

A Study in 2 Chronicles 34:6–12

From Simeon to Naphtali — Repairing the House — Faithful Work

We are reading 2 Chronicles chapter 34, beginning at verse 6.

"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."

"Now in the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land and the house, he sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and Joah the son of Joahaz the recorder, to repair the house of the LORD his God."

"And when they came to Hilkiah the high priest, they delivered the money that was brought into the house of God, which the Levites that kept the doors had gathered of the hand of Manasseh and Ephraim, and of all the remnant of Israel, and of all Judah and Benjamin, and they returned to Jerusalem. And they put it in the hand of the workmen that had the oversight of the house of the LORD, and they gave it to the workmen that wrought in the house of the LORD, to repair and amend the house: even to the artificers and builders gave they it, to buy hewn stone, and timber for couplings, and to floor the houses which the kings of Judah had destroyed."

"And the men did the work faithfully: and the overseers of them were Jahath and Obadiah, the Levites, of the sons of Merari; and Zechariah and Meshullam, of the sons of the Kohathites, to set it forward; and other of the Levites, all that could skill of instruments of music. Also they were over the bearers of burdens, and were overseers of all that wrought the work in any manner of service: and of the Levites there were scribes, and officers, and porters."

From Simeon to Naphtali — All the Land of Israel

King Josiah's purging work did not stop at the borders of Judah and Benjamin. He went into the cities of Manasseh and Ephraim and Simeon, even unto Naphtali. Simeon was in the deep south, near Egypt. Naphtali was in the far north, just south of Dan. Josiah put no limit on his excursions. He went from one end of the land of Israel to the other. His heart was not restricted to his own kingdom.

This stands in instructive contrast with his predecessor Hezekiah, who had sent letters to all Israel and Judah, including Ephraim and Manasseh, inviting them to come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem to keep the Passover. Those letters were received with mockery: the people of those tribes laughed them to scorn. What was offered by letter in Hezekiah's day was done in person by Josiah. The time for letters was past, and stronger measures were taken. The northern tribes had been carried away by the Assyrians; a mixture of peoples had come in; the situation was altogether pitiable. Judah was bending itself to catch up with the iniquity of the north. Here was a brief respite.

The result was remarkable. Chapter 35:18 records that there was no Passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet, and that all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem — both kingdoms together — celebrated it. The destruction of idolatry was preparatory to the worship that followed. A fragmented heart, serving two masters and attached to multiple objects, cannot worship God truly. What the Psalmist asks for is unite my heart to fear thy holy name. Where idolatry is gotten rid of, where the competing objects are removed, the heart is freed to be directed wholly to God. The purging came first, and it made way for a Passover that had not been seen since Samuel.

Verse 7 also speaks of all the land of Israel — not only Judah and Benjamin, but the full breadth of the nation. Josiah knew the nation was in ruins. He knew the ten tribes had been carried away captive. He could not restore the twelve-tribe kingdom. Yet his heart embraced the whole of it. His work was not limited to a few friends in one geographical corner. It had a breadth that recognized the entirety of Israel in God's sight, even in a state of ruin.

Ruin Acknowledged — and the One Loaf

This raises a principle of enduring importance. In the line of the kings of Judah, the priests continued to put twelve loaves of shewbread on the table in the temple. Not two, for the two tribes that remained with the house of David — twelve, for the national unity of Israel as God saw it, whatever the outward state of ruin. That was not a denial of the ruin. The ruin was real, and everyone knew it. It was an acting on the divine principle that the whole nation was one before God, and no earthly ruin could alter that.

The same principle holds in the assembly of God. On the Lord's table, the one loaf is set out. We do not say, well, the church is in ruins, so let us put out a small fragment of bread barely enough to take a piece from, because we can only represent those gathered here locally. The one loaf expresses what God sees: one body, one bread. Whether all the members of that body are participating or not does not change the truth. We act on the truth. The twelve loaves were put on the table because that was the truth. The one loaf is put on the table because that is the truth.

