

Sermon 67, “I’ll Clean Up This Town,” 2 Kings 21

Proposition: God will not turn a blind eye toward sin, even among His own chosen people, and even in one of the ancestors of Jesus.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, our text this evening presents Manasseh’s evil. As we saw last time, judgment very nearly fell on Judah in 701 B.C., and only Hezekiah’s intercession and God’s mercy postponed it. Yet Hezekiah’s own son Manasseh was already an agent of judgment, and one who sealed the fate of Judah. Because of his wickedness, exile was certain. Our text is not afraid to juxtapose God’s promise that Israel would remain in the land with God’s other promise to deliver in Israel into the hands of its enemies. Indeed, the bulk of our text is given over to presenting Manasseh’s wickedness and God’s verdict on that wickedness. The thing that we see preeminently here is that God will not turn a blind eye toward sin, even if it’s in His chosen people, even if it’s in David’s line. God sees sin and He will wipe it out from among His people as a man wipes a dish. That’s the message of this chapter — and it’s one that behoves us to hate and flee sin!

I. Manasseh’s Evil Contrasted with God’s Righteousness, vv. 1-16

Manasseh, son of Hezekiah and according to Jewish tradition grandson of Isaiah (yes, the Jews say that Hezekiah married Isaiah’s daughter), began to reign sometime in the 690s or 680s B.C. Over and over, our text contrasts Manasseh’s sinful lifestyle with God’s comments on that lifestyle and God’s anger at that lifestyle.

A. The Mystery of Providence, v. 1

Yet before we look at that directly, we need to consider this troubling statement that Manasseh, the paragon of evil, the worst king ever, reigned longer than any of the other kings of Judah or Israel. Why did Manasseh reign longer than David, longer than Hezekiah, longer than Josiah? Why did the man who did so much evil not get cut off in his prime like Ahab? The answer, of course, can only be found in the mystery of providence. God allows and sends these things for His own reasons; the evil of Manasseh is only one small subset of the evil that has flourished

under the sun ever since the days of Adam. God allows sin ultimately for the sake of displaying His glory, His grace in forgiving sin and His righteousness in punishing it.

Experientially, before you can really ask why God let Manasseh sin like this, you need to ask yourself why you let yourself sin. Why do you give in to your sin? Why do you spend minutes or hours or days doing things you know to be wrong? It seems clear that Manasseh's evil reign was only the beginning of God's judgment on Judah for not listening to Him. Sin is oftentimes the punishment for sin. Yet sometimes, as in the case of Adam's temptation, sin simply comes out of nowhere. Ultimately, the lesson we should learn from Manasseh's long persistence in sin is that God is patient and that God is not afraid of letting us experience the consequences of our own depravity. If you want to sin, He may not stop you. Don't throw yourself into the abyss assuming that God has a safety net spread halfway down. Yes, we know from Chronicles that Manasseh actually did repent at the end. God did have a safety net spread for him, and that shows us something about the shocking grace of God. But don't presume on such a safety net. If you give yourself to sin, God may give you up. Though He didn't give up on Manasseh, He did give up His people to the consequences of their sin. Beware, Christian. Don't let the enticements of sin fool you!

B. Manasseh Un-hallows the City of God, vv. 2-4

The first thing Manasseh did was to imitate the example of those nations God exiled before Israel and Judah. He did the kinds of things that got people kicked out of the land. Specifically, he undid Hezekiah's good deeds and allowed people to worship on their own terms, in their own ways, at the high places once more. He imitated King Ahab. And he served all the astral deities. He put new altars into Yahweh's house as well.

In short, this was a man who gave himself wholeheartedly to idolatry. He set his heart on breaking the first commandment. He had plenty of other gods before Yahweh! And he refused to worship even Yahweh in the way He had commanded. Again, it's easy to list the gods of our era — wealth, comfort, security, convenience, stuff. But it's hard to see how those things are so bad. Can't we have wealth, comfort, security, convenience, stuff — and Jesus? Aren't they all compatible? Not as gods they aren't. You can indeed have them all, but you can't have them all as gods. Jesus alone must be your God. Insofar as you worship comfort, wealth, and the rest — insofar as you're willing to sin to acquire them — you can't have Jesus along with them.

Notice God's comment on Manasseh's behavior. God had specifically placed His name in Jerusalem. God had set up Jerusalem to be the place where His name was known and displayed. Manasseh, by setting up false gods, deliberately obscured God's name. His false gods hid the character of the real God. And insofar as you bear the name "Christian" but spend your time serving idols, you too will be obscuring God's name. You, the one on whom God's name has been put in baptism and in benediction, have a responsibility to manifest that name. You are the new city on a hill; we as the people of God are what Jerusalem was in the OT era. And if you give yourself to idols like Manasseh did, then you are hiding what God is like. You exist to reveal Him. And so be an idolater is to betray your purpose. You contradict your own prayers.

