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Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 32 – “Manasseh and Josiah”

The kingdom of Judah, prosperous throughout the times of Hezekiah, was once more brought low during the long years of Manasseh's wicked reign, when paganism was revived, and many of the people were led into idolatry. "Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen." 2 Chronicles 33:9. The glorious light of former generations was followed by the darkness of superstition and error. Gross evils sprang up and flourished--tyranny, oppression, hatred of all that is good. Justice was perverted; violence prevailed. {

Yet those evil times were not without witnesses for God and the right. The trying experiences through which Judah had safely passed during Hezekiah's reign had developed, in the hearts of many, a sturdiness of character that now served as a bulwark against the prevailing iniquity. Their testimony in behalf of truth and righteousness aroused the anger of Manasseh and his associates in authority, who endeavored to establish themselves in evil-doing by silencing every voice of disapproval. "Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another." 2 Kings 21:16.

One of the first to fall was Isaiah, who for over half a century had stood before Judah as the appointed messenger of Jehovah. "Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." Hebrews 11:36-38.

Some of those who suffered persecution during Manasseh's reign were commissioned to bear special messages of reproof and of judgment. The king of Judah, the prophets declared, "hath done wickedly above all . . . which were before him." Because of this wickedness, his kingdom was nearing a crisis; soon the inhabitants of the land were to be carried captive to Babylon, there to become "a prey and a spoil to all their enemies." 2 Kings 21:11, 14. But the Lord would not utterly forsake those who in a strange land should acknowledge Him as their Ruler; they might suffer great tribulation, yet He would bring deliverance to them in His appointed time and way. Those who should put their trust wholly in Him would find a sure refuge.

Faithfully the prophets continued their warnings and their exhortations; fearlessly they spoke to Manasseh and to his people; but the messages were scorned; backsliding Judah would not heed. As an earnest of what would befall the people should they continue impenitent, the Lord permitted their king to be captured by a band of Assyrian soldiers, who "bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon," their temporary capital. This affliction brought the king to his senses; "he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto Him: and He was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God." 2 Chronicles 33:11-13. But this repentance, remarkable though it was, came too late to save the kingdom from the corrupting influence of years of idolatrous practices. Many had stumbled and fallen, never again to rise.

Among those whose life experience had been shaped beyond recall by the fatal apostasy of Manasseh, was his own son, who came to the throne at the age of twenty-two. Of King Amon it is written: "He walked in all the way that his father walked in, and served the idols that his father served, and worshiped them: and he forsook the Lord God of his fathers" (2 Kings 21:21, 22); he "humbled not himself before the Lord, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself; but Amon trespassed more and more." The wicked king was not permitted to reign long. In the midst of his daring impiety, only two years from the time he ascended the throne, he was slain in the palace by his own servants; and "the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead." 2 Chronicles 33:23, 25.

With the accession of Josiah to the throne, where he was to rule for thirty-one years, those who had maintained the purity of their faith began to hope that the downward course of the kingdom was checked; for the new king, though only eight years old, feared God, and from the very beginning "he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and 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. Born of a wicked king, beset with temptations to follow in his father's steps, and with few counselors to encourage him in the right way, Josiah nevertheless was true to the God of Israel. Warned by the errors of past generations, he chose to do right, instead of descending to the low level of sin and degradation to which his father and his grandfather had fallen. He "turned not aside to the right hand or to the left." As one who was to occupy a position of trust, he resolved to obey the instruction that had been given for the guidance of Israel's rulers, and his obedience made it possible for God to use him as a vessel unto honor.

At the time Josiah began to rule, and for many years before, the truehearted in Judah were questioning whether God's promises to ancient Israel could ever be fulfilled. From a human point of view the divine purpose for the chosen nation seemed almost impossible of accomplishment. The apostasy of former centuries had gathered strength with the passing years; ten of the tribes had been scattered among the heathen; only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained, and even these now seemed on the verge of moral and national ruin. The prophets had begun to foretell the utter destruction of their fair city, where stood the temple built by Solomon, and where all their earthly hopes of national greatness had centered. Could it be that God was about to turn aside from His avowed purpose of bringing deliverance to those who should put their trust in Him? In the face of the long-continued persecution of the righteous, and of the apparent prosperity of the wicked, could those who had remained true to God hope for better days?

These anxious questionings were voiced by the prophet Habakkuk. Viewing the situation of the faithful in his day, he expressed the burden of his heart in the inquiry: "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and Thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto Thee of violence, and Thou wilt not save! Why dost Thou show me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth." Habakkuk 1:2-4.

God answered the cry of His loyal children. Through His chosen mouthpiece He revealed His determination to bring chastisement upon the nation that had turned from Him to serve the gods of the heathen. Within the lifetime of some who were even then making inquiry regarding the future, He would miraculously shape the affairs of the ruling nations of earth and bring the Babylonians into the ascendancy. These Chaldeans, "terrible and dreadful," were to fall suddenly upon the land of Judah as a divinely appointed scourge. Verse 7. The princes of Judah and the fairest of the people were to be carried captive to Babylon; the Judean cities and villages and the cultivated fields were to be laid waste; nothing was to be spared.

