

Sabbath School Lesson #8 – Josiah’s Reforms – 14-20 November 2015

Christ sought to work with king Josiah to bring about reforms in Judah. “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;” but reforms did not avert wrath: “Notwithstanding the LORD turned not from the fierceness of His great wrath, wherewith His anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked Him withal” (2 Kings 23:25-26).

When Josiah, the son of Amon, became king of Judah, at the age of eight, the people had been much corrupted by heathenism of Baal worship that they had actually lost sight of the Scriptures. Jeremiah did not begin to prophesy till “in the days of Josiah the son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign” (Jeremiah 1:2), only twenty-one years before the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. Judah had no excuse for Baal worship, for in Josiah’s reign, by the time Jeremiah began to prophesy, Scriptures were plentiful, nearly all the prophets had finished their labours and passed away leaving behind their testimonies of Jehovah. The testimonies of Moses – and the writings of Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and others principal prophets – were in the hands of the people. This is a fact that should by no means be overlooked, for it is most important. Reformation has long been called for in our Church – and we have no excuse for sustaining “all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof” (Ezekiel 9:4), for we have the writings of the leading Adventist Pioneers to steer us back to Jehovah. The testimonies of Ellen White – and the writings of James White (1821-1881), JH Waggoner (1820-1889), Merritt E Cornell (1827-1893), Uriah Smith (1832-1903), EJ Waggoner (1855-1916), Stephen N Haskell (1833-1922), John N Loughborough (1832-1924), and other leading Adventist pioneers – are in the hands of the people today.

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, the priest, 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).

When the book was read the king and the elders saw how far they had departed from the truth, they began to put down the idolatrous worship – the chariots of the sun and the altars dedicated to sun-worship were destroyed, together with the emblems of deities associated with the central sun-worship. Prominent among our Seventh-day Adventist Church General Conference presidents who pleaded for a reform was Elder Robert H Pierson (1966-1979). Totally devoted, he did his best. He wanted the church to recover the 1888 new covenant message, but then came the Palmdale Conference 23-30 April 1976 and he was persuaded instead to yield his support to the Australian ‘new theology’ as the path to revival. The soul-stirring 1973-74 Annual Council Appeals that he inspired became history. The worldliness he decried in his 1978 ‘An Earnest Appeal to Church Leaders’ is now rampant. And the ‘new theology’ preached by many ministers is not new covenant truth, but disguised old covenant.

New theology is disguised old covenant, for it says that it is impossible to keep God’s law fully, even for a Christian filled with the Holy Spirit. The faith of Christ is still not understood, for people are rooted in the old covenant. The faith of Christ must bring the righteousness of God, because the possession of that faith is the possession of the Lord Himself. This faith is dealt to every man, even as Christ gave Himself to every man. Do you ask what then can prevent every man from being saved? The answer is, Nothing, except the fact that all men will not keep the faith. If all would keep all that God gives them, Christ, all would be saved.

As in Josiah’s day, Scriptures are plentiful today, but far too many are covered with dust, and are laid aside forgotten. When they are read, the dust of tradition and custom is allowed to obscure them. Let the Word be truly found, and it will be seen that there is necessity now to destroy the symbolism of the ancient sun-worship, and turn from practices which are of heathen origin, and whose influence is the same as in all past time. But our problem of worldliness has been with us for a long time. Ancient Israel’s experience illuminates ours. Abraham’s justification by faith was to have been the guiding light of a nation’s world

mission. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," the Lord promised (Genesis 12:3). Abraham made no promise in return; all he did was believe the Lord's promise (Genesis 15:6). That promise was the new covenant. And true reform is based thereupon.

Before the giving of the law at Sinai with "thunders, and lightings," earthquake, fire, and the death boundary, the Lord tried to re-establish the same new covenant with Abraham's descendants: "Now therefore, if ye will obey [*listen to*, in Hebrew] My voice indeed, and keep [*cherish*, in Hebrew] My covenant [His new covenant promise to Abraham], then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine" (Exodus 19:5). Of all nations in the world, they were to be "the head, and not the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:13). But Sinai was the turning point in the nation's destiny, for they refused the Lord's new covenant of justification by faith. Instead of humbly saying "Amen" to God's promise as Abraham did (the Hebrew word for "believe" is *Amen*), the people promised a works obedience, "All that the LORD hath spoke we will do" (Exodus 19:8). That was the old covenant. They bound themselves to a detour that would finally lead them to the terrible deed of Christ's crucifixion.

King David understood for a time the Lord's new covenant promise to Israel: the Lord would "plant them, and they shall dwell in their place, and shall be moved no more; neither shall the children of wickedness waste them any more" (1 Chronicles 17:9-10). This meant that there were to be no cruel world empires to trample down the earth, such as Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece or Rome. Israel would have remained forever the benevolent super-power of the world through whom all the earth is blessed. There is no evidence that any king after David truly understood it. They all, including Josiah, reformed and revived the Sinai old covenant. Probably Paul was the first to discern this significance of Israelite history as a detour leading back eventually to the new covenant given to Abraham: "The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24).

Josiah's reforms did no more than revive the old covenant. King Josiah's zeal for the Lord was unbounded, albeit in the old covenant: Josiah "stood in his place, and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments;" and in renewing this Sinai old covenant, king Josiah also "caused all that were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin to stand to it" (2 Chronicles 34:31-32). The old covenant could not avert the Lord's wrath. Josiah had read the curses in the recovered book, rent his clothes, he then sent to Huldah to inquire of the Lord. "Tell the man that sent you to me," Huldah the prophetess declared, "Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, *even* all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched" (2 Kings 22:11-17). A reform based on old covenant could not avert wrath. The old covenant is the spiritual experience of being "under the law," under reward/fear motivation, it "gendereth to bondage" (Galatians 4:21-24).

Josiah zealously obeyed the written testimonies of Moses – especially Deuteronomy. But the problem, though so devoted to the writings, Josiah rejected its living demonstration. The problem was that the renewed 'spiritual gift' came through the most unlikely avenue that king or people could imagine – the mouth of a supposedly pagan king! Pharaoh Necho of Egypt was leading his army in opposition to the rising power of Babylon. Josiah thought it his duty to attack Necho. Josiah, beguiled by old covenant, did not discern how Necho was on God's errand. Necho warned Josiah, "saying, What have I to do with thee, thou king of Judah? I come not against thee this day, but against the house wherewith I have war: 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). The Chronicler says king Josiah even "disguised himself, that he might fight" Necho, "hearkened not unto the words of Necho from the mouth of God" (verse 22). The Lord was forced to let king Josiah die of his battle wounds (verse 24). "Jeremiah lamented for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations" (verse 25) – Josiah's reforms had fizzled out with his untimely death. 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" (Luke 23:28).