**Sunday 1st August 2021**

2 Chronicles 33: 1-20

Manasseh

This week we have returned to one of the kings of Judah, Manasseh.

Manasseh was the son of Hezekiah, whom we heard about a few weeks ago, who did good in the eyes of the Lord. As we have heard, Hezekiah had removed and destroyed the introduced high places and idol worship. Manasseh was also the grand-father of Josiah, another king whom we looked at who destroyed the places of idol worship and found the book of the law of Moses. All of these kings are descendants of David.

We follow now where Hezekiah had spent much of his reign destroying these places of idol worship, Manasseh spent much of his putting them back again! He was basically the equivalent of Ahab in Israel. At this point Israel had been overcome by the Assyrian king and deported to Babylon, so Judah was the remnant of God’s chosen nation.

Manasseh held the longest reign of the kings in Judah – 55 years. We can read almost the same account in 2 Kings chapter 21. But that only records the evil events carried out. The chronicles author expands on the journey to Babylon, his repentance and ultimately his restoration to rule. We just need to understand the purpose of each book.

Kings was written whilst Israel and Judah were in exile. It was the way that God communicated to His people the reason why they were in exile. Giving them the information required so that they understood and re-align themselves with God. Chronicles was written in post exile times, when Jerusalem was being rebuilt and Israel would be rebuilding themselves as a nation once again. Therefore, perhaps the chronicler felt the need to expand on the fact that even when the sin of people was great, if they turned to the Lord and truly repented that His mercy would flow – and that would be the reason that Manasseh was allowed to reign for so long – revealing blessing from obedience.

Later in the passage when describing the building of the outer wall of the City of David etc. this also was a sign of blessing and rebuilding – very apt for the time chronicles was written.

Both kings and chronicles say similar messages and quote other books. The authors would have taken excerpts from much the same sources, hence they state other annals and books that recorded the details of the reigns. They would have recorded what they believed was necessary for those whom they were writing for, so it is helpful to know the purpose of their writing.

It is obvious that despite his repentance, it was Manasseh’s re-instatement of such evil practices that made the cup of God’s wrath overflow. Kings before him had diluted His laws and desired community, but it was during Manasseh’s reign that the decision for God’s judgement was cemented. Repentance and humbling from now on only deferred the consequence. Manasseh introduced the sacrificing of children. For me, that is hard to comprehend and I am sure that it is the same for you too. However, it was not a surprise to God. In Leviticus 20: 1-5 God expressly forbid the practice as detestable – he knew just how atrocious humankind could become.

There is no denying that Manasseh was a religious man. Consider the time he would have spent worshipping God, Molech, Asherah, Baal, all the starry hosts, as well as practicing sorcery, divination and witchcraft. And after all that he would still seek the future from mediums and spiritists. Perhaps he had to introduce idols into the temple to save himself some time!

Everything that he was doing, the people were following his example. It seems ridiculous perhaps to us that anyone would choose to sacrifice their children – or bow to the moon. But when your leader is introducing so many types of idols, messages will become mixed. If you have different influences surrounding you, it is easy for things to merge into each other. For me, I often remember snippets of conversations that I have had, with some wise words that I have remembered, but I can get muddled about who I had the conversation with. I can only imagine that it may be the same if you are following many idols – after which ceremony did something positive happen?

Previously, foreign types of worship were tolerated, they were new and novel. People perhaps went to be nosey, or to give support to their wives or husbands, what harm can that do? Perhaps we think the same now? But it can be easy to get drawn in.

For example, astrology. God created the stars, planets and galaxies. He has even used them to show events happening – the Magi at the birth of Jesus were studying the starry hosts and that is when the birth of Jesus was revealed to them, and the whereabouts. If one is looking at their astrological star reading and something rings true, then human nature can easily transfer the trust and reliance onto the messengers rather than the message giver. Hence the astrological stars are in almost every form of paper or journal. If something good happens, it can be false re-enforcement.

How many of us have heard people saying about their “lucky pants” or “lucky socks”; Because they were wearing that item of clothing when they successfully got a job, or they were wearing that when their football team won. If they wear them again and the team wins again, that is false re-enforcement. A silly example but shows how easily you can get drawn into something – fairly harmless, but if that trust is not re-focussed it becomes a barrier to hearing and trusting God.

We hear that the Lord continued to speak to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. On our listing of the kings there are no prophets shown against Manasseh’s reign. It does not name any prophets in the scripture. In truth, it would not have been a pleasant time for prophets – Manasseh was believed to have killed many of them. In the kings account it states that Manasseh shed much innocent blood – the reason for God’s severe judgement. This would not have just been the innocent children offered for sacrifices, but for the death of the prophets. He is held responsible for the death of Isaiah, being sawed into two.

There is so much evil that Manasseh is introducing, but the passage reveals the consequence that God had promised when He had spoken to David and Solomon around 300 years previously: “In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will not again make the feet of the Israelites leave the land I assigned to your forefathers, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them concerning all the law, decrees and ordinances given through Moses.”

God had promised exile IF the laws were not followed. We know that the book of the law had been mislaid many years ago – if it had not been lost then it could not have been found in the reign of Josiah later. Manasseh introduced and led the people to so many evil practices that were completely against His laws that there was no turning back – exile would follow.

Even after Manasseh was taken prisoner, repented and returned to reign over the remnant, even though his heart had been reformed and he recognized only God as the Lord, the rest of the people did not turn back. They continued to worship and sacrifice on the high places, but only to God. They had become so blurred with what God’s laws were that they could not return to pure worship of God.

So what is the message for us today? Keep wise! We must not have the attitude that we can do anything, be involved in whatever is around us, and that either we will not be influenced or that we can repent later.

Do not consider things that are not of God to be harmless. Through our actions and words we can change people’s attitudes and hearts in lasting ways. Irreversible. We have seen the negative side of that in Manasseh’s reign, but it can be done for good. Consider our actions with regard to racism, sexism, oppression and injustice. We may not sacrifice our children, but if we remain indifferent to these things, no hearts will be changed. Continue to see God in all good things and let our actions and responses to things that are not of God be positive for Him. Very often our sharing the gospel is not about telling people bible stories directly, but in our responses to events that occur when we speak of hope and goodness. Let our words, actions and attitudes be of love in order that we can help overcome the hatred in the world.