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NONE BEYOND HOPE

2 Chronicles 33:1-20

By

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Kings of Judah, Lesson 13

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What would you think if you heard that the notoriously immoral rock singer Madonna had been converted to Christ? Or what if you heard that Shirley MacLaine had abandoned all her New Age spiritualism and had embraced Christianity? Throw in Saddam Hussein, combine them all into one grossly immoral, spirit-worshipping, violent person. Would you say that such a person is beyond the hope of God's grace?

I'll admit that the conversion of such people is not commonplace. But the story of King Manasseh shows that what is impossible with man is possible with God. Manasseh combines into one person the most flagrantly offensive sins we can imagine. He set up immoral Baal worship in the temple in Jerusalem. He was into witchcraft, sorcery, and spiritualism. He practiced human sacrifice, offering his own sons in the fire to pagan idols. He slaughtered many innocent people, including many prophets, according to Jewish historians (2 Kings 21:16). They also say that he killed the prophet Isaiah by putting him between two boards like a sandwich and sawing him from head to toe (see Heb. 11:37). He caused Judah to do more evil than the nations whom God had destroyed before Israel. He was the most wicked king in the history of Judah. Yet he was converted.

That's good news for those of us who have loved ones who have pursued sin with a vengeance. They are not beyond the hope of God's grace! It's good news as we pray for the conversion of wicked leaders in our country. God can do it! It's good news for anyone hearing this message who has committed such gross sins that you wonder if God could ever forgive you. Even if you were raised in a godly home and turned away, so was Manasseh. And yet he found God's mercy when he repented, and so can you. Our text shows us that ...

Because God is merciful, there is hope
for the worst of sinners who repent.

If anyone could be beyond hope, it would have been the wicked King Manasseh.

1. Manasseh was the worst of sinners.

He came to the throne at age 12. Bible scholars believe that he shared a ten-year co-regency with his godly father, King Hezekiah, so he would have been 22 when his father died. But in spite of his father's godly example, Manasseh quickly turned the kingdom from a spiritual high to a low described as more evil than the nations which Israel had dispossessed from the land (33:9). Manasseh's sin was unusually bad because ...

A. Manasseh sinned against great light.

It was not as if he had never heard about God or had no models of godliness. His father was the most godly king after David. Although Hezekiah had fallen into pride during his later years, he humbled himself and walked with God. It is inconceivable that the godly Hezekiah had not spent time telling his son and heir to the throne about God and the great things God had accomplished during his reign. Besides Hezekiah there were Isaiah the prophet and other godly men in the kingdom. The priests and Levites were teaching people the law of God. Manasseh was born into a spiritual oasis, but he walked away from it.

Often the most flagrant sinners are those who reject a godly upbringing. When they turn from the things of God they seem to be driven to rid themselves completely of the faith they have rejected. Hugh Hefner, the founder of the evil Playboy empire, is the son of a Methodist minister. Sad to say, Hefner's father later was employed by Playboy. But Manasseh's father was no phony. Hezekiah was a true man of God. You wonder, why did his son turn out so bad?

I can't answer that question with certainty, because the text gives no clue. But we need to remember that while parents have a great responsibility to train their children in the ways of God, ultimately each person must answer to God for himself or herself. You may be growing up in a Christian home, as I did. Your parents may teach and model the things of God. But there comes a point where *you* must yield to Jesus Christ as your own Savior and Lord. Your parents' faith will not get you into heaven.

We also need to realize that there is no such thing as an innocent child. I love kids; they're so cute and sweet. But my theology says that every child, even one born to Christian parents, has a sinful nature capable of all the awful things that Manasseh did. Every child raised in a Christian home is as much in need of a definite conversion from God as Manasseh needed. As Christian parents, we need to pray, work, and look for signs of conversion in our children. It's fine when children pray to ask Jesus to come into their hearts, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they have been genuinely converted. Is there evidence of repentance from sin? Is there a hunger for the things of God? Is there submission to God's Word? Even those who are not outwardly rebellious need to experience God's grace through the cross of Christ. But Manasseh sinned against the light of his godly upbringing.

B. Manasseh sinned boldly.

While all unbelievers are the servants of sin, not all are bold sinners. Outwardly many are decent, law-abiding people. They have a sense of propriety and shame. They make sure that their sin remains within socially acceptable limits or behind closed doors. A New Yorker cartoon showed two clean-shaven, decent-looking, middle-aged men sitting in a jail cell. One says to the other, "All along I thought our level of corruption fell well within community standards!"