Those who claim to be setting up New Testament assemblies, or who speak of local assembly independence as though each gathering is a self-contained unit unrelated to others, are not acting on this principle. They are not thinking of one body. If the loaf on their table represents only local unity, it is saying something entirely different from what the scripture intends. The church is in ruins — that is a fact, like the ruin of the ten tribes. But the truth that there is one body is not altered by the ruin. Josiah did not pretend there was no ruin. He acted on the divine principle of the wholeness of Israel while fully knowing the ruin was real. In that same spirit, believers who are gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus acknowledge the ruin of Christendom while acting on the principle of the one body.

Purge the Land and the House First, Then Repair

In the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land and the house, he sent men to repair the house of the Lord. Not before. Clean first, then repair. This was the order Josiah followed, and it is an important order. A person who hopes to worship God while retaining idols cannot do so. Some would say, encourage someone to become a worshipper first and trust that the distressing aspects of his life may fall off in time without being directly addressed. But this is not the example of Josiah. He dealt with the idolatry first, in a thorough and decisive way — altars, groves, graven images, idols, all of it beaten into powder and cut down — and then, with all of that gone, he turned to the repair of the house. The rubble had to be cleared before the wall could be rebuilt.

It also bears noting that when he purged the house, that was his own capital city, his own home, the place he lived and reigned. Purging the house of God in Jerusalem was not a distant reform directed at someone else's territory. He began with what was nearest to him, and proceeded outward to the furthest reaches of the land.

Jeremiah was prophesying in these same years. From Jeremiah 25:3 we learn that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the thirteenth year of Josiah, and he had been speaking for twenty-three years. The purging of the idols in the twelfth year preceded by one year the beginning of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry. Perhaps the clearing of the idols made way for the prophet's voice — removing an obstacle that had hindered it. The idolatry and the silencing of the prophet's word are not unrelated. One cloaks the other. Where idols are cleared, there is room for the word of God to be heard.

The Money Came from All the Remnant of Israel

The funds for the repair came from Manasseh and Ephraim and all the remnant of Israel and all Judah and Benjamin. Not only from Josiah's own kingdom. The word remnant is a beautiful expression in this connection. It means that God's faithfulness had preserved a few. Where it not for that faithfulness, there would have been none at all. Whenever we read of the remnant of Israel, we should include in our

thoughts the goodness of God in preserving what otherwise would have been entirely destroyed. And those preserved ones, from the northern tribes as well as the southern, brought their contributions toward the repair of the house of the Lord.

The money was put in the hand of the workmen — those that did the work. Not into the hands of office-holders, not into the hands of the priests in their priestly capacity. It went to the workers for the work. And the testimony of verse 12 is: the men did the work faithfully. A lot of money was involved in the purchasing of hewn stone and timber. Faithfulness in handling it was not taken for granted, but it was present, and it is recorded.

Faithful Work, Overseers, and Instruments of Music

The overseers were sons of Merari and sons of the Kohathites — two of the three families of the Levites who had charge of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Their function was to set it forward. Every one of them pulling in the same direction, not one assigned to hinder or obstruct. Verse 12 captures the spirit: they cooperated, they worked together, all of them setting it forward.

And at the end of verse 12 there is a lovely detail: other of the Levites, all that could skill of instruments of music. They were playing and singing while the work went on. As any merry let him sing songs. This was a happy work. The men who had skill in music were not kept back from using it just because they were engaged in physical labor. Their joy found expression. It is only the people of God who have a true song — a theme that is the goodness of God toward them. The world has no such theme. The children of God do. Ephesians and Colossians both direct us to psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, making melody in the heart to the Lord. The Levites here were a living illustration of that.

There were also bearers of burdens, overseers of all manner of service, scribes, officers, and porters. The breadth of service required was wide. But all of it was directed to one end: the repair and reinstatement of the house of God. And all of it went forward together, faithfully, and — so far as we can tell — without the kind of opposition or internal resistance that arose in Ezra's day, when two prominent persons led a party against the work of separation. Perhaps the thoroughness of Josiah's prior purging had something to do with the smoothness of the repair work that followed.

And the men did the work faithfully.