**2 Kings 23:1-5,21-25** July 4, 2021

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*2 Kings 23:1Then [King Josiah] called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. 2He went up to the temple of the Lord with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. 3The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.*

*4The king ordered Hilkiah the high priest, the priests next in rank and the doorkeepers to remove from the temple of the Lord all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron Valley and took the ashes to Bethel. 5He did away with the pagan priests appointed by the kings of Judah to burn incense on the high places of the towns of Judah and on those around Jerusalem—those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and moon, to the constellations and to all the starry hosts…*

*21The king gave this order to all the people: “Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.” 22Not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed. 23But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to the Lord in Jerusalem.*

*24Furthermore, Josiah got rid of the mediums and spiritists, the household gods, the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem. This he did to fulfill the requirements of the law written in the book that Hilkiah the priest had discovered in the temple of the Lord. 25Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**A Fire Lit By Grace**

What do you do when you live in a fallen world that is falling to pieces? Isn’t it frustrating? You look around, see so much that is wrong, and while you hope that things are going to “turn around,” you really see no reason for such optimism.

Well, there are a lot of things to say about that. A lot. Social media and 24/7 sensationalized news coverage exaggerate the bad. Our actual experiences of life are usually nowhere near as bad as what we see on our screens. Yet the feeling remains: What do you do when you live in a fallen world that is falling to pieces?

Welcome to King Josiah’s world. Things weren’t great and he had just gotten news direct from God himself that things were going to get a lot, lot worse. What do you do when your fallen world is falling to pieces?

I need to begin this sermon with an observation; you might even call it a self-criticism. When I picked out the readings for this series about four Old Testament kings, I did so with a clear conscience. I get excited about Old Testament Bible history. And I love to share Old Testament gems that many Christians never lay eyes on in their entire lives. Some think that with the coming of Jesus, the Old Testament really doesn’t have much to say to us. That is not true! Speaking about the Old Testament, the New Testament says, *“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”* (Romans 15:4). In that spirit, I chose these four kings: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Josiah and Zedekiah.

But, there is a pitfall in these Old Testament character studies. And I fear that I may have fallen into it.

When you look only at these histories (I refuse to call them “stories” because many enemies of God’s Word will use that very word “story” to dismiss most of the Bible), when you look at the histories it is very easy to become person-centered. That is a bad thing. While the history recorded in the Bible involves people, the people are oriented around God, not God around the people. In choosing today’s reading, the same one read by Peter Gurney a few minutes ago, I fear that I became human-centered. Not that any one of these four readings is bad, but all four taken together are too people-centered. So I am going to expand our reading today to be sure we are God-centered.

Our reading begins, ***“Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem…”*** It’s the Big Meeting. Something big is about to happen. What’s going on? Why are all the king’s important people being called together? In the next verse he also gathered the priests and the prophets and everybody else whether they were a somebody or a nobody. He called them all. Something’s going to happen. But the reading started with the little word ***“Then.”***  “Then” makes curious minds ask questions. “What came before?” You see, Josiah wasn’t the initiator of all this stuff, he was reacting to something. What?

For the sixty years before King Josiah, his kingdom had been ruled by godless men. They may have been Josiah’s father and grandfather, but they had been godless men. Their influence was so ungodly that even though King Josiah was a godly king, it was almost two decades into his rule before they found a single Bible. Imagine that! His grandfather in particular was so godless and hostile to the worship of the true God that the few copies of the Bible that had survived were so hidden that it took almost twenty years before anyone felt safe bringing one out into public. Now remember, this is what is leading up to our reading.

Here’s some more. For his first many years as king , Josiah was worshipping the Lord, sort of. In sincerity for sure, but since he didn’t have a Bible, it was just on the basis of people’s memories. We don’t know who had brought Josiah to those convictions—it wasn’t his dad—but someone did. Maybe some old member of the royal household who could remember the faith of his or her own childhood shared it with Josiah. As Josiah grew, he eventually he commissioned a renovation of the temple, and that’s where a discovery was made. In the process, the workers found a copy of the Bible. They brought it to the king.

What was read to Josiah was probably the book of Deuteronomy. We don’t know for sure, but it seems likely because Deuteronomy was the actual covenant document, the contract between God and the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. In it were the rules about what God’s people were supposed to do: the Ten Commandments; the rules about clean and unclean food; the commands about the festivals and especially the Passover festival, even rules about the king’s conduct. And like any good covenant document (sort of like a contract), part of the document listed the penalties for breaking the covenant. Those penalties are written in Deuteronomy 28, in some detail, and conclude with these words, *“If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law… the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other… There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, “If only it were evening!” and in the evening, “If only it were morning!”—because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see… You will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.”*(selections of 28:58-68). Well, *that* caught Josiah’s attention.

