

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Up From the Ashes

Finding hope in the story of King Manasseh.

(2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33)

Sermon manuscript

Introduction: The beginning of a mess...

In the summer of 2006, I took a week-long backpacking trip to the Sawtooth mountains in Idaho with my sons, Ben and Zach, and Kathy's brother, Bob.

Planning for this trip required months of poring over topographic maps, devouring Internet trip reports, talking with Sawtooth Rangers, reading rave reviews of the area and salivating over beautiful, scenic photos.

By the time we left San Antonio, visions of Rocky Mountain grandeur were dancing in our heads.

So, imagine our disappointment when, after a long flight and a long drive from Boise to the trailhead, we began our hike with temperatures in the mid-90's. (We could have stayed home for that!)

Our first several hours of hiking were on mostly flat terrain. It was so dry that we kicked up dust-storms as we walked.

Our first days trail took us through an ugly section of burned-out forest that had been destroyed by wildfires a couple of years earlier.

I was completely bummed on that first day and wondered if I had made the biggest planning mistake of my life in choosing to go to the Sawtooths.

Given what we experienced over the first ten-mile hike, I feared that the rest of the trip would be just like the beginning - flat, dry, hot. After all, while it's not always the case, pitiful starts are often followed by more pitiful.

Along those lines, if you had been living in Palestine in the 600's BC, you might have been about as hopeless for your nation as I was on Day One of our camping trip.

In those days, the king was Manasseh. Manasseh reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah, ruling from Jerusalem, for fifty-five long years, longer than any other king.

Seeing how the reign of Manasseh was trending, you, a godly Jew, would have mourned the loss of hope anything remotely godly.

Last Sunday, we looked at the Old Testament story of the life and times of King Joash. That story had a message for us, today, as the Apostle Paul told us, ***[Romans 15:4] Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.***

This morning, we approach the story of Manasseh with the same confidence that this story is FOR US and that it will, indeed, give us hope.

However, some background is in order on the way to exploring the life and times of King Manasseh.

Prelude to the Mess That WAS Manasseh

The Threat to Israel / Judah: ASSYRIA!

Today, Syria and Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran head the list of threats against the little nation of Israel.

During the days of King Manasseh's reign, though, (roughly 700-645 BC), there was one major threat to Israel, and that was Assyria, a vast empire located to the north and east of Israel.¹

¹ Nineveh was the city to which God sent the prophet Jonah.

The capital of Assyria was Nineveh, a large city located near the Tigris River, and Nineveh was well-known for its wealth, architecture, library, museums, and sculptures.

Mostly, though, Nineveh was known for violence and cruelty. The Assyrian Empire was, at its core, a war machine, and the Assyrian army struck terror in the hearts of everyone in the Ancient Near East.

After defeating a nation in war, they would typically lead the population away into captivity, often with hooks in their flesh.

For a full century before Manasseh, Assyria had been gobbling up nations, growing stronger as they marched their way across the Fertile Crescent toward the Mediterranean, toward Israel.²

By the time Manasseh reigned as king of Judah, Assyria was poised to attack him.

Now, let me tell you a little bit about Manasseh.

Manasseh's Family of Origin

Manasseh was a direct descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jews. So, he came from good stock. His family's story included Egyptian slavery, a Red Sea crossing, Ten Commandments, forty years of wilderness wandering, and a conquest of the Promised Land.

Eventually, God also gave kings to rule His people.

First, there was King Saul, who was a disobedient failure. But then David was anointed and crowned king - and every king who ruled after him from Jerusalem came from David's line.

After this, though, because of the Jews' disobedience to God, their kingdom was divided shortly after David's son, Solomon, died.

The northern kingdom (Israel) had only bad kings while the slightly more godly southern kingdom (Judah) had bad AND good kings.

Among the better of these good kings was Hezekiah, who was the father of Manasseh.

