

Dr. August Konkell, Chronicles, Session 24, Reversals of Fortune

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This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the books of Chronicles. This is session 24, Reversals of Fortune.

In our last session, we ended with Hezekiah, and we made the point several times that Hezekiah is portrayed as the second Solomon because of the way in which he establishes the worship of the temple and brings into practice all of those things that are at the heart of the kingdom of God, the way that it was portrayed under Solomon, the man of peace. After the dedication of the ark and God manifesting his presence within the dedication of the temple, Solomon is given the divine message about the importance of the covenant, and we really have what is a key verse in perhaps all of the Chronicles. It is 2 Chronicles 7, verse 14, and there God says to Solomon, If my people, which are called by my name, will humble themselves, and will pray, and will seek my face, then I will hear from heaven, and will heal their land.

Now there are several words there that become favorite for the chronicler in describing all of the kings. They are to humble themselves, they are to seek God's face, and God will heal. Now it is in the story of Hezekiah that all of these words are used most prominently.

Virtually all of the words of that verse appear in Hezekiah. As we observed, Hezekiah takes, the chronicler in telling about Hezekiah takes the three long chapters of Kings and reduces them basically to 18 verses so that everything he says about Hezekiah is his own material about Hezekiah establishing the worship in the temple. He doesn't ignore the incidents about Hezekiah, such as his illness, where he knew that he was going to die, or the visit of the Babylonian embassy, which the Chronicler kind of refers to as the mockers who came to see him.

But there the Chronicler's word is the key word in 2nd Chronicles 7 verse 14. It's the word *kanah*. It is to humble yourself.

The one thing that Hezekiah not only did was pray and seek God's face so that God healed and they could celebrate the Passover, but when he was tested, when he was humbled himself and to the chronicler, this is the mark of faithfulness. The mark of unfaithfulness is pride. But Hezekiah was faithful, and God could test him.

And it didn't mean that Hezekiah came out well on the test. The chronicler doesn't say that Hezekiah came out well. He doesn't disagree with kings.

He just says that God tested him to know what was in Hezekiah's heart. This isn't that God needed the knowledge. It's for us to understand that faithfulness is not something that is without failure.

Rather, we could see that, although Hezekiah had failed, he was still faithful. This is the chronicler's point. Now, in our final session here today, looking at some of the final kings of Judah, we see reversals of fortune.

We see these reversals of fortune in more than one way. They go from bad to good and from good to bad. Again, it all depends on the relationship to this formula.

So, in our outline of Chronicles, we have now come to the final section which I have called Humiliation and Hope. One might say that it's only humiliation because the nation goes into exile. But the chronicler doesn't quite leave it there.

He has an ending that leaves the future open. And it seems to me that is a very, very deliberate inclusion on his part to say the kingdom of God is not over. There is an open future and we are here to see what it is that God is going to do.

So, the king that we are introduced to after Hezekiah is Manasseh. Now, in Kings, Manasseh is universally bad. In fact, Kings portrays Manasseh as the one who was so bad that in spite of all of the great reforms of Josiah who followed Manasseh, the destiny of the nation could never be reversed, and it was going into exile.

That's repeated a couple of times in Kings. Chronicles doesn't look at it quite that way. He never denies the evil way in which Manasseh was influenced.

Now, during the reign of Manasseh, the Assyrian power reached its zenith under an emperor called Esarhaddon. And the Assyrian power was dominant all through Syria and Palestine. In fact, the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon is one that we now find posted in the temples across Syria, and we have every reason to believe that the Assyrians required that same vassal treaty to be posted in the temple at Jerusalem, maybe even in the most holy place.

So, there was no doubt a lot of Assyrian pressure on Manasseh concerning the way in which his empire was to be, or his kingdom at least, was to be manifest. But the chronicler simply tells us that Manasseh was inexcusable and that what he did was bring about cult practices of the nations that were abominable, perhaps the most abominable, because he refers especially to the necromancers and the astrologists and the fortune tellers, the one that you call the Ov, the one who is a soothsayer in the pit and who tries to call back spirits from the dead. Manasseh promoted all of these things.

He passed his sons through the fire, which, at very minimum, was some kind of dedication to a god at the death of an infant. So, Manasseh had desecrated the temple in just about every way possible, and really, that fits fairly much with the other descriptions that we have of what happened in other temples across Syria and Palestine in the days of Esarhaddon. The chronicler then tells us something about Manasseh that's not present in Kings.

He was taken captive to Babylon, which is sort of interesting because the Assyrians were the dominant power during Manasseh's reign. But Manasseh was taken captive to Babylon. Now, that actually makes a lot of sense historically, and there's no reason to contest that assertion of the chronicler.

The Assyrians themselves talk about the many captives and all of the booty that they took from Palestine to Assyria. But the most likely occasion for this event was the revolt of Shamash-Shum-Ukin, a leader in Babylon. There was a great rivalry always between Babylon and Assyria and eventually the Babylonians would come to prevail.

But at this time, the Assyrians still held sway over the vast empire, and this leader in Babylon was seeking everybody he could to ally with him against the Assyrians. And it is probable that Manasseh, among many others in Syria and Palestine states, joined with him against the Assyrians, maybe involuntarily, maybe even by force, the same thing that Rezan and Pekah had tried to do with Ahaz. That would be a very likely occasion for Manasseh to have been taken captive to Babylon because that was where the revolt took place.

In any case, here's where the Chronicler's keyword comes into play. Kana. This captivity, this being led into Babylon, led Manasseh to humble himself.

And after his humbling, God grants him, in his mercy, a restoration. And this is the chronicler's point of view. It's sometimes described as retribution, you know, you do good, you get good.