His reacted with terror. He tore his clothing. He could feel God’s judgment falling on him and his kingdom. So Josiah sent his cabinet officials to a prophetess named Huldah saying: *“Go and inquire of the Lord for me… Great is the Lord’s anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book.”* Word came back from the prophetess, “You’re right, Josiah. The Lord is furious. He is going to annihilate this nation, and it is going to be every bit as ugly as Deuteronomy chapter 28 says” – except they didn’t have chapters in their Bibles back then, but you get the point. But there was a special message to take back to the king, *“Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord… and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord. Therefore… you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.”*

Remember how our reading begins, ***“Then the king called together all the elders”***? That is what happened just before the ***“then.”*** Now you know why I started by asking about the fallen world falling to pieces. That was the Lord’s declaration to Josiah.

What would you have done? Just curious. What would you have done in Josiah’s shoes? “These people around you, Josiah, are such a hot mess that I am going to destroy them. But you, Josiah, who have humbled yourself before me—you’re going to be okay. You will see none of their sword, famine and plague.” What would you do?

Wouldn’t it be easy to look at it this way: “They’re going to get what they deserve. In the meanwhile, I’m home free. So, let me go on worshipping the Lord, and they can go on doing what they are doing. I mean, it’s their choice.” Adopt a live and let live attitude. “They’ve made their bed. Let them lie in it.” That’s how people usually think. “It’s not my problem. Maybe it’ll just go away. Maybe they will get this thing figured out. But it’s not my problem!”

But Josiah just can’t do it. He can’t say, “That’s on you.” As soon as he heard the word, ***“You will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place,”*** do you know what he did?

He did what people who have experienced God’s grace do. You see, when Josiah had heard about his sinfulness and how much God hates sin, and how much he will punish people who choose sin over him, Josiah didn’t send word to the prophetess saying, “What am I going to do with these rebellious people in my kingdom?” He sent to God’s prophetess, “Go and inquire of the Lord for *me*… Great is the Lord’s anger that burns against *us*…” He knew that his own sins condemned him. The ax at the root of the tree was about to bite *him*. He tore his robe. Would you ever do that? Would you ever be so distressed about your sin that you not only shed tears (tears are cheap), but actually tore your clothes, so that when people saw you they would ask with wide-eyed concern, “Are you okay?” and you would answer, “Woe is me! I have sinned against the Lord!” Of course you wouldn’t! We have forgotten how much God hates sin.

But Josiah knew. And he also knew the relief he felt when God told him, “You are forgiven.” The same words that we hear every week. “You are forgiven in Christ Jesus.” Those words, that forgiveness revolutionized his life. From that moment he would make it his goal in life to take as many people with him as he could. “Take as many people with him as he could.” That’s is usually used with the ugliest deeds that human beings are capable of. But Josiah, given new birth in God’s forgiveness took it exactly the opposite way. He would take as many people with him to heaven as he could. He would bend all the powers of his royal rule to saving them.

He summoned his cabinet and all the people and ***“he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant.”*** He knew that they needed to hear God’s word, so he proclaimed it!

As king of God’s people, he started to clean up the religious scene. He cleaned up the temple. He burned the wooden idols and carried their ashes miles into the countryside. He got rid of the astrologers, the tarot card readers, the ouija boards. He got rid of the shrines on the street corners and in people’s yards. He went through the land and cleansed it of every whisper of idolatry.

Then, he ***“gave this order to all the people: ‘Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.’”*** The Passover was and is the preeminent Jewish celebration of God’s goodness and mercy toward his people. And under Josiah, Israel celebrated God’s undeserved favor the best they had in 800 years. ***“Not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed.”***

King Josiah knew that not only is the Lord holy, but he is also merciful. He had known God’s grace, his undeserved love, so Josiah did all he could to turn his people to God. Having experienced God’s grace himself, maybe he even thought that maybe, just maybe, if the entire nation of Judah would turn around, maybe the Lord would put off his day of judgment. This was not about Josiah. He knew that he had eternity. It was about everyone else. So the final verse of our reading says, ***“Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength.”***

What to do about seeing your fallen world falling to pieces? Trust God’s mercy. Live in that mercy. Proclaim that mercy in Christ. Amen.