

Before the Brightest Dawn

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[0 : 00] And then if we turn once more to 2 Chronicles and chapter 33, 2 Chronicles chapter 33, and we'll consider together this evening the words of verses 1 through 9.

Manasseh was 12 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for 55 years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. The brightest dawn comes after the darkest hour, or so the saying goes.

Just when it seems that things can't get any darker, the sun begins to shine, and the gloom begins to lift. How true to experience it is that the darkest hour comes just before the brightest dawn.

How true it is to the storyline of our salvation as Christians. But just when it seemed that the messianic mission of Jesus was dead and buried in a dark garden tomb, on the third day the Son of Righteousness rose with healing in his wings.

[1 : 27] How true in our own illnesses, physical, mental, spiritual, that things, before they get better, they often get worse.

The history of Judah recorded for us in 2 Chronicles is rather like that. The darkest hour always comes before the brightest dawn.

The kings follow on from one another in cycles of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to God. King Ahaz, a dreadfully unfaithful king, is followed by his son King Hezekiah, a delightfully faithful king.

King Hezekiah is followed by his son King Manasseh, another dreadfully unfaithful king, although with a twist.

Followed by his son King Amon, another terrifyingly unfaithful king. Followed by his son King Josiah, the most faithful of all the kings of Judah. Over the next three Sunday evenings, I want us to dig into 2 Chronicles 33 and the life of one of these kings, King Manasseh of Judah, who was the longest reigning of all Judah's kings.

[2 : 48] This man's life is testament to the truth, that the darkest hour comes before the brightest dawn, for just when it seemed that he could go no further down into unfaithfulness, God marvelously brought him back.

Well, before we get into this passage, I want to make two introductory comments to help you find your place. First, from a biblical perspective, 2 Chronicles was written after the return from exile in Babylon.

It was written to remind them that faithfulness to God results in blessing.

What has unfaithfulness to God leads to judgment. They had gone into exile in Babylon in the first place because of their unfaithfulness.

Now they had returned and God had settled them once again into their own land. They needed to remember their history and to be faithful to God, lest worse should happen.

[4 : 05] We'll come back to this later. And secondly, from a theological perspective, trying to set our place here in 2 Chronicles 33, from a theological perspective, each of these kings in 2 Chronicles, whether they are faithful or unfaithful, point to our need of a greater king, King Jesus, born of the line of David, but ruling his people with justice, with power, and with steadfast love.

And so remember, through Manasseh's high points and low points, 2 Chronicles 33 points to our need of a king who is always faithful, King Jesus.

Well, I could have chosen to preach from any number of themes this COVID November. Why Manasseh? Well, as Christians, we find ourselves in the position of those to whom Chronicles was first written.

Saved from captivity to our sins by God, and now called to live in obedience to God.

Saved by the gospel, and living out the gospel. Saved by Christ, living for Christ.

[5 : 36] And so over the course of this November, through Manasseh's life and example, my aim is to renew our dedication to living out the gospel in our homes, in our classrooms, in our workplaces, and living for Christ in all of our relationships.

Well, Manasseh's life divides into three sections. His pre-life, his life pre-captivity in verses 1 through 9, which we'll look at this evening.

His conversion and captivity from verses 10 to 13. And his obedience, post-captivity, verses 14 through 20. This evening, I want us to focus on the first of these, his life pre-captivity.

It was a dark, dark time in the life of Judah, which is why I began this evening by saying that the darkest hour comes before the brightest dawn.

According to the writer of 2 Kings, that passage we read together, Manasseh may well have been the most evil king Judah ever had.

[6 : 50] The darkest night. And yet, by God's grace, Manasseh, confronted by his sin, humbled himself, prayed for forgiveness, and was forgiven by God, the brightest dawn.

Well, these verses, 2 Chronicles 33, verses 1 through 9, recount the darkness of the night of Manasseh's pre-conversion reign. And it was characterized by four choices that he made.