The Life and Reign of Manasseh's Father (2 Kings 18)

Hezekiah followed the Lord

Hezekiah began his reign at age twenty-five, and the Bible tells us that **[2 Kings 18:3] He did right in the sight of the Lord, in accordance with everything that his father David had done.**

Hezekiah removed most of the idolatry from the land. And he broke off evil, foreign alliances into which previous kings had entered.

He even **[7]...revolted against the king of Assyria and did not serve him.**

That move angered the Assyrian king, prompting him to invade and defeat the northern kingdom of Israel. He then set his sights on Judah. He marched south and surrounded Jerusalem, preparing to lay siege to the city where Hezekiah ruled.

But, when Hezekiah prayed to God for protection, God answered miraculously (see 2 Kings 18-19), and what was left of the Assyrian army beat a hasty retreat to Nineveh.

Hezekiah was healed by the Lord (a mixed blessing)

After this deliverance, the prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah that he needed to get his house in order because he was going to die soon.

Well, Hezekiah didn't want to die, so he begged for healing, which God granted.

² In the days of Manasseh, there had been some hope that Assyrian might was waning. The assassination of the powerful King Sennacherib, though, had not led to Assyria's weakening because Sennacherib's son, Esarhaddon, made the empire even more powerful. And Ashurbanipal, the next king, continued to increase Assyrian might.

And we, who view Hezekiah's life with 20/20 hindsight, wish that King Hezekiah had just gone ahead and died.

Why? Well, after he was healed by the Lord, Hezekiah lived fifteen more years.

During those fifteen years, two things happened that made the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem inevitable.

Hezekiah's final years

A tactical blunder

First, Hezekiah made a tactical blunder: He showed all the gold and silver in the city to a delegation from Babylon.

When the Babylonians saw all that loot, they decided that they would add Judah to their list of defeated nations. And, sure enough, less than a century and a half later, Judah was destroyed and plundered by Babylon.

A son worth forgetting - Manasseh

Second, Hezekiah fathered a son. That son - Manasseh - is today's case study. And here is how the Bible summarizes Manasseh's reign: **[2 Kings 21:2] He did evil in the sight of the LORD.**

You'll recall that Josiah was seven years old when he became king. Well, Manasseh was a ripe, old twelve years old when he became king - and he wasn't shy about taking the reins of leadership.

He immediately introduced changes into the life of the nation, changes that would have made his godly father, Hezekiah, gag.

The Wicked Reign of King Manasseh

Idolatry and Immorality

After returning from his father's funeral, Manasseh took off his mourning clothes, put on his kingly robe and went to work dismantling everything his father had done.

High places rebuilt (2 Kings 21)

He rebuilt the high places for the worship of other gods in Judah. In the ancient cultures of Canaan, worship had always taken place on the hills because the people supposed that the gods lived on the heights.

Manasseh's father, Hezekiah, had destroyed these high elevation altars. Manasseh liked them. He wanted the people to worship other gods on the high places.³

A champion of idolatry

Then, in the temple itself, he erected an altar to Baal, the chief god of the Canaanites.

Sometimes Baal was depicted as the storm god and sometimes as the god of ecstasy. The worship of Baal involved sexual immorality and violence and drunkenness. Manasseh encouraged the Jews to worship Baal.

Sexual perversion rules the day

Manasseh further directed the craftsmen of Jerusalem to make wood carvings of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility and warfare.

These carvings were nothing by ancient pornography, and Manasseh encouraged the worship of Asherah in the Jerusalem temple. **Astrology**

Then, Manasseh introduced a whole host of other worship options, encouraging the worship of the sun, the moon, and the stars as if they were God.

And Manasseh had yet more wickedness up his sleeve.

³ Who was Manasseh's role model in wickedness? It was wicked King Ahab, of the northern kingdom. Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, were notoriously ungodly. And Manasseh was taking leadership cue from Ahab. (2 Kings 21:3)

The Dark Arts

Scripture tells us that he introduced the dark arts of witchcraft, divination and sorcery to Judah. He brought back into Judah the mediums and sorcerers that Hezekiah had removed.

