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## A Comprehensive Reform

### II Kings 23:1-30

**Intro:** After the untimely death of his father Amon, Josiah was made king of Judah at the tender age of 8. While this would be considered a wonderful place to be if you are a child, it was not the most remarkable day in Josiah's life. Yes, as they say, "It's good to be king!" But, it appears that Josiah was more concerned with the responsibilities of being king than he was the benefits. To his credit, and as evidence of a tender heart towards the things of the Lord, the Chronicler tells us that when Josiah was 16 yrs old, (while he was still young) he committed himself to seeking the God of his father David. This means he dedicated his life to discovering Yahweh's will for Judah and following that will to the best of his abilities.

How was this possible after such a long line of marginal to down-right awful kings in Judah? Maybe he had a good Bible teacher; maybe he had a good history teacher – or both! It didn't take much intelligence to understand that the best place for the kingdom to be was in the center of God's will. The blessings and curses of the covenant were clearly seen to any casual observer of Judah's history (and Israel's). Obedience brought blessing; disobedience brought judgment. Josiah chose wisely because he realized his position was that of responsibility – to obey Yahweh first and to lead his people in righteousness. To do this, he knew he needed to seek the Lord and he did!

There are 2 points to glean from this. First, notice the wisdom in seeking the Lord in your youth. If obedience brought blessing, why wait until you've ruined your life to experience God's presence and blessing on your life? Josiah's grand-father Manasseh did eventually repent and turn to Yahweh in obedience but it was so late in life and after he had wreaked so much havoc in his nation and family that, while it was a blessing to Manasseh, it didn't count for much in Judah – the damage had been done. Even the Apostle Paul, as great of a witness and missionary as he was and the amazing ministry that he had, he still had regrets of things he'd done prior to his conversion. But when we look at the likes of Joseph, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Mark, Timothy and the testimony that each has of living for the Lord from and early age, we see the value of turning to

the Lord at a young age. These examples from Scripture weren't perfect individuals but they were all used by God for the full extent of their lives.

2ndly, some may question the veracity of Josiah's faith, assuming that his obedience was just religious performance to achieve a favorable blessing from Yahweh. This is a legitimate concern; especially since our own experience has seen people claim to be followers of Christ for less than spiritual reasons. But, we must remember that a faithful adherence to the covenant was never a casual undertaking as the demands of the covenant were fairly rigorous. Also, God Himself had declared that faithful obedience would bring His blessing and those blessings would be given by a God who looks upon the condition of the heart. Finally, we'll see from Josiah's own testimony that his heart was in the right place as he sought to follow the precepts of Yahweh's Law

**1-3** – In ch22, Hilkiah the High Priest finds the Book of the Law in the temple as its being renovated. He gives the book (scroll) to Shaphan the scribe who brings it (*and reads it*) to King Josiah. It didn't Take Josiah long to realize that Judah was in a heap of big trouble! He sends a committee to Huldah the prophetess to find out what Yahweh has to say about their current predicament. She informs the group that 1) there is no hope – judgment is coming and 2) there is mercy – it won't come in Josiah's days. They bring the news to the king and thankfully, he doesn't respond in the same manner as Grandpa Hezekiah, "The Word of the Lord...is good" (**20:19b**). Josiah didn't respond with indifference or simple contentment with the promised peace of Yahweh for his days. No, judgment was coming and the king knew it was because Judah was in such a terrible spiritual state. He had work to do and he got right to it

King Josiah wanted to get the kingdom right with Yahweh and he knew he couldn't do it all by himself – he needed all the elders of Judah to willingly join in broken repentance with him. He calls all the elders to him first and then calls for a nationwide gathering at the temple. With every household in the kingdom represented in the congregation, the king himself read the Book of the Law to them. Josiah was so concerned that the nation would hear the Word of God that he read it to them himself. Then, having read to them the requirements of the covenant, King Josiah publicly declared his commitment to obey the word of God to the best of his ability.

In response to the bold example and spiritual leadership of King Josiah, the author tells us that all the people took a stand for the covenant. There is no mention of a command from the king to do this; they did it spontaneously as they followed the king's example. Clearly, this kind of mass response and commitment to the Lord can't be commanded. You cannot force or coerce anyone into a faithful, honest commitment to the Lord; it can only be entered into willingly of their own volition. But, that doesn't mean that there isn't a part for man to play. This positive response of faith was obviously the work of God among the people but God worked through the example and leadership of Josiah. In the same way, God works through your consistent life and conversation of faith, obedience and trust to bring others to a favorable opinion of the gospel and what Jesus Christ has done for them. God graciously chooses to include us in His work of bringing salvation to a lost and dying world.