He consciously made these choices. He chose between his fathers and the nations. He chose between reality and emptiness. He chose between promise and provocation.

And he chose between corrupting and inspiring. Remember the big themes which lie behind these verses in 2 Chronicles 33.

Our need of a better king than Manasseh. King Jesus. Our need to walk in faithfulness and obedience to Christ and his gospel.

[8 : 01] First of all then, in this passage, we see Manasseh choosing between fathers and nations. Choosing between fathers and nations. Now, Manasseh was a man who was blessed with a very godly father.

You only have to read the previous few chapters to learn how faithful King Hezekiah had ruled Judah in such a way that she had returned in devotion to God.

Old Testament scholars have proposed that Hezekiah and Manasseh shared the throne of Judah for nearly 10 years before Hezekiah died. The Manasseh ruled by himself.

So, for his whole life personally and for 10 years professionally, we might say, Manasseh had seen a faithful life firsthand.

His father, Hezekiah. And one might have supposed that Manasseh would have followed in his father's footsteps. One might have supposed that having seen such a faithful life at home and in the workplace, Manasseh would have been just as devoted to God as his father, Hezekiah, had been.

[9 : 14] So, we quote verses like Proverbs 22 and verse 6. Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.

And we assume an almost automatic transfer of faith between parent and child. A word for those of us whose children are not walking in the faith.

For many years, Hezekiah's boy didn't walk in the faith either. In fact, Hezekiah was long dead and buried before Manasseh came to his senses.

It may be that way for you also. You must not feel guilty for your children not walking in the faith as though somehow you have done something wrong.

Rather, with hope in your heart, keep praying that God would fulfill His covenant promises to you and to them and though we may be dead and buried long before they come to their senses, we trust they will.

[10 : 18] We trust they will. Anyway, back to Manasseh. The normal formula attached to the kings of Judah is and so and so became king and he reigned for so and so many years.

And at that point there are two variants. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord just as his fathers had done or he did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord just as the nations around him had done.

And Manasseh chose the latter. He turned his back on his godly father's legacy and he pursued the gods of the nations which God had driven out and destroyed all those years before under Moses and Joshua.

He worshipped and served their gods the Baals the Ashtoreths and the worship of the stars how contemporary. Instead of walking in the faith of his father he walked in the ways of the nations around him.

And there may be some of us like that. Our forefathers followed Jesus but we've chosen a different path for ourselves. We've chosen to leave their legacy and heritage behind us and turn our backs on them.

[11 : 36] We've chosen for people we don't know. We've chosen against people who loved us nurtured us and cared for us. I wonder are there teenagers among us who are in danger of making this very choice at this very time.

Of turning away from the faith of your fathers and turning to the emptiness of the world around you. Perhaps you're fortunate enough to have photographs of your ancestors stretching back over a hundred years.

Look deeply into the eyes of your faithful fathers. Listen to their silent voices instructing you. and saying I follow Jesus my whole life and he was always faithful to me.

My child I love you. Will you follow him also? The key word is obscured by the English translation but it's the beginning of verse 3 covered by the word rebuilt.

He turned back. Manasseh turned back from God and he turned back from the faith of his father Hezekiah in God.

[13 : 00] He turned back. The name Manasseh comes from a Hebrew root meaning he forgot. So for all these many years Manasseh forgot the lessons his father had taught him and he forgot about God.

for so many wasted years he forgot. Have you forgotten the faith of your fathers? Are you turning back? Choose this day between your fathers and the nations.

Second in this passage we see Manasseh choosing between reality and emptiness. Reality and emptiness. Well our first point may have been an appeal to emotion but our second point is an appeal to common sense.

So here we have Manasseh he is king of Judah the king of a nation which owed its very existence to the miraculous work of God in rescuing them from Egypt and settling them in the land of Canaan of dispossessing the peoples who had been there previously of driving them out and of destroying them.