Now, of course, all of this was in direct violation to what Moses had commanded in the Law.

But King Manasseh was trying to move as far away from the Law of Moses and the heritage of godliness he had received from his father, Hezekiah, and from the ways of God as he could.

And even this is not all.

Human Sacrifice

While human sacrifice was obviously an abomination to God, some of the surrounding nations had long engaged in human sacrifice.

The people of the Moabite and Ammonite nations would gather in front of a great furnace and work themselves into a frenzy and throw innocent children into the flames to appease hungry gods.

Manasseh followed suit when *[2 Kings 21:6] he made his son pass through the fire.*

Despite all this, God didn't abandon Manasseh. No, He kept sending prophets to turn him from his wicked ways.
"Dissing" the Prophets

God warned the king of coming judgment and rebuked him for his rebellion, called on him to repent.

Among these prophets was Isaiah, who, by the time of Manasseh, was a very old man.

Isaiah had been a tremendous help to Hezekiah, Manasseh's father. But Manasseh wasn't in a listening mood for whatever Isaiah

might have had to say. He dismissed Isaiah's message and that of all the other prophets, too.

In fact, more than just turning a deaf ear to Isaiah, Jewish tradition tells us that Manasseh was the one who actually killed Isaiah.⁴

We could go on. But, instead, let's simply listen to Scripture's summary of his fifty-five-year reign of terror.

Summary of Manasseh's life: [2 Kings 21:2] He did evil in the sight of the Lord, in accordance with the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel...[16] Furthermore, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides his sin into which he led Judah, in doing evil in the sight of the Lord.

And that is the end of the story of Manasseh - at least as far as his story is told in the book of 2 Kings.

2 Kings goes on after this to immediately tell of the reign of Manasseh's son, Amon (another terrible king), and then of the righteous reign of Manasseh's grandson, Josiah.

But, when we turn to 2 Chronicles, a second telling of the history of Israel, the chronicler provides details about Manasseh's story that the writer of Kings did not.⁵

Manasseh at the Crossroads (2 Chronicles 33)

God's Discipline (2 Chronicles 33:11)

2 Chronicles 33 starts off reading exactly as the script of 2 Kings reads. It is a recounting of the evil deeds of Manasseh. Then, we read this.

⁴ By placing him in a hollow log and sawing him in two - see Hebrews 11, a likely reference to Isaiah.

⁵ The books of Kings are not interested to bring out the fact of Manasseh's repentance, being more concerned to show why the monarchy fell. Chronicles, by contrast, was written to magnify the Davidic dynasty and to show that even a wicked king like Manasseh could experience God's grace.

[2 Chronicles 33:11] Therefore the Lord brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains and took him to Babylon.⁶

God sent the discipline of judgment against King Manasseh. His reign had been beastly for decades; he was treated like a beast and was taken away in chains.

God saw to it that Assyrian soldiers, known for their cruelty, should be the very ones to afflict this king who was guilty of cruelty and so much more.

So, Manasseh got his just dessert. He got what he had coming to him. So, this is the end of his story, right? Not quite.

Manasseh's Repentance (2 Chronicles 33:12)

[12] When he was in distress, he appeased⁷ the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.⁸

⁶ On the Senjirli Stele of Esarhaddon, Baalu, King of Tyre, is shown lifting manacled hands in supplication to Assyria. Beside him Tirhakah, king of Ethiopia, is portrayed with a hook through his lips and tied by a rope to Esarhaddon's hands. (Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyrian and Babylonia*, section 690.)

⁷ It is difficult to translate this word rendered in my version "**appeased**." The sense seems to be that he turned to the Lord in prayer, which appeased God's wrath.

⁸ In the Apocrypha (a collection of books deemed beneficial, but not inspired), is a record of Manasseh's prayer. It is not certain that this was actually his prayer.

