

A Study in 2 Chronicles 34:1–7

Josiah — Seeking the Lord — Purging Judah and Jerusalem from the High Places

We are reading 2 Chronicles chapter 34, beginning at verse 1.

"Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem one and thirty years. And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined neither to the right hand, nor to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father: and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images."

"And they brake down the altars of Baalim in his presence; and the images, that were on high above them, he cut down; and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images, he brake in pieces, and made dust of them, and strowed it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed unto them. And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And so did he in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about. And when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem."

The History Behind Josiah: Manasseh and Amon

There was considerable history behind Josiah before a single verse of his own reign had been written. His grandfather was Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings of Judah. Yet in the latter part of his life, God dealt with Manasseh in such a way that he turned. 2 Chronicles 33:15 records that Manasseh took away the strange gods and the idol out of the house of the Lord, all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and cast them out of the city. Something better came at the end.

Josiah's father Amon, however, undid that repentance in the most direct way possible. Chapter 33:22 says: Amon sacrificed unto all the carved images which Manasseh his father had made, and served them. His father had cast those idols out of the city; Amon went outside the city and brought them back. He was murdered by his servants after a reign of two years. Josiah became king at the age of eight.

What Josiah does in our chapter — beating the graven images into powder — was the lesson his grandfather had failed to learn. Manasseh cast the idols out of the city. Had he beaten them into powder, they could not have been a snare to his son. The lesson for fathers and grandfathers is plain: it is not enough to put away evil from one's own sight. Care for the children who follow requires that what is evil be destroyed, not merely removed.

Eight Years Old — Sixteen Before He Began to Seek

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign. Verse 3 says that in the eighth year of his reign — when he was sixteen — he began to seek after the God of David his father. That is an excellent thing. But one could say he was rather slow, because he certainly could have begun to seek after the Lord sooner than he did. The sooner one seeks for the Lord, the better. Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. And again: all they that seek me shall find me. The Lord does not hide from those who are looking for Him.

There is also a lesson for the kingdom of Josiah. The very first thing that needed to be set in order was Josiah himself. And the spiritual exercise and learning that preceded the purging work were not wasted years. It was not until the twelfth year — when Josiah was twenty — that he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem. There was a further lapse between the seeking and the acting. Instruction in the mind of the Lord as to what would please Him preceded the outward reformation. He had to know what the Lord's will was before he could begin to carry it out.

This mirrors the book of Titus, where the first thing that had to be set in order was Titus himself. Before any appointment of elders or correction of disorder in Crete, the worker had to be right. The inner work precedes the outer. And with Josiah, there is a clear sequence: seeking (8th year), purging (12th year), repairing (18th year). Each step built on the one before.

The High Places — Almost Right, and Therefore the Worst

Josiah began his purging with the high places and the groves. This might seem a surprising place to begin, because chapter 33:17 notes that when Manasseh had repaired the altar of the Lord, the people did sacrifice still in the high places, yet unto the Lord their God only. So at least at those high places, there were no physical idols. They sacrificed to the Lord there, not to Baal. One might have expected the reformer to begin with the worst cases — the altars of Baal — and leave the high places until last.

But righteous judgment dictates the opposite. To sacrifice to the Lord in places that He had never appointed, and that were specifically the places associated with idolatry, is not to honor the Lord — it is to attach His name to something He never sanctioned. The Lord had said, in Deuteronomy 12: ye shall

not do so unto the Lord your God, but unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there. One central place, one appointed meeting point. Everything else, even if conducted in the name of Jehovah, was a denial of that truth.

The word nevertheless with which chapter 33:17 begins already signals that something is wrong. Nevertheless the people did sacrifice still in the high places, yet unto the Lord their God only. They sprinkled the name of Jehovah on it and said, well, we are doing this unto the Lord. But the Lord had never asked for it, and the connection of His name with those places was itself a form of idolatry — the heart set on a place not appointed by God, with the Lord's name added to sanctify the practice. Keep Christ in the Christmas tree is the modern version of exactly this impulse. And in verse 3 of our chapter, Josiah does not say he purged Judah and Jerusalem from the high places except those where they sacrificed unto the Lord their God only. No exception is made. All four categories — the high places, the groves, the carved images, and the molten images — had to go.

Deuteronomy 12:4–7 makes the principle explicit: ye shall not do so unto the Lord your God, but unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose. And ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and your heave offerings, and your vows, and your freewill offerings — there. This was a two-pointed commandment: destroy those graven images, and come to the one place that Jehovah has chosen. What chapter 33:17 describes is a denial of the second point, dressed up as piety by attaching the name of Jehovah to it.

Carved Images and Molten Images — Two Forms of Idolatry

The carved images and the molten images appear as a pair throughout this passage. The carved images allowed scope for the imagination of the carver — every heart could have its own kind, suited to individual taste, imaginative, varied, personal. Idolatry in this form is expressive and creative. The molten images, by contrast, were made from molds and mass-produced. They represent traditional religion — everybody does it this way, it has always been done this way, a bandwagon effect. Both forms are present in Christendom: the personally expressive and innovative on one hand, and the traditional and inherited on the other. In both cases, the flesh craves something visible, something to lean on, something it can observe and touch. Josiah broke them both in pieces and beat them into powder. He did not leave dust he could not see. He made dust of them and strewed it on the graves.

He Broke Down the Altars of Baal in His Presence

The altars of Baal were broken down in his presence. He would not delegate this and receive a report. He wanted to see that it was done. His heart was set on a real purging, not an administrative reform. The word purge is a word of decision. It is not a gray or wishy-washy word. It appears in 2 Timothy

2:21: if a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use. And in Hebrews 1:3: when he had by himself purged our sins, he sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high. Christ purged our sins — He got rid of every one of them. He did it righteously, through His blood. That word carries force. Josiah used it here with that same force, beating the images into powder, burning the bones on the altars, strewing them upon the graves. There was to be nothing remaining that the heart could anchor to or go after.

The bones of the priests he burnt upon their altars. It is implied that the priests of Baal were executed — much as the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal were slaughtered after the contest with Elijah on Mount Carmel. The burning of their bones on the altars served a further purpose: people have a way of reverencing bones, and there is bone-reverence in Christendom too. By burning the bones on those altars, Josiah left nothing for the heart to hang on afterward. Everything was gone.

The Images That Were on High — and the Assembly's Center

Verse 4 speaks of the images that were on high above the people — sun pillars, associated with the worship of the heavenly bodies. Whatever the specific form, the principle is clear: something was elevated on high, and the congregation looked up to it, and its elevation was intended to draw the heart heavenward. Walking into many places in Christendom today, one finds something put up on high, with the congregation directed to look toward it. In so doing, they are not following the pattern of the assembly of God in the New Testament — they are following the pattern of the worshippers of Baal in Israel of old, the spiritual continuators of what was worst and most corrupt in the Old Testament.

In the assembly of God in the New Testament, there is not something on high drawing the eye and the heart upward. There is someone in the center. Where two or three are gathered together in His name, there am I in the midst of them. The focal point is not elevated above the congregation — it is in the midst of them. That is the center from which everything radiates. That is the one place where the Lord has promised His presence. And when everything other than that is removed, this is what remains.

He did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined neither to the right hand nor to the left.