Josiah's commitment was to follow, to keep and to perform. This was a comprehensive commitment that left no room for mere lip service or half-hearted effort. Josiah was declaring that not only was he going to serve the Lord, he was going to go all the way. No half-measures or halting steps. If we're going to do this then we're going to do it right. If you think about it, that's the only way to serve the Lord because anything less than a full commitment is really no commitment at all. In his personal declaration, King Josiah was pleading for the people to yield their hearts and souls to the Lord in sincerity and truth. Between the words he read and the example he set, the people were convinced. It's only through this full-hearted commitment of king and people that the following reforms were fully accomplished

**4-20** – After reading this, we understand that the author of Kings has been kind to us, not constantly overwhelming us with the sad truth of Judah's paganism but he more than makes up for it now. We can see by all of Josiah's extensive reforms just how far the nation has fallen in to foolish and futile idolatry. The first thing Josiah does is clear out the pagan vessels and accoutrements out of the temple (4). He deposed all the pagan priests who had been installed in Jerusalem and supported by previous kings of Judah (5). Josiah's reforms didn't just remove sinful things – they also removed sinful people; people who promoted and permitted these sinful things. If sinful people are not dealt with, they will quickly bring back the sinful things that were righteously removed.

He beat to smithereens the wooden image that had been set up in the temple (Asherah or Baal) (6). Throwing the ashes of the idol on the graves of the common people wasn't meant to defile the graves. On the contrary; any contact with death was considered an act of defilement, so scattering the ashes on the graves served to defile the idols (or their remnants). He took a wrecking ball to the temple apartments of the male prostitutes and destroyed the woven curtains used in their obscene worship practices (7). The temple had become little more than a brothel and King Josiah set about correcting this disgraceful perversion.

He also had to deal with lax religious practices from the supposed orthodoxy. There were high places scattered around the kingdom where Levites were in the habit of burning incense to Yahweh. The problem with that was that the Law stated this was only to be done in the temple at Jerusalem. So, although their hearts were in the right place, their religious practice was not and Josiah wasn't about to let it continue. He defiled those high places and brought the errant Levites back to the temple. They could no longer serve in the temple but they were able to eat the priest's portion of the showbread and the food from the sacrifices.

Next, Josiah desecrates Tophet, the place of child sacrifice. Vs10-12 describes something of the extent of official idolatry in Judah. It was widespread, elaborate and highly invested in. Previous kings of Judah had spent a lot of time and money to honor these wretched pagan idols. It took a long, dedicated commitment on the part of King Josiah to do this work. Tophet is where the unthinkable rites of Molech were performed. Josiah defiled it so it couldn't be used for that anymore. Some believed he turned it into the city dump but a recent article stated archeologist in Israel had discovered a pagan site that had been defiled during Josiah's reign and this was done by turning it in to a public latrine. It's very fitting since that's about all pagan belief amounts to. This defiling was necessary to insure that these locations could never be used for idol worship again once Josiah was off the scene.

After removing and destroying all the paraphernalia associated with sun god worship and disposing of the favorite pagan altars of previous kings; Josiah finally sets right the folly of Solomon. It's seems incredible that this nonsense had been put up with for over 300 years by Judean kings and people but yet, there it still was on the southern slopes of the Mount of

Olives: a damning testimony of the futility of half-hearted commitment. These pagan shrines were the reason the kingdom was split from Solomon and yet, everyone just kept turning a blind eye to them...until Josiah. The king destroys all the props used in fertility worship, crushing them and defiling the area with human bones.

So far, Josiah's reforms had been focused on Jerusalem and Judah but in vs15 he exports his reformation to cities in the now defunct kingdom of Israel. Assyria had invaded and carried most of Israel off into exile but not Assyria's star was on the down slope while Babylon's star was on the rise and Assyria was too busy worrying about Babylon to notice Josiah's unpermitted invasion of religious orthodoxy. So off to Bethel he goes and he does exactly what the unnamed prophet of **I Kings 13** had told King Jeroboam he would do. He brings an end to that offensive altar, the folly of Jeroboam; the doom of Israel. Josiah then goes on to other cities in Samaria, kicking butts and taking names.

We can notice sort of a pattern for Josiah's reforms. A pattern that is necessary in our own lives when desiring to live for the Lord. Notice how Josiah's campaign began at the very heart of Judaism – in the temple. Then it worked its way into the precincts of Jerusalem, then out into the kingdom of Judah and then eventually up into Samaria. Josiah began his cleansing reforms at the center of the kingdom and worked outwards from there. This is the only effective pattern for real reformation even in an individual. If you're trying to get right with God by cleaning up your life – it will never happen. Simple logic will tell you that you're in this current predicament because you've been living in the flesh and now you want to fix it all through the efforts of the flesh! It won't work! True reform must take place in the heart first and when that happens, it will work itself out into all other areas of your life.

**21-25** – Josiah could not command the people to engage in heart-felt obedience to the Word of God but he could establish a national holiday to observe the Passover. The celebration of Passover had become so neglected in those days that this particular observance was so remarkable. The Feast of Passover remembered and celebrated the central act of redemption in the OT: Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Their neglect of the Passover was evidence that they had neglected to remember the Lord's work of redemption on their behalf. It's the same as



if a modern congregation completely forgot to celebrate the Lord's Supper, which remembers Christ's work of redemption for us.