*"O Lord, God of our fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,
And their righteous offspring
He who made the heaven and the earth with all their beauty...
You appointed grace for me - I who am a sinner -
Because my sins exceeded the number of the sands of the sea.
And now, O Lord, I am justly afflicted.
And I am deservedly harassed.
And I am bent by many iron chains.
I cannot lift up my head.
Because of the gross iniquity of my wicked deeds,
Because I did evil things before you
And provoked your fury
And set up idols and multiplied impurity.*

Well, that is surprising. I had been reading my Bible for a long time before I saw this part of Manasseh's story. I never saw it coming.

But it's good to pray. It's good to be humble before God. So, we're glad that Manasseh prayed. But will it matter? After a life lived as badly as Manasseh's, will God pay attention?

Will He say, "*Tough luck, bub, you should have prayed that prayer about a hundred human sacrifices ago.*" Or, will God say, "*Good prayer. Yes, I'll forgive you - but enjoy the rest of your days in Assyria, 'cuz that's where you're gonna stay!*"

So, what will God do, now that Manasseh has called out to Him? You've heard of "amazing grace"? Well, get this.

The Amazing Grace of God (2 Chronicles 33:13)

[13] When he prayed to Him, He was moved by him and heard his pleading, and brought him back to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord alone was God.

The one thing Manasseh had feared most in life - that he might be taken to Assyria with hooks in his flesh - was exactly what God allowed. It was this that drove him to repentance.

*And now behold, I am bending the knees of my heart before you
And I am beseeching your kindness.
I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned;
And I certainly know my sins.
I beseech you;
Forgive me, O Lord, forgive me.
Do not be angry against me forever.
Do not remember my evils
And do not condemn me
Although I am not worthy."*

Out of his affliction, Manasseh called out to God - and God listened. More than that. God ***“was moved”*** by his pleading.

Let’s not miss this. Almighty God was emotionally impacted by the turning of the most wicked king who had ever ruled over Judah. This is a stunning picture of God’s mercy and compassion.

God forgave. More than that, God restored. God orchestrated things so that Assyria sent Manasseh back to Jerusalem to resume his reign as king of Judah.

Manasseh: God’s King (2 Chronicles 33:14-16)

We don’t know how much time he spent in Assyria. But after some time (perhaps years?), he returned.⁹

And we wonder...
 ...what thoughts must have gone through Manasseh’s mind as he made his way back to Jerusalem from Nineveh?
 ...what would he have been thinking as he surveyed the wreckage of the city he had ruled?
 ...how painful would it have been to have known that the wreckage was all his doing?

He saw a desecrated temple, false worship on every corner, violence and cruelty everywhere, injustice and impurity.

All the results of his own work. He saw as clearly as anyone could ever see that his whole life had been given to a lie.

But God had given him a new lease of life, a blank page to write a new story, and a golden opportunity to rule.

Manasseh was resolved to not waste it and the last years of his life were a model of what God’s king should be and do.

He built protective walls around the city.

[2 Chronicles 33:14] Now after this he built the outer wall of the city of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, up to the entrance of the Fish Gate; and he encircled the Ophel with it and made it very high. Then he put army commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah.

He re-established right worship in Jerusalem and throughout the land.

[15] He also removed the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, as well as all the altars which he had built on the mountain of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside the city. [16] He set up the altar of the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings and thanksgiving offerings on it; and he ordered Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel.

Manasseh’s first years on the throne were a thorough-going perversion. The prophets called him the most wicked king Judah had ever had - and so he was.

His repentance, though, is one of the highlight stories of the Bible. God forgave him and restored him. And the end of his life was better than the beginning. Something that began pitiful was followed by something beautiful.

So it was with Manasseh - and so it was in the Sawtooths of Idaho.

Conclusion:

I told you about the ugly, hot, dry, dusty beginning of our 2006 backpacking trip to Idaho. Well, an ugly Day One was followed by a few days of glory.