How many times have you asked God to hallow His name? Yet every time you choose an idol, you un-hallow that name. Brothers and sisters, an idol is anything you will sin to get. And every time you sin to get something, you are trying to besmirch God's name. Your actions are saying He is not enough — that you, though you bear His name, need not really *be* a Christian, need not really *be* a godly person. Do you want to be a Christian? Or would you prefer to be of the tribe of King Manasseh?

C. Manasseh Un-hallows the Temple of God, vv. 5-8

Manasseh also un-hallowed God's temple. He filled God's house with pagan shrines. He sacrificed his own son to his false gods. He betook himself to the occult. He even set up the goddess Asherah in the court of God's house. The syncretism of his era was so bad that two big storage jars have been found inscribed with the following statements: "I bless you by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah," and "I bless you by YHWH of Teiman and his Asherah."¹ In the popular mind, apparently, YHWH and Asherah were a couple, or something close to it.

How do we imitate this kind of idolatry? The answer is obvious. We imitate it by bringing into God's church things that don't belong there. An obvious one, perhaps, is the displaying of a national flag in our worship space. Since when do we need to be Americans to worship God? Another obvious one is the idea that the things we have in this building are necessary to worship God. The instant we begin to think that we can't worship God unless we have bulletins, hymnals, wireless microphones, and a pulpit and chairs, we have taken a step down the road to Manasseh's kingdom. Brothers and sisters, the things we have here are nice things. Don't get me wrong. It's not evil to bring a microphone or a candle or a ceiling fan into worship. But the instant we begin to think that those things are necessary parts of worship, we have a problem.

Another way to corrupt the church is to attempt to make it into a place that hosts worship of other gods. If you can come here and celebrate wealth as an end in itself, or celebrate health, or human relationships, or beautiful music and stirring oratory, or any other merely human thing, then we have perverted the church into an idolatrous organization. If you are here because you love beautiful music and architecture, well, that's fine — but if you love those things more than you love God, that's not good at all. Don't allow God's temple to get cluttered up with the paraphernalia of idolatry. It's okay to have carvings and paintings of saints and angels in the church. But the moment they distract us from God, the moment they become ends in themselves, they need to go.

Manasseh, however, did not merely use good things in the wrong way. He also used evil things. Don't play with the occult, as he did. There is no way in which you can lawfully read your horoscope, visit an astrologer, play with a ouija board, or attempt to establish communication with the dead or with spirits. I hope that there is little temptation to pursue these things as such among us here at Harvest, but for certain personalities and temperaments, the occult exercises a powerful fascination. Under stress, or among a new group of friends, the

¹ Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, // *Kings*, Anchor Bible, 268.

temptation to participate can be rather overwhelming. Yet to participate is to worship idols like Manasseh did.

Don't sacrifice your children, either literally or figuratively. You can sacrifice your children to your own convenience by yelling at them, by making them take a back seat to your favorite TV show, by provoking them to anger through your misguided efforts to teach them the Bible, by corrupting them with evil films, books, pictures, and music. You can sacrifice them by putting them in institutions where they will not be taught to love God and neighbor, or by keeping them out of such institutions but not teaching and training them yourself.

How did God respond to Manasseh's cluttering up the Temple with idols, and to his occult practices and his sacrifice of his son? By reiterating His promise, and then by explaining that through sin, Manasseh and Judah in general had forfeited that promise.

God had promised not only to put His name in the Temple and thus in Jerusalem; He had promised to put it there *forever*. In addition to His permanent presence in the land, He had sworn to grant Israel a permanent presence in the land too — on condition that they carefully obeyed Him. In other words, the point is that God's promise of His presence and Israel's presence in the land, in that form, was conditional. If God's people chose to ignore the way He had provided for them to remain in His presence in the land, then they would be cast out of His presence and He would move out and leave them.

Now, we know from the New Testament that God's presence in its Old Testament form was always designed to be temporary. He had a better kind of presence in store for them. Abraham and David were explicitly looking for that better kind of presence (see Heb. 11 and Ps. 23). But what made it temporary? The problem of sin. God could not dwell with His people permanently through the Levitical system because the Levitical system could not effectively deal with sin! The only way God can dwell with His people permanently is when they are righteous. If Israel kept the law, then they would not need to wander anymore. But Israel was not capable of keeping the law. Manasseh, ultimately, was different only in degree but not in kind from the other kings of Judah. He sinned worse, but they all sinned.

D. God Promises to Forsake His Chosen People, vv. 9-15

And so, God promised to forsake His chosen people. The penalty for sin is removal from the presence of God. And God's people had become worse than the world.