Confident that even in this terrible judgment the purpose of God for His people would in some way be fulfilled, Habakkuk bowed in submission to the revealed will of Jehovah. "Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One?" he exclaimed. And then, his faith reaching out beyond the forbidding prospect of the immediate future, and laying fast hold on the precious promises that reveal God's love for His trusting children, the prophet added, "We shall not die." Verse 12. With this declaration of faith he rested his case, and that of every believing Israelite, in the hands of a compassionate God.

This was not Habakkuk's only experience in the exercise of strong faith. On one occasion, when meditating concerning the future, he said, "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what He will say unto me." Graciously the Lord answered him: "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith." Habakkuk 2:1-4.

The faith that strengthened Habakkuk and all the holy and the just in those days of deep trial was the same faith that sustains God's people today. In the darkest hours, under circumstances the most forbidding, the Christian believer may keep his soul stayed upon the source of all light and power. Day by day, through faith in God, his hope and courage may be renewed. "The just shall live by his faith." In the service of God there need be no despondency, no wavering, no fear. The Lord will more than fulfill the highest expectations of those who put their trust in Him. He will give them the wisdom their varied necessities demand.

Of the abundant provision made for every tempted soul, the apostle Paul bears eloquent testimony. To him was given the divine assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." In gratitude and confidence the tried servant of God responded: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10.

We must cherish and cultivate the faith of which prophets and apostles have testified--the faith that lays hold on the promises of God and waits for deliverance in His appointed time and way. The sure word of prophecy will meet its final fulfillment in the glorious advent of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords. The time of waiting may seem long, the soul may be oppressed by discouraging circumstances, many in whom confidence has been placed may fall by the way; but with the prophet who endeavored to encourage Judah in a time of unparalleled apostasy, let us confidently declare, "The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him." Habakkuk 2:20. Let us ever hold in remembrance the cheering message, "The vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. . . . The just shall live by his faith." Verses 3, 4.

"O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years,

In the midst of the years make known;

In wrath remember mercy.

"God came from Teman,

And the Holy One from Mount Paran.

His glory covered the heavens,

And the earth was full of His praise.

And His brightness was as the light;

He had bright beams out of His side:

And there was the hiding of His power.

Before Him went the pestilence,

And burning coals went forth at His feet.

He stood, and measured the earth:

He beheld, and drove asunder the nations;

And the everlasting mountains were scattered,

The perpetual hills did bow:

His ways are everlasting."

"Thou wentest forth for the salvation of Thy people,

Even for salvation with Thine anointed."

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom,

Neither shall fruit be in the vines;

The labor of the olive shall fail,

And the fields shall yield no meat;

The flock shall be cut off from the fold,

And there shall be no herd in the stalls:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,

I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The Lord God is my strength."

Habakkuk 3:2-6, 13, 17-19, margin.

Habakkuk was not the only one through whom was given a message of bright hope and of future triumph as well as of present judgment. During the reign of Josiah the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah, specifying plainly the results of continued apostasy, and calling the attention of the true church to the glorious prospect beyond. His prophecies of impending judgment upon Judah apply with equal force to the judgments that are to fall upon an impenitent world at the time of the second advent of Christ:

"The great day of the Lord is near,

It is near, and hasteth greatly,

Even the voice of the day of the Lord:

The mighty man shall cry there bitterly.

"That day is a day of wrath,

A day of trouble and distress,

A day of wasteness and desolation,

A day of darkness and gloominess,

"A day of clouds and thick darkness,

A day of the trumpet and alarm

Against the fenced cities,

And against the high towers."

Zephaniah 1:14-16.

"I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust. . . . Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath: but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy: for He shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land." Verses 17, 18.

"Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together,

O nation not desired;

Before the decree bring forth,

Before the day pass as the chaff,

Before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you,

Before the day of the Lord's anger come upon you.

"Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth,

Which have wrought His judgment;

Seek righteousness,

Seek meekness:

It may be ye shall be hid

In the day of the Lord's anger." Zephaniah 2:1-3.

"Behold, at that time I will deal with all them that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven away; and I will make them a praise and a name, whose shame hath been in all the earth. At that time will I bring you in, and at that time will I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I bring again your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord." Zephaniah 3:19, 20, R.V.

"Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel;

Be glad and rejoice with all the heart,

O daughter of Jerusalem.

The Lord hath taken away thy judgments,

He hath cast out thine enemy:

The King of Israel, even the Lord,

Is in the midst of thee:

Thou shalt not see evil any more.

"In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not:

And to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

The Lord thy God in the midst of thee

Is mighty; He will save,

He will rejoice over thee with joy;

He will rest in His love,

He will joy over thee with singing."

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