

December 30, 2018
Sunday Morning Service
New Year
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2018 David J. Whitcomb

THE LORD HEARD 2 Chronicles 30

The life of King Manasseh makes for an interesting and instructive study. During my devotional time a couple of weeks ago, I perused the brief record of Manasseh left by the Chronicler. I was struck again by the fact that Manasseh was so wicked that he became the measuring stick for “bad” in the lineage of Judah’s kings. It seems like the historians assessed the kings either as good like David or bad like Manasseh. It’s a telling contrast.

Our Bible contains as many as 75 psalms attributed to David. Many of those psalms are prayers. They are prayers that we often identify with and in which we find much strength when we meditate on them in times of trouble. In contrast to David, we might wonder if Manasseh ever prayed. Actually he did.

It is true that Manasseh was bad to the bone. Worse is that he was a spiritual rebel against God in spite of the fact that his father Hezekiah was one of the most faithful kings in Judah’s history. It got so bad that *“The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention”* (2 Chronicles 33:10). And so finally, God punished Manasseh severely by sending the King of Assyria to whip him good and take him captive to Babylon (v.11).

A wonderful thing happened to Manasseh while he was in prison. God poured out His grace on the rebel and the king humbled himself, repented of his sin, and prayed to God. *And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers”* (2 Chronicles 33:12).

One of Satan’s most pernicious lies is to convince you that you are so bad God doesn’t want to hear from you. Satan wants for us to believe that God responds to us like immature, vacillating, offended

people do. Satan desires for us to think that if we are not perfect, we might as well forget about prayer because God’s not listening. The reality is that the only way we can restore fellowship with God is through humble prayer. God loves to hear sinners pray, “Be merciful to me for I am a sinner” – even when that prayer comes from His own children.

Hezekiah and his people demonstrated this truth in a wonderful way. Though it seems strange, Hezekiah’s father, King Ahaz, was almost as bad as Hezekiah’s son Manasseh. Ahaz virtually shut down worship of God in Judah. When Hezekiah came to the throne, he longed to bring the nation back into fellowship with God. As the saying goes, “It takes a long time to turn a big ship.” Accurate worship of God was not going to happen over night. But with Hezekiah’s leadership, it was close to an immediate change. Would all the pieces of the puzzle be placed perfectly? No. But God wonderfully, patiently heard Hezekiah’s prayer and blessed His people.

Hezekiah teaches us an important lesson about the effectiveness of prayer. It is a lesson that we will do well to remember as we launch into 2019.

The Situation (vv.1-5).

The Bible historian has clearly recorded that at this point in history God’s people had rebelled against God. Much of the rebellion was due to the leadership of the wicked king Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28:23-25). He had no faith in the LORD God. Thinking he did not need God, he concluded that no one else did either, and he literally had shut the doors to the house of God. As if that was not enough rebellion, Ahaz proceeded to cut up the vessels of the house of God that were supposed to be used in worshipping the LORD. He chose to worship the gods of Damascus because the Syrians had defeated him.

But, in truth, the Syrians defeated Judah because God’s people rebelled against God under Ahaz’s leadership. God hates to have His people loving other gods and rejecting Him. Therefore, because of Ahaz’s leadership, God was angry with His people. *In every city of Judah he made high places to make offerings to other gods,*

provoking to anger the LORD, the God of his fathers (2 Chronicles 28:25).

Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, was determined to change things. It is not unusual that we find a wicked king followed on the throne by a son who loves God. Or vice versa is also the case. In this case, the son of the wicked king loved the LORD deeply.

Hezekiah began to reign when he was 25 years old (2 Chronicles 29:1). From the scant evidence we have, it appears that Hezekiah began a co-regency with his father Ahaz in 729 BC. That would have coincided with the third year of the reign of King Hoshea in Israel. Seven years later (722 B.C.), God finally sent Assyria to destroy Israel and scatter many of the people to distant lands. The seven years after that intervention by God, (715 B.C.) Ahaz died and Hezekiah was the sole king of Judah.

Most important is that King Hezekiah did what was right. The record states, *And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done (2 Chronicles 29:2).* Hezekiah is the first king of Judah to be compared so favorably to David. The worship he instituted and the restoration of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread was compared only to the great times of worship under David and Solomon (30:26).

Specifically, we learn in our text that what was “right” included restoring right worship of the LORD. Hezekiah and his princes hatched a plan to observe Passover (which naturally included the week of Unleavened Bread) (v.2). In fact, they decided to invite the remnant of God’s people who were still in the old region of Israel (v.1). We remember that Assyria had overrun the nation of Israel seven years earlier. *Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem to keep the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel (v.1).*

Proper worship was long overdue. At the end of verse five, we read in the message Hezekiah sent out that *the people should come and keep the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel, at Jerusalem, for they had not kept it as often as prescribed (v.5).* Talk about an understatement! It had been many years since God’s people had worshiped Him correctly.

