

# Josiah, Backsliding in Heart, and the Goodness of God

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## **Josiah's Revival — What the People Did and What Was in Their Heart**

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Second Chronicles 34 records one of the most remarkable revivals in Israel's history. Josiah became king at eight years old. At sixteen he began to seek the God of David his father. At twenty he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of its idolatry — breaking down the altars of Baal, cutting down the Asherahs, grinding the images to dust and scattering it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them, burning the bones of the priests on their own altars. And when the book of the covenant was found in the house of the Lord, he read it to all the people and made a covenant before God, and caused all present to stand to it.

The account of what followed is striking: Josiah removed all the abominations out of all the countries that belonged to the children of Israel, and made all that were found in Israel to serve Jehovah their God all his days. They did not depart from following Jehovah the God of their fathers. It reads like a complete national recovery.

But there is a detail worth noting in the way the Scripture records it. We read about Josiah's heart — it was right, it was fully given to God, and that is stated plainly. What we read about the people is what they did. Not what was in their heart, but what they did. They followed Josiah. They removed the idols. They stood to the covenant. But the Lord, who is a God of knowledge and by whom actions are weighed, saw something the outward record did not show.

## Jeremiah's Prophecy in the Days of Josiah — A Surprising Timing

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Jeremiah chapter 3 opens with a word that the Lord gave to Jeremiah in the days of Josiah the king. The timing is striking. If you were going to choose a moment in Israel's history to deliver a prophecy against adultery and treachery toward God, the days of Josiah would not be the obvious choice. The idols were gone. The priests of Baal were dead. The covenant was being kept. Why send Jeremiah with this word now?

Because the Lord could see what the outward record concealed. In verse 10 He says: her treacherous sister Judah hath not returned unto me with her whole heart, but with falsehood. The people were doing the right things. But their heart had not been restored to the Lord. They were following Josiah the king, not following the God of Israel with their own hearts. And the Lord, who searches the heart and tries the reins, was not deceived by the outward compliance.

*The heart is deceitful above all things and incurable. Who can know it? I, Jehovah, search the heart, I try the reins, even to give to each one according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings. — Jeremiah 17:9–10*

There is a principle in Proverbs 14:14 that matches this precisely: the backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways. The people of Judah were, in a sense, filled with their own ways — compliant outwardly while their heart remained unchanged. They could point to the altars they had broken and the idols they had ground to powder and say, look at what we have done. And the Lord said something different: your heart is not with me.

## The Lord's Posture Toward a Backsliding Soul

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What is most striking in Jeremiah 3 is not the diagnosis — it is the posture of the Lord toward those whose hearts have wandered. In verse 7 He says: And I said, after she hath done all these things, she will return unto me. The One who has

every right to be indignant, the One who sees the spiritual adultery for what it is, says simply: when she is done with all of that, she will come back. He is waiting. He is patient. He is expecting the return.

That ought to mean something to us. When we have wandered in some measure — when there is something in us that draws us away from the Lord, some interest or occupation or anxiety that has taken the place that belongs to Him — the Lord's posture toward us is not one of anger looking for an opportunity to deal with us. It is one of patient love, watching for our return, and saying: when he has finished with that, he will come back to me.

We should not want to keep the Lord in that position. Not from fear of judgment, but from love. If someone who loved us dearly was patiently waiting for our return from a foolish errand, the right response to knowing that would not be to stay longer on the errand. It would be to come back quickly. The goodness of God — not His severity — leads men to repentance. That is equally true of His own people when they have slipped away from Him.

## **David in the Cave of Adullam — A Right Purpose, a Fearful Refuge**

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First Samuel 22 introduces a very different picture. David, fleeing from Saul, escapes to the cave of Adullam. And there, those who were in distress and in debt and discontented gathered to him — about four hundred men. David was their captain. His family came down to him. The prophet Gad came to him. The priest Abiathar came to him. All that was connected with the testimony of God in Israel was with David, not with Saul, who sat under a tree with a spear in his hand outwardly prospering.

And yet David does something surprising. He takes his father and mother to the king of Moab and asks that they stay there while he was in the hold — while he was in hiding. This was not David's finest hour. Psalm 142, which he wrote in the

cave, opens with the words: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul. And in the very next breath: I cried unto thee, O Lord; I said, thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living. He knew where his refuge was. And in this act of sending his parents to Moab, he was looking for it somewhere else.

The goodness of God endures continually. That is what Psalm 52 says — written in the same chapter of 1 Samuel, in the shadow of Doeg the Edomite's slaughter of the priests. The goodness of God endures continually. And the Lord, in His goodness, sent the prophet Gad to David immediately: abide not in the hold; depart and get thee into the land of Judah. And David went. He did not argue or delay. He heard the word of the Lord and obeyed it.

### **Hezekiah's Courage — the Same Pattern, the Right Refuge**

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The contrast is with Hezekiah when the Assyrians were at the gates of Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 32:7 he says to the people: be strong and courageous; be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him. For there be more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles.

That is the refuge that David confessed in Psalm 142 but momentarily sought elsewhere. Hezekiah held it plainly. The people rested themselves on Hezekiah's word — and the Lord fulfilled it. The Assyrian army was destroyed overnight and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh in disgrace. When a man's refuge is in the Lord and he acts accordingly, the Lord acts on his behalf.

Where do we look for our refuge? Not in abstract principle — but day to day, anxiety to anxiety, challenge to challenge. We tend to acknowledge the goodness of God when things go as we hoped, and to lose sight of it when they do not. But the goodness of God endures continually — not only when we see it, not only when circumstances confirm it. It is unchanging. It is always there. And it is a secure refuge, the only secure one, unlike everything else that will fail

somewhere along the way. He wants to be that refuge for us. He is the only one who can be it fully.

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