

Sabbath School Lesson #3 – The Last Five Kings of Judah – 10-16 October 2015

Christ would have us today learn lessons from the kings of Judah. Our memory verse says, “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was not this to know me? saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 22:16). Whilst our Lesson examines the reign of the last five kings of Judah, herein we focus on Josiah and briefly on Zedekiah.

After the death of Manasseh, his son Amon reigned for two years. He was only twenty-two years old, but he walked in all the evil of his father’s earlier life. A conspiracy was organised against Amon which resulted in his murder, but the people of the land slew the conspirators, and put Josiah, the son of Amon, on the throne at the age of eight years. He reigned for thirty-one years, and was one of the best kings that Judah ever had. He “walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2). This disposition became especially marked in him when he was sixteen years old, and during the rest of his life it was steadfastly maintained. “And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him” (2 Kings 23:25). In his eighteenth year, Josiah instructed Hilkiah, the high priest, who was father to Jeremiah the prophet, to apply the temple contributions to restoration of the sacred building. This work was put in hand and, in the course of it, an important discovery was made. The book of the law, which God had directed should be kept with the ark of the covenant, was brought to light. Hilkiah showed the book to Shaphan, the scribe, who read it himself, and then took it to Josiah. “And Shaphan read it before the king” (2 Kings 22:10).

It is impossible for us to conceive now the feelings with which this recovered treasure would be regarded. The Word of God is so easy of access that men have come to regard it as a common thing, and often show it scant reverence. But no greater calamity could befall the world than to be deprived of the Bible. As the remnant of God, people of the book, because we are so accustomed to it, and to enjoying the results of its influence, we seldom think how everything that makes life worth living, yea, even life itself, we owe to God’s Word. The prophet Amos tells how the loss of the Word will affect men: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the Word of the Lord, and shall not find it. In that day shall the fair virgins and young men faint for thirst” (Amos 8:11-13).

The Lord is not to blame for such a famine. Men will not endure sound doctrine, “but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). As a people, we have forsaken the Word and the true God that our pioneers worshipped. Having rejected the counsel of God against ourselves, chosen pleasing error rather than sanctifying truth, we have only ourselves to blame when false doctrines and false beliefs ensnare our souls. Rejecting the Word that would save us, there is no other way of escape. When we remember that it is the Word of the Creator of the universe to us, bringing infinite treasures of wisdom and knowledge, manifesting unsearchable love in an everlasting salvation, we will “contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints [*even to our pioneers*]” (Jude 3).

When the book of the law was read before Josiah, he rent his clothes. He knew that the nation had pursued a course very different from the one commanded by God in the discovered document, and had justly incurred the judgments therein denounced against the disobedient. Josiah enquired of the Lord by Huldah the prophetess (the Spirit of Prophecy), whether the evils of which Moses wrote were indeed to fall upon Judah. The answer was returned that the Lord would certainly fulfil His word, but in that reply evidence was given that the judgments of God were only directed against the stubbornly impenitent. To Josiah, because his heart was tender and he had humbled himself before the Lord, the promise was given that his eyes should not see the evil, but that he should end his days in peace. The same heart-felt repentance on the part of others would have secured the same degree of favour. It was because the people would not be turned from their own ways that the judgment could not be averted. The Lord was trying to purify His people by suffering, but

they were so joined to their sins that the people were melted entirely away before they would allow themselves to be separated from their iniquities. "They are all grievous revolters, they are all corrupters. The bellows are burned, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain: for the wicked are not plucked away" (Jeremiah 6:28-29).

The compassionate Judge of all the earth, who had inspired Abraham's pleading for the cities of the plain, and Himself wept over Jerusalem, was not at this time less desirous of finding some reason to spare the guilty nation. Before the city was finally destroyed He proclaimed, "Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it" (Jeremiah 5:1). Long after Josiah enquired of the Lord, a promise was given that if the people would fear God and give glory to Him, by keeping the Sabbath which He had sanctified, the city should stand for ever (Jeremiah 17:20-27). So in the last days, the test of the fourth commandment reveals who will follow the Lord and be saved, and who will choose his own way and be destroyed.

For a time after the discovery of the Book of the Law, the people returned to the Lord. Many of those who were left in the cities of Israel joined Judah in observing the Passover. Never before since the days of Samuel had there been such a gathering. It was in his time that Israel rejected the Lord from being King over them, and the evil effects of kingly rule upon the nation may be judged from the fact that the sacred historian has to go back before the time of the kings to find a parallel to the Passover which was kept in Josiah's eighteenth year. Before the Passover, there was a thorough destruction of all idols throughout the land. In the country of Israel, where the fast decaying power of Assyria no longer bore sway, the altars set up by Jeroboam were now destroyed. In Bethel for three hundred and fifty years there had been preserved the prophecy uttered in Jeroboam's day, that a king named Josiah should defile the altar and offer upon it the dead bodies of its priests. Josiah saw the tomb of the prophet who had uttered this prediction, and gave orders for its preservation, after the prophecy had been repeated to him by the men of the city.

The iniquity of Assyria was now filled up, and the mighty empire was tottering to the fall which its pride had provoked. Egypt, Babylon and Media, were encompassing it with their armies, and Pharaoh-Necho, king of Egypt, came through the land of Judah to attack the Assyrian stronghold, Carchemish. It was in God's plan that the king of Egypt should do this, and when Josiah thought to arrest the progress of his army, Pharaoh-Necho sent him a warning message from God, saying that he was not come against Josiah, and had no desire to meet him in battle; "for God commanded me to make haste: forbear thee from meddling with God, who is with me, that He destroy thee not" (2 Chronicles 35:21). Notwithstanding this warning, Josiah persisted in his attempt to stop the king of Egypt, and was fatally wounded in the battle that followed. There was great lamentation at his death in all Judah and Jerusalem. Yet he was taken away from the evil to come, and the words of Christ to the weeping women of Judea were indeed applicable to those whom Josiah left behind him: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children."

The last king in Jerusalem was Zedekiah, but he was not an independent king. Years before, the Lord had given the city to Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:1-2). Although Jehoiakim was overcome, he was allowed to reign in Jerusalem as a tributary prince for eight years. At his death his son Jehoiachin reigned only three months, and Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem again, and conquered it, and carried the king and his family and all the craftsmen and smiths away to Babylon; "none remained save the poorest sort of the people of the land" (2 Kings 24:8-16). Still there was a king left in Jerusalem, for Nebuchadnezzar made Mattaniah king, changing his name to Zedekiah (verse 17). Jeremiah came to Zedekiah with the words: "If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire.... Obey, I beseech thee, the voice of the Lord which I speak unto thee: so it shall be well unto thee, and thy soul shall live" (Jeremiah 38:17-18). God had commanded it; the city would have been saved by it; Zedekiah's own soul would have been saved. Zedekiah pleaded a most human excuse, saying, "I am afraid" (verse 19). Thus in Zedekiah was revealed the weakness, the cowardice, the wickedness, and the final ruin of those trained for the service of the world and not for the service of God.