

A Study in 2 Chronicles 34:11–21

Hewn Stone — The Couplings — The Book of the Law Found in the House

We are reading 2 Chronicles chapter 34, beginning at verse 11.

"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 when they brought out the money that was brought into the house of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the LORD given by Moses. And Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiah delivered the book to Shaphan."

"And Shaphan carried the book to the king, and brought the king word back again, saying, All that was committed to thy servants, they do it... And Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath given me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the law, that he rent his clothes."

"And the king commanded Hilkiah, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Abdon the son of Micah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king's, saying, Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do after all that is written in this book."

"And Hilkiah, and they that the king had appointed, went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum... now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college: and they spake to her to that effect."

Hewn Stone — No Tool of Iron at the Site

The material purchased for the repair was hewn stone — the same kind with which Solomon built the temple at the beginning. 1 Kings 6:7 records that the house was built of stone made ready before it was brought: there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building. The stone was cut to fit at the quarry and then brought to the site, where it was laid in comparative silence. No iron tool was needed at the point of construction. The hewn stone simply

slipped into place.

The repair under Josiah followed the same method. The objective was not innovation — it was restoration. Various attempts to improve things in Christendom typically involve some novelty, some new material, some change that is called an advance. But every innovation is a departure from what was there at the beginning. Solomon built the temple under divine guidance, according to the preparations David had made, following the pattern given from above, just as Moses built the tabernacle according to all that he was shown in the mount. Josiah did not seek to improve upon what Solomon had built. He sought to restore it to what it had been. That was the right instinct.

This is worth dwelling on. The present state of decay was no more justified by Josiah than it would be by us. But the answer to decay is not innovation — it is a return to what was there at the beginning. The rule for recovery in Christendom is the same: go back, not forward. Not back to some imagined golden era of recent history, but back to the word of God and what was there at the beginning, as revealed in Scripture.

The Couplings — Joists — Internal Strength

Verse 11 mentions timber for couplings, which Darby's translation renders joists. Joists are internal structural members — not visible from outside, not decorative, but functioning to hold the building together from within. They are a source of hidden strength, binding the structure into a coherent whole.

There is something suggestive in that for the assembly viewed as the house of God. There is a function that corresponds to the joists — an internal strength, not prominent, not celebrated, but serving to hold the place together. In times of pressure and difficulty, the people whose ministry quietly binds the saints together in the truth perform something like the function of the joists. Without that internal cohesion, the building does not stand. And in a day when the Lord assembles His people in such and such a place, and desires that they should be gathered together, one of the things that is needed alongside the visible ministry is this kind of strengthening and binding function worked in quietness.

The Gershonites Not Mentioned — and the Ark Not Repaired

In verse 12, the overseers are sons of Merari and sons of the Kohathites. These are two of the three families of the Levites who carried the tabernacle through the wilderness. The third family — the Gershonites — is not mentioned. The Gershonites were charged in Numbers 3 with carrying the tabernacle itself: the hangings, the coverings, the tent, the curtain for the door of the court. The Kohathites bore the furniture — the ark, the table, the candlestick, the altars, and the vessels of the sanctuary. Merari bore the boards, pillars, sockets, and cords. Two of the three are represented here, but

the Gershonites, who specifically had charge of the coverings of the tabernacle, are not.

Connected with this is another observation: nowhere in this account of the repair work is there any mention of attention being paid to the ark, the candlestick, the table of shewbread, or the altar of incense. Hewn stone was purchased, timber was brought, floors were repaired, damages were addressed — but the objects which spoke most directly of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ are not mentioned as requiring repair.

The reason for this is, I believe, instructive. The excellencies of the person of Christ cannot be damaged. They are secure, unchangeable, as He is unchangeable. The ark of the covenant in all its symbolic significance could not be improved or diminished by any work of man's hands. What can fall into disrepair, and what did fall into disrepair — sometimes by neglect, sometimes by deliberate destruction, as verses 11 and 12 note — are those things committed to the hands of man: the building, the structure, the ordered worship, the right practice of the house of God. Those things suffer. But what they point to does not. Christ Himself cannot be damaged. His person, His work, His glory stand untouched by all the decay of the church's history.

