

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Spring 2012 No. 124

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

JOSIAH and THE ESSENTIALS UNDERPINNING REFORM

By James Crabtree

“And he did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.” (II Chronicles 34 : 2).

These words refer, of course, to King Josiah. They are noteworthy not least because in the Second Book of Chronicles, they form a summary, quite remarkably, of his thirty-one year reign in Jerusalem, beginning when he was a mere eight years old. Of how many kings and rulers can the same be said after the close of so lengthy a reign ? Contemporary comparisons point in the opposite direction : in respect of none of the long periods of rule which have been brought to a sudden end in the first few years of the Twenty-First Century would these verses form a fitting epitaph. In stark contrast, it can be said of Josiah’s kingship that in essence, it was marked by undistracted, single-minded, godly obedience.

When reflecting on either past or potential reform in both church and nation, it is easy just to take the simple step of focussing on what has been, or should be, done to bring about material change and reform. In no time at all, our thinking on reform is reduced to a matter a councils and conferences, debates and decisions, memoranda and meetings, pronouncements and programmes. Vital though these often are, Scripture regularly reminds us that change and reform are always the product of a prior, fundamental work of grace : an inner ordering of heart and mind which necessarily precedes and creates the right conditions for outward change and visible reform.

Josiah’s Heart

It has been written of Josiah that he was *“only twenty years of age when he set about a national reformation of religion as radical and as complete as anything that Martin Luther or John Calvin or John Knox themselves ever undertook”* (see Alexander Whyte’s *“Bible Characters”*). However, perhaps it is even more astonishing that (as Alexander Whyte again puts it) *“the whole of that immense movement that resulted in the religious regeneration of Jerusalem and Judah in Josiah’s day...all sprang originally and immediately out of nothing else but Josiah’s extraordinary tenderness of heart.”* The starting point for an analysis of Josiah’s successful reforms is therefore not the sequence of events which brought about a restoration of true worship, noteworthy though they are, but an understanding of the characteristics of Josiah’s spiritual life. There are a number of points to be made :

- 1) Josiah sought after God with the objective of knowing His will, as revealed in His Word. He instructed those serving him to *“Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for those who are left in Israel and Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found...”* (II Chronicles 34 : 21).
- 2) When Josiah heard God’s Word, he responded in keeping with it. We are told that *“...when the king heard the words of the Law,...he tore his clothes.”* The realisation that the people had turned away from God’s Law to worship other gods, thereby exposing themselves to God’s judgment, merited a response on Josiah’s part which visibly signified the ruinous state of heart and mind which the people’s rebellion had led them to. It was the perfection of God’s Law which revealed the true extent of this disaster. Josiah’s act of self-humbling demonstrates his awareness of this, characterising his attitude and actions thereafter.
- 3) As a student and keeper of God’s Word, Josiah led a corresponding life of humble dependence on the Lord. This is, indeed, the Lord’s declared verdict in response : *“...because your heart was*

tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and against its inhabitants, and you humbled yourself before Me, and you tore your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you.” (II Chronicles 34 : 27). Significantly, of course, this tells us about the character of the person the Lord is willing to hear. He will not give everyone a hearing but the Law keeper of tender heart whose understanding of God’s glory and greatness is such that the only proper response is a life of self-humbling, will undoubtedly be heard.

Josiah’s Actions

Turning from Josiah’s inner characteristics, what are we informed about the actions for which his rule is remembered ? There are various points here :

1) Josiah’s actions were a direct consequence of his godly inclinations. He sought after God and within the space of four years *“he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images and the molded images.”* (II Chronicles 34 : 3). Such actions would not have taken place if he had not sought after the one, true God. Conversely, the prevalence of idolatry was the direct result of a turning away from the one, true God (*“...they have forsaken Me and burned incense to other gods...”* : verse 25).

2) Josiah waged war on false worship. Much detail is provided in this regard but fundamentally, we are taught that true worship is incompatible with false worship and that the latter is intolerable to the godly practitioner of true worship. For Josiah, obedient kingship precluded him from engaging in true worship while, at the same time, acquiescing in the continuation of idolatrous practices. Truth was proclaimed but error was also refuted and visibly subjected to God’s judgment at the hands of the God fearing king.

3) Josiah restored true worship. The discovery of *“the Book of the Law of the Lord given by Moses”* prompted more than private study or devotion. It ushered in the restoration of true worship, devoid of idolatry. The discovery of God’s Word brought about radical change and wholesome reformation.

4) Commensurate with the kingly powers vested in him, Josiah modelled godly leadership. This was manifested in three ways : Josiah openly stood for and proclaimed God’s Word before the priests, the Levites and all the people (verse 30). He publicly committed himself to the keeping of God’s commands (verse 31) and he required others to follow his example of obedience (*“And he made all who were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin take a stand. So the inhabitants of Jerusalem did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers”* : verse 32). Proclamation of the Word went hand in hand with obedience to God’s Word. As a result, Josiah’s kingly status was accompanied by a moral authority which derived from his adherence to God’s Word and, in addition, pointed to the higher, divine authority from which Josiah’s own authority derived. Josiah did not demand a bare allegiance to his kingship; in following Josiah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem *“did according to the covenant of God”*. Without Josiah’s godly example, this would not have happened.

Lessons for Today

There are many lessons here for those of us seeking the reformation of the church under the supreme authority of God’s Word and the genuine restoration of spiritual health to our nation. True revival starts with the heart and mind, informed by God’s Word and in turn, conformed to His Law. In this way, those, like Josiah, of *“tender heart”* are gradually reformed in their ways and transformed into the likeness of the God they serve. However, the restoration of true spirituality is not a purely inward or private matter. Reformation entails the refutation of error in the shape of everything which stands opposed to God’s Word, as well as the institution of true worship. In Josiah’s day, the discovery of God’s Law led to the recovery of God’s people from a state of

spiritual depravity. Old ways of disobedience were cast out and replaced by new ways of obedience. While today, we are not literally called to tear down the physical images of idolatrous worship, the spiritual and reformatory battle to expose and refute the false idols and ideologies of our day still needs to be fought alongside the proclamation of the true Gospel. This is clear from Second Corinthians 10 : 4-6 :

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.”

Since we are surrounded by false worship and idolatry, for our nation’s sake, we should pray that the church in our country will, like Josiah, be remembered as one which did what was right in the sight of the Lord, walked in His ways and did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. We should also pray for tender-hearted leaders in the mould of Josiah, whose example of godly leadership *“made all who were present...take a stand”*, so as to do all *“according to the covenant of God”*.

As Richard Sibbes put it :

“In a tender heart there is no resistance, but it yields presently to every truth, and has a pliability and a fitness to receive any impression, and to execute any performance...God must first make us fit, and then use us to work....a tender-hearted man is fit for all good. Let God threaten : he trembles and quakes; let God promise : his heart melts and rejoices and makes him even to break forth into thanksgiving; let God command : he will perform all; he is fit for any good thing to God and man.” (Richard Sibbes : *“The Tender Heart”*).

James Crabtree, Chairman, Church Society Council