Josiah also made a point to remove all those who practiced the occult and spiritism. He also quit preaching and started meddling when he commanded his subjects to get rid of their own household gods and idols. "Hey now, you're getting mighty personal!" But hey, if you're going to stand by the covenant, this is what's required. Josiah wasn't knit-picking; he was just passionate to perform all the words of the law. The great reformation of Josiah was simply the result of going back to the Word of God and seeking to base all thought and practice of life on what God has revealed in His Word. King Josiah wasn't pulling these things out of thin air – he was reading from a script, a divinely inspired script. It's the same script we have today, only there's more revelation and clearer understanding. The only unknown factor is each individual's level of commitment to the Word.

Josiah's commitment receives a high commendation from the author: it was unique! He's one of the most remarkable kings of Judah, unique in the strength of his obedience and commitment to God's Word. He stands as a wonderful example of what a leader can and should be. There'd been other good kings of Judah but one thing that made Josiah unique was his godliness *in his day*. He lived in an incredibly wicked time so his godliness was remarkable against the backdrop of his era. David may've been a greater king but he wasn't a better man than Josiah. Josiah was a king without parallel – there was no one like Josiah for whole-heartedly shaping his life after God's Law and yet – none of it seemed to do any good!

**26-27** – After everything Josiah had accomplished in Judah for the Lord, God's judgment is still coming. We've already seen that Manasseh's mess had put Judah beyond the line of hope, passed the point of no return. It's a sobering realization that there is such a thing as the hot heat of Yahweh's anger that no amount of repentance or reform can dampen or douse. We've known this but somehow the point falls on us more heavily after 25 verses describing Judah's finest hour! Yet God's consuming wrath is still coming and that is for certain.

It helps to remind ourselves that we already knew this but we should also remember that Josiah already knew this too. Huldah's prophecy had made this abundantly clear. But still, he pressed on in faithfulness to the covenant,

in his commitment, in reinstating the sacraments and cleaning up the worship. But why? Would it make any eventual difference? Would it last? Would it save the nation? Would it cool God's wrath? No to all of these. Here we see the depth of Josiah's commitment. His is a faithfulness that doesn't confuse obedience with pragmatism or practicality and so he pushes on, not because it will change anything but simply because Yahweh demands it! Obedience without incentive is more than likely genuine.

Josiah knew judgment on Judah was sure to come but he pressed on with reforming Judah anyway. He didn't just throw his hands up and say, "What's the use? It's not going to save Judah anyway!" No, he went ahead with the reformation solely for the sake of the honor and righteousness of the Lord. The Lord has a right to be served even if our service doesn't bring about our salvation or deliverance from difficulty. Too many Western Christians seem to think Christian service is some kind of spiritual barter system. "God, I'll do this, this and this but You gotta do this, this and this." That's not how the Master /servant relationship works and [Luke 17:10](#) confirms it. This is not an attitude of false humility but rather an attitude that recognizes that God has done more and greater things for us than we could ever do for Him. What He has done for us was done out of pure love; what we do for Him is out of proper gratitude and duty – not to earn brownie points or special favors. God is never indebted to His servants.

Josiah did what the situation demanded and what opportunity afforded. He did what he could, to the best of his God-given abilities. That was the pattern of Josiah's obedience and it's the way of Josiah's spiritual descendents who, unlike the king, may not have the potential to sway a nation but who still worship God faithfully and keep His commandments even though it may not resolve personal problems, bring economic success or relieve emotional distress. We do what we can do because God is worthy of our faithful obedience and service

**28-30** – Huldah's prophecy said that God's judgment would not come in Josiah's reign. If that was the case, and it was – I would make sure Josiah stayed as safe as possible. Don't go to war, stay in Jerusalem and let the army fight your battles. Well, someone wasn't listening and Josiah took a fatal hit and there you have it. It's all over but the crying and that will come soon enough. From the death of Josiah to the destruction of Jerusalem is a mere 24 years. 4 different kings will sit on David's throne – 3 of them will be

sons of Josiah but they will not be imitators of his faithfulness. Josiah was the best of all Judean kings but he was a king come too late.

Josiah's reign was prophesied centuries before. There's another Son of David whose eventual reign was prophesied even more extensively than Josiah's. Jesus will eventually come and reign over the entire world with righteousness and true justice. But today, He reigns in the hearts of believers and He's doing Josiah-type work among the people of God – refining, purifying, avenging and dividing (Mt 3:4). Is His work being accomplished in your life? What is the proof? What are the signs? If you are a new creation in Christ what old things have been put away and what new things have been brought to the forefront of your life? If the commitment is whole-hearted and the determination is sincere then the evidence will be forthcoming that the reformation (transformation) has begun.

I pray that it has not only begun but is making great progress in every heart.

