

## 2 Kings: King Josiah Takes Israel Back to Square One *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

### Background

Josiah might very well be the most celebrated king you've never heard of in the Bible. Surprisingly it's not David or Solomon that are the pinnacle of Israel's kings. It's *Josiah*—who's been called "A New David," "A New Joshua," and even a "New Moses" because of the great spiritual reform he brought to Israel.

But it was the best of times, and the worst of times in Israel's monarchy. There were threats within: Civil war between Solomon's sons Rehoboam and Jeroboam divided Israel into the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms. There were threats without: Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt were breathing down Israel's back.

So Israel was 500 years and 40+ kings into the monarchy. And the last five centuries were a sad, running commentary on the human failure to faithfully represent God's rule on earth.

*And yet*, the message of First and Second Kings is that God's purposes are still being worked out—even despite foolish kings who royally and regularly mess things up. Sure, there were some occasional bright spots. King David, King Solomon (at times), King Hezekiah, and now King Josiah.

But there were many, many low points. Things got to the lowest of the low with the infamous King Manasseh who came before Josiah. Under his fifty-five year-long leadership, Israel looked no different than the idol worshipping nations around them.

*Let's see how King Josiah would help his people pick up the pieces in a spiritually dark time for Israel.*

### Scripture – 2 Kings 22:1-11, 23:1-3, 25 (NRSV)

Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah; she was from Bozkath. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent the secretary, Shaphan son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, to the temple of the Lord. He said: "Go up to Hilkiah the high priest and have him get ready the money that has been brought into the temple of the Lord, which the doorkeepers have collected from the people.

Have them entrust it to the men appointed to supervise the work on the temple. And have these men pay the workers who repair the temple of the Lord—the carpenters, the builders and the masons. Also have them purchase timber and dressed stone to repair the temple. But they need not account for the money entrusted to them, because they are honest in their dealings."

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord."

He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: "Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the Lord and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple." Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.

<sup>1</sup>Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord.

The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## Sermon – 2 Kings: King Josiah Takes Israel Back to Square One

In Mary Karr's bestselling and unflinching memoir *Lit*, she tells about a time in her life where she had to clean house--her eighty-year old mother's house. Her mom was not only a recovering alcoholic (like herself), but a pack rat. Due to declining health, her mother had to move out of her home of thirty+ plus years and transition into assisted living.

This was no family bonding event. This was *The Alamo*.

Mother was digging in her heels and pouring on the guilt and spewing her wrath on her children who were not there to help her move--no they were robbing her of her possessions and stealing their mother's independence.

A profound shift took place. Mary Karr ceased being herself--her adult self. The sleeplessness, the stress, the grief, and all the hurt resurrected her dysfunctional childhood relationship with her mother. And so the mother and daughter mercilessly pelted one another with hurtful and vindictive words--just like the good old days.

Exhausted and despairing, the two finally called it a night. But Mary couldn't sleep. Her pulsating heart rattled her rib cage. She got out of bed and kneeled in the dark silence to pray.

All this was happening during the season of Lent—a time of repentance and atonement. Like her mom, Mary was just beginning her road to recovery from alcohol abuse. While on her knees, she remembered the two Bible verses her sponsor gave her to read on the trip—but she forgot her Bible.

So Mary rummaged through her mother's closet and happened to find a dusty Bible stashed away in one of the many piles. It was floppy and old, with a cracked and peeling binding. Opening it, she found her mother's name carefully inscribed:

*For Charlie Marie Moore, from her loving Mother Mary,  
Christmas 1927*

She opened to Psalm 51:7-12—her first Bible reading assignment. The skin of Mary's scalp prickled. In a faint blue chalk with a child's hand *the exact verses* she was assigned to read were underlined:

*Turn away your face from my sins; blot out all my guilt. A clean heart create for me, God:  
renew in me a steadfast spirit.*

She thought it odd—her mother was never particularly devout—even in childhood. Mary then flipped to her second reading assignment from the book of James:

*Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will  
receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

Her jaw hit the floor. Like the verses from Psalm 51, this second reading assignment in James also had the pale-blue underlining on the *exact verses* she was to read. Only these two passages in the entire Bible were marked.

Mary felt it was as if God long ago guided her mother's small hand, circa 1920-something, to make two notes that her future daughter would very much need to find some seventy years later. A message that she could be made new and that she is—and always has been—loved by God.