Manasseh's corruption exceeded community standards! He had no sense of shame. If there had been Geraldo or Oprah, Manasseh would have been on there, telling all the sordid details of his wicked life. His motto was, "If you've got it, flaunt it!" It's as if he was trying to be outrageous, to see if he could shock people with the extent of his wickedness. He sinned against great light; he sinned boldly.

C. Manasseh led others into sin.

You would have thought that with all the godly people in the land after Hezekiah's revival, they would have opposed Manasseh and forced him from the throne. But people tend to be followers. While they will go along with a king who is bold for the Lord, they also will quickly turn aside and follow the next king who is bold to do evil.

As God's people, we need to be careful not to be influenced to tolerate evil by ungodly leaders, whether politically or in the church. It's easy to be swayed by a man of power or wealth. It makes you feel important to know some famous person, whether a politician or a well-known Christian. I find that Christians are just as enamored by famous people as the world is. But even though an entertainer, sports figure, politician, or author professes to be a Christian doesn't mean that he is in line with God's Word. We need to evaluate everything a leader says by God's Word of truth and have the courage to stand against evil, no matter who is promoting it. A final point shows why Manasseh was an especially flagrant sinner:

D. Manasseh loved himself and hated God.

God's Word is clear: If we love Him, we will keep His commandments (1 John 5:3; John 14:15). But Manasseh did not want to "observe to do all" that God had commanded His people through Moses (33:8). Why didn't he obey? Because he loved himself and hated God.

All sinners love themselves and hate God, but it's especially true of those who practice idolatry, witchcraft, sorcery, and sacrificing their own children to false gods! People do those things to manipulate spiritual power for their own benefit. Why offer your own children to the gods? So the gods will be nice to you! Too bad about the child's happiness; you're only concerned with yourself! With idols, you can make your own god according to your own liking. If you don't like a holy God who confronts your sinful behavior, you create a god who tolerates sin. At the root of all idolatry is the love of self and the hatred of the one true God who alone deserves and demands our obedient love.

I read in the *Arizona Daily Sun* (11/5/94, p. 3) an article about the woman who recently admitted to drowning her two sons. It explained how "authorities" (that means psychologists) say that "an unbearable pileup of stresses may trigger latent emotional or mental illness" that leads to this sort of tragedy. Instead of sinful behavior for which the woman is responsible, the cause is some mysterious, latent "illness." Maybe they'll find the defective DNA strand that leads to such illness some day! Also, according to a psychologist quoted in the article, women who kill their children

sometimes “have very low self-esteem.” But the Bible says the problem is too much self-love, not a lack thereof. The woman loved herself more than her children.

If anyone was a candidate for hell, you would have thought Manasseh would be. He seems like a hopeless case if there ever was one. But the good news is that because God is merciful, there is hope for the worst of sinners who repents. As with Saul of Tarsus, the Lord delights to take the chief of sinners and turn him into the best of saints as a trophy of His grace. What the sinner must do is to repent.

2. Manasseh repented.

That’s all that God was waiting for! Manasseh didn’t have to vow to join a monastery and wear hair shirts. Nor did he need to work on building his self-esteem. We read (33:12) that “he entreated the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers” and God showed him mercy. If repentance is God’s requirement for sinners to be reconciled to Him, then it’s important to understand what it means.

- A. Repentance means turning to God from sin and performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

I’m using here the Apostle Paul’s words as he summarized his message to Agrippa (Acts 26:20). He kept declaring both to Jews and Gentiles “that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.” Maybe you’re thinking, “I thought that salvation is by faith in Christ. Doesn’t repentance add works to simple faith?”

The biblical answer is that saving faith and repentance are flip sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other. Note Acts 26:18, where Paul related Christ’s direct words to him, that He was sending Paul to the Gentiles, “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.” Turning from darkness (sin) to light (holiness) and from Satan’s domain to God is repentance; it is the means of receiving forgiveness of sins.

That last phrase ("faith in Me") shows that repentance is synonymous with faith in Christ. You can't truly believe in Christ without turning from your sin any more than you can turn north at the same time you're heading south. Because God and sin are at opposite ends of the spectrum, you cannot turn to God without turning from sin. Repentance begins as an entreaty, "God be merciful to me, the sinner!" But it continues in deeds appropriate to repentance. Manasseh removed the foreign gods, idols, and altars, set up the altar of the Lord and began serving Him (33:15-16). In other words, repentance is not just talk. It is faith in God that results in a godly change of direction.