The king revealed his heart in the message he sent. He sent to the people in Judah and the remnant of Israel a challenge for the remnant of Israel to return to the God of the Covenant so that they can enjoy restored fellowship with Him. *O people of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria (v.6b).*

Hezekiah also challenge his friends and relatives to the north to stop their rebellion against God. *Do not be like your fathers and your brothers, who were faithless to the LORD God of their fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see. Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were (vv.7-8a).* Along with the challenge to forsake the rebellion of their fathers was the challenge to be engaged in right worship. They needed to *yield yourselves to the LORD and come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever, and serve the LORD your God (v.8b).*

Finally, in the message Hezekiah sent a promise of restored fellowship. He encouraged participation in worship that honored God, *that his fierce anger may turn away from you. For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your children will find compassion with their captors and return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him (vv.8c-9).*

This is the heart of a person who truly loves God, trusts God, and desires to worship God. He knows that the so-called people of God had abandoned God in favor of the little, make-believe gods of their world. His heart aches for professing followers of Jesus to worship Him as His perfect character requires. He challenges people to come clean of their sin, restore fellowship with God, and worship Him. What happens when you express that kind of heart?

The Response to the Message (vv.10-16).

The message went out, but some in Israel mocked it. *So the couriers went from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them (v.10).* The evangelists did their part. They took the

king's message just like you and I try to share it with other people. They went to great lengths to invite others to restored worship.

The recipients of the good news rejected it. Many who heard the invitation mocked and laughed. They scornfully laughed at the messengers and derided their message. They mocked them with slander and blasphemy. This is what Sanballet and Tobiah did to Nehemiah as he was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. They displayed their hatred for anyone who desires to serve God. These were the same people who sinned generation after generation until God judged them. But even after God's judgment, even while they were trying to pick up the pieces of a destroyed life, they mocked the invitation to return to the LORD. It is a reminder that sin is so deceiving, so enslaving. It is a reminder that sin mocks the mocker.

Unlike the mockers, some in Israel took heed when they received Hezekiah's message (vv. 11-12). Three tribes out of ten were represented positively. They were *some men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun who humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem (v.11)*. Those people heard the challenge from the man of God and humbled themselves. But why did these people respond differently? For the same reason most of the people in Judah did. Read on.

Many in Judah responded well to the invitation to return to right worship. Why? *The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the LORD (v.12)*. The hand of God was on the leaders and on the individuals in the nation. The king and princes hatched the plan and invited others because God the Holy Spirit was pouring out His grace on them. Many people in Judah were recipients of God's grace.

That is the same reason the few people in the three tribes from Israel responded positively. We must remember when we give the good news for people to return to fellowship and right worship of their Creator, that they can only respond positively if God stirs their hearts. When His hand of grace is not present, the people will respond according to sin and Satan's influence. They might laugh. They might mock. They might ignore. Or they might just conclude that such "fanatical pursuing of God" is just not necessary.

The many who responded positively to the challenge to go to Jerusalem and worship God kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv.13-16). Before engaging in worship to God, they removed the

sinful objects. They removed the sinful objects for the same reason they showed up to worship. A great number of people demonstrated the work of God's grace in their hearts. *And many people came together in Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the second month, a very great assembly (v.13)*. People graced by God abhor what He abhors. *They set to work and removed the altars that were in Jerusalem, and all the altars for burning incense they took away and threw into the Kidron valley (v.14)*. They removed all the altars of make-believe pagan gods that Ahaz and the people set up in Jerusalem. They threw the junk in the valley of refuge, the city dump.

We live in a strange religious climate. The Old Testament is full of evidence like this that when God did a work of grace in people's hearts, their first response was to dump all the junk of the world that had displaced God. Coming to the New Testament, we discover that when God did a work of grace in the hearts of people, they abandoned sins, they stopped going places they used to attend when they were sinners, and they brought thousands of dollars worth of books about worldliness and burned them (Acts 19:19).

Even in comparatively modern times, like since the Reformation, the response has been the same. It was common in America's past that when revival swept a church, a city, or a part of the country that people abandoned worldly entertainment and especially alcohol.

But today, people who claim to love Jesus and worship God seem to want to hang on to things that for centuries were considered opposition to godliness. The only suitable explanation I can find in my heart is that it appears that God has not poured out His grace on very many people. As a result, we observe a lot of religious talk and expression, but not much true separation from sin unto God.

I read a statement attributed to Benjamin Franklin. He supposedly said, "The great danger with fraternizing with people who don't drink is that they can actually remember what was said the night before." God would have us remember and exercise care to that end. I find it ironic that many religious people in our sub-culture claim that Benjamin Franklin was a Christian. He was not. He barely had any respect for God. He and his conclusions are not good examples for God's people to follow.