This mystery of the marked Bible passages in her mother's cluttered closet began to soften Mary Karr's heart beat by beat in her journey of recovery and eventual reconciliation with her mother.

In our passage this morning from 2 Kings, King Josiah is also having to do some house cleaning. It's not his house, but it's the House of the Lord that's fallen into disarray and neglect. It's been 90 years since the last temple refurbishment.

Things happen in our lives when we begin to tend to what's been neglected. And it was here in the Lord's house that Josiah experienced the *Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*.

In the midst of all the temple clutter and moth balls and idols, a mysterious book, a forgotten book was found. You had to blow the dust off the scroll just to read what was in it. It was the Book of Law—likely the book of Deuteronomy. Faith had gradually and thoroughly slipped away from the collective conscience of the people of God.

Even Hilkiah, the High Priest of the temple, didn't know what the scroll was. He gave it to King Josiah's chief of staff to read. Shaphan then read it to the King. And that's when *everything* changed.

The ancient King Josiah is very important for us today because he shows us how to go back to square one spiritually. How to turn over a new spiritual leaf and return to our long-lost roots of faith—individually, as a church, or a nation.

**First**, be humble and admit where you've fallen short.

When Josiah was made aware that his life and people didn't square with God's word, he did what people in that culture did when overwhelmed with grief or distress—he ripped his clothes. Yes, I know, a very expensive habit that his mom was probably not too excited about. 😊 But God's Word shined a light on how far Judah had fallen from God's intentions for them. Josiah took responsibility, rather than avoiding it. He saw he needed help—rather than pretending that he was all good.

Reading and listening to Scripture privately and in community keeps us sensitive and aware to God's desires for our lives. God's Word is living and active and it kindles the fires of our faith. It keeps our heart warm and tender, rather than stone-cold. Rather than sitting on our shelf—it's our compass and GPS to get us where we need to go.

Josiah shows us that Scripture isn't just to be read, it's to be enacted in our lives. Scripture is like a play. Sure, you can read Shakespeare, but his plays need to be spoken, memorized, performed, enacted, seen. Not just alone, but with others.

And so King Josiah did that. He called together everybody—high and low, rich and poor alike. All are in need of God's forgiveness and grace—king and pauper alike. And so the king and the people renewed their covenant vows to God and to one another.

**Second**, Josiah reinstated long forgotten traditions that shaped the identity of the community. He brought back the celebration of Passover. The Passover is central to the Jewish people because it reminds them of God's faithfulness and deliverance from bondage.

We're no different today—we need ceremonies with the community of faith to anchor us and provide faith-markers. Look around you right now. This is holy space, sacred time together. We need the community of faith to remind us to keep at the forefront of our lives faith and mission and a life given to God and others.

**Third**, King Josiah refocused the people's worship away from lesser gods to the One True God.

Like Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers in the temple, King Josiah sought to bring every person, place, and thing under God's loving rule. This can be a rigorous and even painful discipline.

Starting with the temple, then in Jerusalem, and surrounding areas—Josiah sought to faithfully and judiciously bring every person, place, and thing under God's lordship. To help Israel *be Israel* again.

Josiah shows us how to be-live our faith. To clear out and throw in the dumpster all the spiritual clutter that has crowded out God in our lives.

Everything was going so well—but then tragedy struck. Before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, King Josiah died in battle. Although fighting in a war, Josiah died in peace. He was at peace with God, and peace with himself—even in the midst of his nation’s immanent fall and exile.

King Josiah’s tragic death and unfinished life is a reminder for all of us to live for God’s glory, but that we have no guarantees of a perfect life and long life—even if we’re doing all the right stuff and making a difference.

We just don’t know how long we have. Every day is a gift. We’re all living on borrowed time from God. So while we have time, let’s follow God like Josiah did—believingly and obediently. Wholeheartedly, passionately, and steadily. With no deviations. No detours. No regrets.

I like how the poet Mary Oliver puts it:

*The past is the past,  
And the present is what your life is,  
And you are capable  
Of choosing what that will be,  
darling citizen.  
So come to the pond,  
Or the river of your imagination,  
Or the harbor of your longing,  
And put your lips to the world.  
And live your life. Amen.*

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