You do bad, you get bad. But I don't think that the chronicler wants us to see it that way at all. He wants us to see God's mercy.

He also wants us to see God's justice. And in seeing God's justice, we need to know that there are consequences for unfaithfulness. That's just inevitable.

Those consequences are going to come. But those consequences do not need to be determinative. And even if you're in such a low status, Manasseh, God's mercy is still available.

And so, this is really presented not as some kind of reward. Rather, it's God extending his mercy to someone who humbles himself. What's required in faith always is humility before God.

So, Manasseh humbled himself. And then his reign really ends with a flourish, the very opposite of the way that it began. The chronicler tells us about the way in which Manasseh restored the fortifications, the way he restored temple worship, and the way he removed all cult worship, all of which make quite a lot of sense.

When the reforms of Josiah came along, it is not likely they didn't have a background, and there wasn't a preparation for them. That what Josiah did was a continuation of some things that had already happened before. Now, following Manasseh, we have a very short reign, that of Ammon, which is reported in just a few verses.

And the only thing that the chronicler can actually say about him in the summary of Ammon's reign is that he did not humble himself. So, he is the converse of what is supposed to be. Following Ammon, we have Josiah.

Now, Josiah, we remember from Kings, is really, in a way, the high point of the covenant. Because Josiah, the Chronicler, tells us right in the eighth year of his reign, he began to seek the Torah. And in the twelfth year of his reign, he began to make preparations.

In the eighteenth year of his reign, he began to cleanse the temple, and in the cleansing of the temple, the book of the Torah was discovered. This seems to come as something of a revolution for Josiah, who begins to realize, especially in that context, the consequences of their failure, the consequences of what they have not been doing.

And so, they consult with the prophet Huldah. This is one of those rather rare occasions in the Old Testament where a woman prophet is named, and she's very significant, married to the priest. So, she's well-connected.

But still, it is a woman prophet that they go to in order to understand what God is saying through this instruction of Moses. What about these curses that we're reading about there? What about the consequences of failure, which we have to admit have been simply part of our history? Under the admonition of the prophet Huldah, Josiah began to carry out his reforms. And what's described in great detail, though it's noted only briefly in Chronicles, is the renewal of the covenant oath.

The oath is something that is very, very positive because the oath within the Old Testament is you declaring your complete and full loyalty to God. And the failure of that loyalty to God has for you the consequences of being cut off from the life that God gives and that God alone is responsible for giving. And so, renewing the

covenant establishes that relationship with God establishes the relationship with the life-giver, and therefore enables you to be the ones who represent God and enables you to receive the life that comes from God.

So, Josiah, at this point in time, has led the people in all the right direction. And then we read about the greatest Passover that was ever celebrated. Now we've already noted that the Passover is the celebration of redemption.

It is a celebration of how God has created this person to be the ones through whom his salvation and redemption are going to come. And as the Chronicler has already portrayed it in the story of David, it is going to come to all the earth, as David stated in that quotation there from Psalm 98. So, this celebration of the Passover is a powerful testimony.

The Chronicler describes in considerable detail and flourishes the procedures that were in place. It is here in just the time of Josiah, as it was in the time of Hezekiah. Not just a family festival but now a pilgrimage festival.

It is the priests that do the slaughtering of the lamb and so forth. But it is a great festival. It is very inclusive, and it celebrates God's redemption of this people that have committed themselves in faith to God's covenant.

So, what we have here is the renewal that takes place under Josiah, and it really reaches its high point with this dedication and the fulfillment of the law. But that is where the reversal takes place. In this reversal, we see that Josiah doesn't end well.

Now, by the end of Josiah's reign, which is approaching the year 609, the Assyrians had already begun to lose their grip and their power. Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon had already begun to take over control in the year 627, about 15 years before that. And so, there's a whole shift in the empires taking place.

The Egyptians are the ones who now have an opportunity to retake control of Palestine. And the Egyptians are going on their way through, Necho and his army, up to the north to encounter the Assyrians at Carchemish. That's going to be one of the fatal battles that ends the Assyrian domination.

What we gather is that Josiah saw an opportunity for political ambition here. Now, the Chronicler doesn't say this specifically, nor does Kings. They only tell us about the consequences.

But what it seems is that Josiah was seeing an opportunity here for himself to take political control over the territory that had been dominated by the Assyrians. Namely, that Josiah could take control back over Ephraim and Manasseh, the

territory west of the Jordan. And so he went, and so in that respect, went and encountered the Egyptian army.

But, of course, he discovered that he was no match for the Egyptian army at all. The Egyptians didn't have any part of this notion that Josiah might be able to become the ruler over Samaria and that rich territory of the north. So, Josiah is killed in Babel, a dismal end.

From that point on, the kingdom of Judah and rule in Jerusalem were swift and fatally demised. So, while Josiah begins on such a high point, and with the renewal of the covenant, he ends with the kingdom being lost. Now, the prophet Jeremiah is where we see this the most.

In the year 622, according to the dating that we would have for when the Book of the Law was discovered in the temple, Jeremiah would have already been a prophet. So, he was there during the high point of this great celebration and this renewal of the covenant. But Jeremiah is also there in those last days of the kingdom, when he has to warn them that God uproots, the same way as what the chronicler said when there's unfaithfulness, and that's going to be the chronicler's word here, they're unfaithful, and in their unfaithfulness, God uproots.

And so, Jeremiah goes from the high point of the great celebration to the point of being thrown into the pit, to the point of being rejected by all the other prophets, to the point of becoming what we often refer to as the weeping prophet. Jeremiah is a pretty good example of the reign of Josiah in terms of its practical effect in relation to the kingdom of God. Faithfulness to unfaithfulness and failure.

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