Manasseh knew that the God of his fathers was real that was never his problem. Manasseh was not an atheist no one at his time ever was an atheist his problem was not that he did not have enough gods in his life his problem was that he had too many and so rather than staying with the one God that he knew was real the God of his fathers the God who had rescued his ancestors from slavery in Egypt he began to worship and to serve the gods of the nations around him the Baals the Ashtoreths the religion of the Babylonians which was the worship of stars and planets modern day astrology he consulted the gurus of foreign religion the fortune tellers of Babylon the sorcerers and the mediums and the necromancers of the Assyrians with a fervor to show himself an eager convert to their religions he even offered up some of his own children according to verse 6 as human sacrifices to foreign gods

[15 : 26] I remember having a discussion with an atheist about the corrosive influence of Christianity upon our native British religions in our own history as a nation many of the bog people those bog people being bodies which have been found perfectly preserved in the bogs of Scotland and Ireland we know that these bog people were human sacrifices made by iron age pagans human sacrifices was British native religion really so peaceful I don't think so not here not anywhere to compound it all in words which are very difficult to translate Manasseh seems to have made himself an idol he carved an image something akin to what we might understand today as an American Indian totem pole and he placed this totem pole in the temple of God in Jerusalem and all the time we're shaking our head and wondering to ourselves

Manasseh what has got into that head of yours you might as well bark at the moon as worship it you might as well bow burn the totem pole for fuel as bow down to worship it you might as well spin your own yarn rather than spend money on a fortune teller and how low does it get Manasseh you're offering your own children the seed of your loins to empty fantasy into its fires so here then is the choice for us all between the God who has worked in time and space to redeem his people and whose face we see in Jesus Christ and gods we have to work with wood and stone and metal before we can see their faces don't be surprised that the vast majority of people in our world today still worship the latter be it golden coins stone houses metal cars or social media but you choose the

God whose face you see in Jesus Christ and whose reality you know of in the empty tomb and the third day resurrection of Jesus so again I ask the question are you living in the fantasy of astrology are you living in the fantasy of idol worship or are you living in the real world choose this day between reality and emptiness happiness third in this passage we see manasseh choosing between promise and provocation promise and provocation these verses are filled with God's gospel promises in verse 4 we read that God had promised that in Jerusalem his name would be placed forever and then in verses 7 and 8 we have these incredible incredibly important promises God had made to Solomon manasseh's great grandfather many times removed in this house behold and in

Jerusalem which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel I will place my name forever and I will no more remove the fruit of Israel from upon the ground which I have appointed for your forefathers only if they are careful to do all that I have commanded them all the laws statutes and judgment by the hand of Moses we're going to come back to these promises in a couple of weeks time and understand exactly where they fit in to manasseh's story but for the purposes of this evening rather than believing in the promises of God and being faithful to him we read in verse 6 that by his unfaithfulness his wickedness and his idolatry manasseh provoked God to anger manasseh chose provocation over promise he chose to bow down to other gods and in so doing angered God I don't like the thought of anyone being angry with me I'm sure you're the same but the thought of the almighty God of the universe the God who can stop the sun in its tracks and shake the earth the thought of him being angry with me should be enough to terrify promises or provocation believing in the promises of the gospel or bowing down to other gods which of these do you think any sensible person would choose but then at this stage in his pre-conversion life sense is not something you could accuse manasseh of having over much the ultimate reason manasseh was taken and changed to babylon as he was in verse 11 and as we'll see next week is because of his sin because by spitting on the promises of God he turned his back on

God he knew only too well that faithfulness to God leads to blessing whereas unfaithfulness to God leads to judgment but he chose to provoke God and not to believe God's promise and you know sometimes I wonder whether we're really so different faced with the prospect of the judgment seat of Christ before which we must all appear rather than place our faith in him for his forgiveness and his righteousness we provoke him by our continued rejection of the gospel or for those of us who are already Christians rather than walking in repentance and holiness we choose a life of apathy and of self-sufficiency those to whom 2nd chronicles was first written those exiles God had returned to Jerusalem from captivity they needed to be reminded over and over and over again that it was the unfaithfulness of their fathers which had led to them being exiled in the first place but believing the promise leads to blessing whereas unfaithfulness leads to judgment what was good for