It is a happy thing when the people of God are exercised to repair what has fallen into disrepair in the practical expression of worship and service, and to do so under the oversight of those who know well the truth concerning Christ's person and what is due to Him. That was the Levitical character of the work here. In the New Testament, all believers are priests, and all are set in service answering to Levitical service. There are differences in gifts, as there were differences among the Levitical families in their respective tasks — but every Christian has some service to the Lord. When all are functioning in that service faithfully, as these Levites did, the work goes forward. The disorders of Christendom, where man's interference has produced a clerical class over against a lay class, have hindered that.

The Book of the Law Found — While Looking for Money

And when they brought out the money that was brought into the house of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses. That discovery is one of the most remarkable features of the entire life and reign of Josiah.

Notice the occasion. They were not searching for the book. They were occupied with money — looking for the funds collected for the repair work. He was looking for the thing that the whole world is occupied with: money. And he found something better. He found the book of the law of the Lord given by Moses.

One might have imagined that the discovery would have been made in the course of a great spiritual exercise specifically directed toward finding the word of God. But it was not. It was while occupied with money that the priest found something better than all the money in the world. That is characteristic

of the grace and sovereign goodness of God — He gives what is needed at the right time, and often through unexpected means.

The preservation of the book is also significant. Kings of Judah had destroyed parts of the temple itself, as verse 11 notes. Other things were swept away in the long decline. Yet the book of the law of the Lord was preserved. Scripture gives us confidence about this: the word of God is preserved in heaven — pure, errorless, without anything wrong with it. That is where the promise of preservation ultimately rests. Down here, there are manuscripts, copies, and the long labor of textual criticism. But the preservation in heaven is the guarantee. And as a reflection of that, the book was not destroyed when the kings were destroying other things. God preserved it, and brought it forth at the right time.

The fact that it had to be found at all tells us something about the state of the priesthood. Malachi 2:7 sets the standard: the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. A priest who has to discover the book of the law in the house of the Lord because he had not known it was there is an evidence of decline. And not only did Hilkiah not know about the book — he does not appear to have read it after finding it. He delivered it to Shaphan, and Shaphan brought it to the king. There is a difference between having a Bible and reading it. There are more people who have Bibles than who read them. And more people who read Bibles than who live by them. The finding of the book was one thing. Its effect on the king, as we shall see, was another.

The King Rent His Clothes — and Sent to Inquire

When Shaphan read the book before the king, and the king heard the words of the law, he rent his clothes. That is a response of genuine contrition. The immediate recognition that the book described a condition of things that was catastrophic — great is the wrath of the Lord that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord, to do after all that is written in this book. Not my fault, but the recognition of a long-accumulated departure, and the seriousness of it.

This is the outward tidying and the purging work coming to grips with the underlying reality that Josiah's labor could not address: the hearts of the people. He could beat the images to powder. He could break down the altars of Baal. He could repair the house. But he could not change the hearts of the people. The book of the law, found in the house of God during the repair work, addressed exactly that issue. This was the last word of the Lord to them before the judgment fell. He destroyed the idols, He repaired the house, and He gave them His word. The question was whether they would act on it. History shows that very quickly after Josiah's death, the decline resumed and accelerated until Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem.

The king sent five men to inquire of the Lord concerning the words of the book. And remarkably, they went to Huldah the prophetess — not to Jeremiah, who had been prophesying in Judah from the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign and was therefore available. That Josiah's messengers went to a prophetess rather than to Jeremiah is instructive. It is not a mark against Josiah personally; it may rather reflect the state of things more broadly. Jeremiah had been given a very difficult commission — told in advance that the people would not hear him, and experiencing that throughout his prophesying. That they went to Huldah rather than Jeremiah has something to say about the underlying weakness of the revival, however bright it was on the surface. The Lord honored it. The Passover in chapter 35 was extraordinary. But the deep state of the people's hearts could not be disguised, and Jeremiah lived to see the captivity that followed.

For great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD — go, inquire of the LORD for me.