Brothers and sisters, what an indictment this is! Are you and I in danger of becoming worse than the world? Yes, we are. This kind of apostasy is and remains a possibility for the people of God. Don't read about Israel under Manasseh and say, "It's a good thing I'm not like that! It's a good thing I can't fall that far!" If you have a single area in your life where you're not paying attention to the word of God, then you are headed toward Manasseh-land. God's people paid no attention to His word. They ignored His promise. The prospect of life in God's presence forever was not enough to entice them away from their sin.

So God denounced Judah by His prophets. Notice, if you would, that none of the writing prophets were active during the reign of Manasseh. Isaiah, Micah, and Amos had all finished

their ministries before Manasseh came on the throne, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel did not arise until the reign of Josiah or afterward. What we're about to read in vv. 11-15 of the present chapter represent the one word of God to Judah during the 55 years of Manasseh's reign.

That single word is a word of judgment. It recounts how Manasseh sinned worse than all who were before him, and how in response God planned to judge Judah like He had judged Samaria. Samaria, of course, had been destroyed by Assyria in 722 B.C. God would treat Judah like the house of Ahab, which had been wiped out to the fourth generation. God would clean up this town, as they used to say in the Old West. Jerusalem is a dirty dish that needs a good wiping, a wiping out. That is precisely what God plans to administer to her.

How will God do this? By forsaking His people, removing His guiding, guarding, and protecting presence, and handing them over to their enemies. Brothers and sisters, this is the fate that any Christian and any church which gives itself over to sin can expect. God will wipe you out. This fate would befall Judah because they had provoked God to anger for 800 years, ever since the Exodus onward.

Let's look at the Christian church for a second. Is our track record better than Israel's? Maybe a little. But not much. We too have had notorious idolaters in high positions. We too have had the majority of ordinary people in the church living as apostates barely distinguishable from the ambient culture. We have provoked God in high style for ages, and we in the American church have certainly done so.

What hope do we have? Is there any chance for us? Only in Christ. The Levitical system couldn't keep God's people in His presence. There was just too much sin for it to deal with. In the same way, any system that relies on what we do will succumb. If we wish to remain in God's presence, if we don't want Him to leave us or hand us over to our enemies, then we need to humble ourselves in repentance before Him. Even Manasseh was saved when he humbled himself at the last minute. And you and I will be saved if we humble ourselves in repentance before God and trust entirely and exclusively in Christ.

Yet, at the same time, we should recognize that if we are part of a sinful church, then we too will suffer here on earth. Israel being sent into exile was not necessarily the same thing as being cut off from Heaven, even though the Promised Land was a type of Heaven. The larger point here not that you can lose your salvation, but rather that God will punish sin. If you give yourself over to sin, beware!

E. Manasseh Murders the People of God, v. 16

Indeed, Manasseh himself already anticipated the sufferings that would be visited on God's people by filling Jerusalem with innocent blood from end to end. This is always one of the costs of idolatry. If you are willing to worship false gods, then you are also willing to kill innocent people. It has happened in every culture, in every place, and it will continue to happen until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God. Do you see a murderer? He was an idolater first. Do you want to be a murderer? Then go ahead and worship idols.

II. Manasseh's Sin-Soaked Epitaph, vv. 17-18

Even Manasseh's concluding formula drips with sin. Not even Jeroboam or Ahab have the sins which they sinned commemorated in the closing formula about their reigns. Manasseh combined the nastiest features of Jeroboam, Ahab, Saul, and Ahaz. He was worse than all four of them put together. He was buried in the garden of Uzza — a name reminiscent of the one who defiled the ark of the covenant and was struck dead for it in 2 Sam. 6. Manasseh, the corrupter of God's worship, is buried in a garden named for the one who touched the sacred ark.

III. Manasseh's Wicked Clone, vv. 19-26

And, in case 55 years wasn't enough, Manasseh left behind a clone of himself. Three times in vv. 20-21 we are told that Amon imitated his father. The son was just like his daddy, only he did not die in peace. He was murdered after only two years of his carrying-on in the palace.

Yet the people of the land did not give up on David's line. We could certainly say the same today, couldn't we? So many people who profess the name of Christ are rotten scummy people. So let's just abandon Christianity and try something else. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, allegedly said that church membership should be open to anyone who professed to love God and to love others.

We can't do that. Our trust is not in the good behavior of ourselves or of Christians in general. Our trust is in Jesus Christ. We know that God will punish sin. It's written all over this chapter. But it was most prominently done at the cross of Jesus Christ. There God punished sin completely and totally, in His own Son. That means two things. First of all, it means that if you sin God will not spare you. As righteous judge, He must and will punish the guilty. You cannot possibly make a claim on Him that will influence Him to drop the idea of punishing you. But secondly, as righteous judge He will forgive the sins of all those who are covered in Christ. If you are in Jesus, then your sins have already been punished and God has no condemnation for you.

Do you want to defy God and suffer His punishment? Or do you want to take refuge in Jesus Christ? The choice is clear. Blessed are all those who take refuge in Jesus! Amen.