[22 : 06] Manasseh and for those to whom 2nd chronicles was first written is good for us this evening to repent of grieving the spirit and to find out what pleases the Lord namely faith in his son Jesus Christ and then fourth and lastly in this passage we see Manasseh choosing between corrupting and inspiring corrupting and inspiring I don't know what kind of leader Manasseh was was he a gifted manager was he a gifted leader of men we do not know if Manasseh was a good leader but he was most certainly not a godly leader in verse 9 we read Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel we don't know if Manasseh was a competent leader but he was most certainly a corrupting leader who led his people astray like a shepherd who leads his sheep into a marsh where they get stuck and they drown he led the people of

Judah into the unfaithfulness of all the nations of the day many years before this before the first king was appointed in Israel in the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 17 verses 14 through 20 God had given instructions as to how a king should act and behave listen to what God commands in verses 18 to 20 of Deuteronomy 17 when he that is the king takes the throne of his kingdom he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law taken from that of the priests who are Levites it is to be with him he is to read it all the days of his life so that he must learn to revere the Lord his God and to follow carefully all the commands of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn to the right or to the left not only did

Manasseh turn to the right and to the left rather than following God's covenant law and promise he turned the nation God had called him to serve to the right and to the left Judah became a nation not for its righteousness but for its unrighteousness not for its faithfulness but for its apostasy Manasseh corrupted them in Psalm 23 it is said of the good shepherd he leads me in paths of righteousness what does that mean for the shepherding capacity of Manasseh he led his people in paths of unrighteousness of unfaithfulness and of evil reminds us does it not of that sober warning in James 3 verse 1 not many of you should become teachers my brothers for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness but it also reminds us that we all have a responsibility for leading one another into the righteousness of the gospel or the wickedness of the world around us listen to me carefully will there be people in heaven because of your loving witness to the beauty of the gospel will there be people in hell because of our faithless hypocrisy in the things of religion what's good for Manasseh is good for us also we must choose to inspire and encourage one another to the love and good deeds of the gospel there's something about the pre-conversion

Manasseh which is just plain evil according to tradition Manasseh was responsible for the execution of the prophet Isaiah he's not been misled by put advice he's not ignorant of the right way he's not in a position of weakness where he can't influence anyone or make a change he is the king he is the son of a godly father he is instructed by the godly prophets of Judah the truth is that pre-conversion Manasseh was just plain evil when under the late professor John L.

Mackay who's well known to many of us here who was well known to many of us I was learning all about these Old Testament kings in Free Church College he would ask us playfully the question how would you feel about meeting this king in a dark alley when it comes to Manasseh the answer is Professor Mackay I'm frankly terrified of the prospect would I rather Vlad the Impaler or Manasseh of Judah I'd probably find Vlad the more reasonable option Manasseh was without doubt the darkest night in Judah intellectually socially spiritually and religiously never had Judah stooped as low as it did when Manasseh was its king and so as we close let's go back to this theological message of Manasseh namely our need of a better king than he

[28 : 03] Manasseh offered his children as sacrifices in the fires of foreign worship our king sacrificed himself on the cross of divine love Manasseh provoked God by his evil idolatry our king delighted God by his righteous compassions Manasseh corrupted the nation over which he ruled Jesus loves and sanctifies the people for whom he died why then would you put your trust anywhere other than Jesus do not trust in the darkest night trust rather in the brightest dawn let me leave the final words to Psalm 118 verses 8 and 9 it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes amen amen bring to by■o in función ■■ you only ■■ within

I I feel a minute I would really have to make as ind you may as■ ■■■■ for for was in