

***Manasseh and Josiah: Lessons from “the Kings of Contrast”***  
***By James D. Hernando***

For many Christians reading through Kings and Chronicles is at times monotonous. The reason, perhaps, is due to so much repetition in the history of the various kings of Israel and Judah. One way to avoid this monotony is to read with an eye for comparison and contrast, paying attention to themes that speak to our walk with God. For example, compare the lives of two Judean kings – Manasseh and Josiah.<sup>1</sup> Manasseh was unquestionably the most evil king of Judah (See 2Kgs 21:16; 2Chr 33:14-20). He is also known for being Judah’s longest reigning king, occupying the throne for fifty five years. Josiah on the other hand, was perhaps Judah’s most righteous king of Judah (2Kgs 23:24-25; 2Chr 34:29-33), whose reign was cut short by an ill-advised battle with Egypt. When scrutiny is applied to their lives, some fascinating facts and truths emerge.

***Their Heritage***

Ironically, these two kings possess contrasting heritages from the spiritual path they would eventually pursue. Manasseh was given a godly heritage, born to Hezekiah, one of Judah’s most righteous kings (2Chr 29). Josiah’s father, on the other hand, was the evil king Amon, who followed in the footsteps of Manasseh (1Kgs 21:19-26).

***Their Beginnings***

Both of these kings began to reign<sup>2</sup> when they were still children. Manasseh began to reign alongside his father at the age of twelve. Josiah was younger still, beginning his co-regency at the age of eight! What is fascinating is that both these boy kings took opposite paths from their heritage while still in their youth. Manasseh was about twenty one when he began to reign after the death of his father.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Josiah was only sixteen when he “began to seek the God of his father David.” The Chronicler tells us that Manasseh “did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abomination of the nations.” He immediately began to rebuild the idolatrous high places that his godly father had destroyed. Moreover he built altars to Baal and Asherah, going so far as to put them in the “house of the Lord!” In stark contrast, Josiah “did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in the ways of his father David.” At the age of twenty he began “to purge Judah and Jerusalem” of idolatry, tearing down pagan altars, and smashing idolatrous images.

***Their Influence***

Both these kings had a powerful influence over Judah. Manasseh led the nation into religious apostasy on a scale that was unprecedented. Idolatry, witchcraft, sorcery and even human sacrifice were practiced. He led his nation to “do more evil than the

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete comparison and contrast of these kings, read 1Kgs 21-23 and 2Chr 33-35.

<sup>2</sup> Their reigns began as co-regents with their respective fathers, a common practice among ancient near-eastern kings.

<sup>3</sup> Hezekiah’s reign was ca. 715-686 BC. Manasseh began his independent reign ca. 695 BC, which would make him about 21 or 22 years old at that time

nations whom the Lord destroyed” (2Chr 33:9). The wickedness of Manasseh prompted God to move the hand of Assyria’s king against Judah, capture Manasseh and take him to Babylon.

By contrast, Josiah led Judah in a campaign to root out every form of idolatry he could find. In the process of repairing the temple, the book of the Law was found. When Josiah had it read and realized the extent of Judah’s sins, he led the nation to national repentance and instituted the most thorough-going religious reforms in the history of Israel (2Kgs 23:4-30). Josiah stood before the people and made a covenant with Lord, promising to walk after the Lord and keep His commandments “with all his heart and with all his soul.” (2Chr 34:31). The impact was great. All the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah not only “did according to the covenant of God,” but “did not turn from following the Lord God,” throughout Josiah’s reign. (2Chr 34:32-33).

### ***Their ends***

If a novel, the story of Manasseh and Josiah, would qualify as one with a surprise ending. While the reader might cheer the abrupt removal of the wicked king to Babylon, secretly taking delight in his judgment, the story takes a strange turn. In captivity Manasseh humbles his heart and cries out to God in his distress. Incredibly, God is “moved by his entreaty,” hears his prayers, and restores him to the throne (2Chr 33:12-13). Manasseh spends the rest of his days trying to remove the idolatry he helped establish in Jerusalem and Judah.

On the heels of such obedience and religious reform we would expect the conclusion of Josiah’s reign to be paved with glory. We are disappointed. Josiah, apparently out of pride, tries to stop Pharaoh Neco of Egypt, who is on his way to fight Babylon. The pharaoh warns him not to interfere, a warning that had come from “the mouth of God.” (2Chr 35:22). Sadly, Josiah ignores the warning and is killed on the plain of Megiddo.

### ***Observations/Conclusions:***

The tale of these “kings of contrast” provide some very powerful, life-changing truths for the modern reader, especially our youth:

1. Young people, even children, can independently serve the Lord from their heart. They can also chart their own course to follow the evil ways of the world.
2. Young people can, like Josiah, rise above their evil background and heritage and serve God. They can, like Manasseh, deny their godly heritage and serve the world.
3. The lives of great leaders are often shaped by the decisions of their youth, the course they chart for life often hinges on those decisions.
4. The lives of great leaders seldom remain private and personal. The consequences of their righteous or unrighteous lives have far reaching effects and influence many.

5. No matter how righteous people live before God, they can succumb to pride and fall. No matter how evil one has lived, if a person truly and humbly repents, he can find God and be restored.<sup>4</sup>
6. Some consequences of disobeying God *cannot be erased*. Manasseh tried valiantly to undo the effects of his idolatry, but in vain (2 Chr 33:17).
7. Some consequences of disobeying God *are fatal*. Josiah's one disobedience cut short the life of Judah's most righteous king and Judah was deprived of the good that could have come from his continued reign.

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<sup>4</sup> Manasseh continues to be one of the greatest examples of God's mercy and grace in all of Scripture. When a close reading of all references to his name is made in Scripture, he is certainly the most evil, wicked and depraved king in all of Israel's history. How a heart so dark and devoted to evil could humble itself and seek God (2Chr 33:12-13) is a great mystery. How God could not only forgive him, but restore him to power is for some an even greater mystery.