Having thrown out the interfering junk, the many people worshiped God. In their worship, the people **almost** followed God's instruction given in His law (Numbers 9:11). On the surface, everything looks fine as *they slaughtered the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the second month (v.15a)*. Yes, it was precisely on the prescribed day, the people slaughtered their Passover lambs. However, according to God's law, the priests were responsible to receive the blood of the sacrificed lamb at the tabernacle. The priests and Levites were a bit derelict in their duty to be ceremonially clean and ready to participate in this worship.

In the process of breaching God's law, the religious leaders were put to shame. *And the priests and the Levites were ashamed, so that they consecrated themselves and brought burnt offerings into the house of the LORD. They took their accustomed posts according to the Law of Moses the man of God. The priests threw the blood that they received from the hand of the Levites (vv.15b-16)*. When it became obvious that the people were more dedicated to God than the clergy were, the clergy got under conviction. The Levites ended up doing more than the law required by handing the sacrificial blood off to the newly purified priests.

It is not unusual that there will be people sitting in the pews in multitudes of congregations who are more spiritually, more closely in fellowship with God than the clerics in the pulpit. That is a sign of a culture in spiritual decline. God intends for His appointed spiritual leaders to lead the people into closer fellowship with God. Instead, too many religious leaders are consumed with leading the people into social efforts, exciting programs, or human-centered endeavors – all of which are typically more attractive than self-sacrificing fellowship with God.

A Problem (vv.17-20).

Just when it looked like the society of God's people were getting back to doing God's will, it became obvious that there was a problem. Many of the people who came to worship were ceremonially unclean. *For there were many in the assembly who had not consecrated themselves. Therefore the Levites had to slaughter the Passover lamb for everyone who was not clean, to consecrate it*

to the LORD. For a majority of the people, many of them from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves (vv.17-18a).

That a lot of people were ceremonially unclean was a difficult matter because God required the people to approach this special act of worship having been cleansed from outward sins and law breaking. But in this case, most of the people from old Israel had not been cleansed. As a society, they had been in almost ceaseless rebellion against God for over 200 years. Their first king Jeroboam had established false worship with two altars of his design. The people had been sunk in wickedness as bad as the people God had destroyed out of the land. Now some of the remnant that was left desired to get back to worshiping God.

In response to the problem of ceremonial uncleanness, the Levites offered a special sacrifice for cleansing. *Therefore the Levites had to slaughter the Passover lamb for everyone who was not clean, to consecrate it to the LORD (v.17)*. Okay, that was a little closer to doing God's law. But still not quite in conformity to what God required. The priests were supposed to offer the sacrifice for cleansing. The individual sinners were supposed to provide the sacrifice.

What to do? Well much to some people's chagrin, the unclean people celebrated Passover anyway. The text states, *yet they ate the Passover otherwise than as prescribed (v.18b)*. The good news is that the people worshiped the LORD. The bad news is that many of the people were not quite in conformity with the prescribed law.

This brings us to an impasse according to many sincere, devout Christians. I remember a conversation I had about modes of baptism. The hypothetical situation was presented of a man who is bedridden, cannot even stand up, and would not recover from the disease. In that condition, he professes Christ as Savior and requests baptism. The question was if I would be willing to baptize the man by sprinkling? I confessed that I would. Wrong answer! The person offering the hypothetical situation concluded, "It is better not to baptize than to baptize the wrong way." No doubt there are some here who would agree with that conclusion. Sometimes circumstances do not allow us to be perfect.

How did Hezekiah handle the problem with the attempts to do God's will but not quite in conformity to His law? He prayed. *For Hezekiah had prayed for them, saying, "May the good LORD pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God, the LORD, the God of his fathers, even though not according to the sanctuary's rules of cleanness." And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people (vv.18c-20).*

The king's prayer truly was a request for God to overlook the rules. The circumstances just did not allow for an exact following of the rules. The rules were God's rules and stated clearly in His law. Would God ever allow for an exception to His own rules? The Bible is full of examples of that very thing.

The LORD heard and healed. The LORD was pleased to listen to Hezekiah's request. The LORD was patient and gracious to people who set their hearts to seek God. Isn't this what God promised to Solomon at the dedication of the temple? God said, *"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land"* (2 Chronicles 7:14). That is what God did here. God cleansed the people from disfavor and restored them to favor (*healed*).

And there was great rejoicing in the land as the LORD accepted the people's worship. *The whole assembly of Judah, and the priests and the Levites, and the whole assembly that came out of Israel, and the sojourners who came out of the land of Israel, and the sojourners who lived in Judah, rejoiced. So there was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. Then the priests and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven (vv.25-27).*

Living in obedience to the clear truth of God's word is right and necessary. But sometimes God's people become more satisfied that they are keeping the rules than whether they are living in daily fellowship with the Lord. Our goal, our focus needs to be a right, serious, intimate relationship with our God. The depth of that fellowship is often revealed in the way we pray. We will pray the way we should when our prayer is a reflection of a heart that is set to seek the LORD. Let's begin 2019 with hearts that are so focused on God

that our prayers are not rote repetition but the transparent outpouring of our whole person to God.