- B. Repentance means forsaking self-sufficiency and submissively casting ourselves on God's undeserved favor.

Manasseh "humbled himself greatly" before God (33:12). Humility is at the heart of repentance. The root of all sins is pride, thinking that we are sufficient in ourselves apart from God. It frequently manifests itself in people who think that they can commend themselves to God by their good works. They don't want to admit that they are sinners, totally dependent on God. They don't want to humble themselves by submitting to God's ways.

The Hebrew word translated "humbled" is used often in a military context of bringing a proud, rebellious people into subjection. When used spiritually, the emphasis is on a proud, independent person abasing himself. Manasseh, whose life to this point could be summed up by the song, "I Did it My Way," turned from his self-sufficiency and self-will and cast himself totally on God's undeserved favor. Then he came to know personally what before he had only known intellectually, "that the Lord was God" (33:13).

What happens when a person repents? Does God put them on probation? Does He say, "We'll consider your application"? No, thank God!

- 3. Repentance results in God's undeserved blessings.

When Manasseh repented, God could have said, "I hear you talking. But you've messed up royally [pun intended!]. After what you've done, don't expect Me to give back your kingdom!" But look at verse 13: God "brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom." Amazing grace! Did Manasseh deserve that? No way! God

would have been perfectly just to say, "I forgive you, but you'll die as a captive in Babylon."

I'm not saying that there aren't consequences to our sin, even when we repent. "The people still sacrificed in the high places" (33:17). They were damaged by Manasseh's sin. His son Amon followed his father's sin, not his repentance, and was assassinated after two years on the throne. Manasseh's repentance did not restore to life Isaiah and the others Manasseh had murdered, including his sons. He had to live with those memories for the rest of his life. Sin always leaves scars. But even so, Manasseh enjoyed God's undeserved favor after he repented. His kingdom was restored. Even better, he came to know God and to be reconciled to Him. When he died, instead of incurring God's wrath which he deserved, he was welcomed into God's presence.

That's how God waits to bless every sinner who repents. He won't undo all the consequences of your sin (that's part of His grace, to teach us the seriousness of sin); but He will give you undeserved blessings beyond measure. He brings you into His family, the church, where you find love like you've never known. He arranges the circumstances of your life for good as a loving Father. He cares about your every need. He forgives all your sin. He will welcome you into heaven when you die, to be with Him through all eternity. Amazing, abundant grace!

I think that we're tipped off to God's great mercy in the first verse of our text: "he reigned 55 years in Jerusalem." *Fifty-five years!* That's the longest reign of any king in Judah, longer than David or Solomon or Hezekiah! Why would God allow this wicked king to occupy the throne for 55 years? For the same reason He has put up with all the wickedness in the world to this point in history: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

A poor woman from the slums of London was invited to go with a group of people for a holiday at the ocean. She had never seen the ocean before, and when she saw it, she burst into tears. Those around her thought it was strange that she should cry when such a lovely holiday had been given her. "Why in the world are you crying?" they asked. Pointing to the ocean she answered, "This

is the only thing I have ever seen that there was enough of." God has oceans of mercy. There is enough of it for the worst of sinners. There is enough of it for you and me!

Conclusion

Years ago newspapers carried the story of a teenager named William, who was a fugitive from the police. He had run away with his girlfriend because the parents had been trying to break them up. But what William didn't know was that an ailment for which he had been seeing the doctor was diagnosed just after he ran away as cancer.

So here was William, doing his best to elude the police, lest he lose his love, while they were doing their best to find him, lest he lose his life. He thought they were after him to punish him; they were really after him to save him. (Told by Howard Hendricks, *Say it With Love* [Victor Books], p. 14.)

Maybe you've thought that God was after you to punish you. The truth is, He is after you to bless you. Even if you have been the worst of sinners, if you will turn to God from your sin He will forgive and bless you. No one is beyond hope, because God's grace is greater than all our sin!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is humility essential for repentance?
2. Some say that to preach repentance is to add works to faith. Is it? Why? Why not?
3. How do you explain godly parents having a wayward child in light of Proverbs 22:6?
4. How would you have felt if you had been Isaiah's widow when God forgave and restored Manasseh to his throne? Is God's grace "fair" (see Matt. 20:1-16; Luke 15:11-32)?

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