I’m so glad that, at the end of that first day, we didn’t look at each other and say, *“This stinks. Let’s get back to the car.”* If we had, we would have missed some of the grandest scenery on planet earth. You just have to get a few miles away from the car before you get into the depth of the grandeur of God’s finest handiwork.

On the days following Day One, we

⁹ As many have noted, he may have retraced Abraham’s footsteps as he traveled across the Fertile Crescent to Haran, then to Damascus, then south to Jerusalem.

- hiked heavily forested trails beside rivers flowing over giant slabs of granite.
- saw dozens of spectacular waterfalls.
- camped at highland lakes brimming with trout.
- saw scenery that looked to be right out of *The Rings of Power* made up of rock columns (called “hoodoos”) shaped into fantastic forms.

A less than stellar beginning was redeemed by a glorious end. And as it was for our wilderness trek, so it can be for our lives, as we have seen from the story of Manasseh.

Listen again to Paul’s words: ***[Romans 15:4] For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scripture’s we might have hope.***

Yes, Manasseh’s story brings us who believe in Jesus hope.

Around here we use the term “Next Step” a lot. Our church’s Mission Statement is, *“We help you take a next step with Jesus...so that you can help others take their next step with Jesus.”*

We use the vocabulary of taking a hike to describe making progress in our faith journey.

Just put one foot in front of the other. Each step into faith and obedience doesn’t have to be a big step. A small step is better than no step at all. You don’t need to sprint. But keep moving.

I love that picture of forward movement in our life with God. It provides an optimistic image of “onward and upward.” It’s energizing and motivating and inspiring.

That picture of forward movement works great unless, like Manasseh, I’ve been walking in the wrong direction.

We wouldn’t have approached Manasseh, deep into his reign of terror in Judah, and told him, *“Just take a next step, Manasseh.”*

No, the problem was that he was taking next steps - lots of them! - in the wrong direction. If he was going to get spiritually healthy, he needed to turn around, back up, and go the other direction.

I love our church’s Mission Statement. I really do. It speaks of movement. No stagnation. There is no future in putting our lives in neutral. Movement has to happen if we want to grow.

But there will be times when forward movement won’t get us where we want to go.

It’s no secret that I have gotten a couple of new knees over the last several months. A lot of the post-surgery months have been given to rehabbing the muscles around my knees, gaining strength and mobility in the knees, and getting back into hiking condition. (Yes, I’d love to go back to the Sawtooths...)

I’ve learned that one of the best ways to strengthen knees is to walk backwards. So, I’ve been walking backwards A LOT.

Neighbors wave at me and smile as I walk backwards on our street (or as I pull my sled on the street). But backwards walking is helping my knees get healthy.¹⁰

Manasseh didn’t get healthy until he backed up from the direction he had been going. He walked away from the sin and walked the other direction into faithfulness to God.

We could either say that he backed up, put his life in reverse or we could say that he turned around and walked in a new direction.

Either way, the term we use to describe this movement is *repentance*. For us, as it was for Manasseh, sometimes repentance is the need of the hour. A next step backwards. A next step after turning around.

Repentance is called for when you wake up to the reality that you have been disobeying God.

¹⁰ Backward walking (or “retro walking”) is commonly practiced for good health in China and in Japan. The adage is, *“A hundred steps backwards equals a thousand steps forward.”*

Recently, the Lord opened my eyes (after all, it is God who kindly leads us to repentance - Romans 2:4) to how wrongly I was dealing with someone here at church.

I was making assumptions about motives. I was leaving things unsaid that needed to be said. I wasn't pursuing. I was avoiding him.

I knew that I needed to back away from those toxic ways of dealing with him. So, I have done some backwards walking in recent weeks with this friend and have been working on honesty, respect, and love. It has been liberating. A step into repentance is, typically, a step into liberation.

I've known men and women here who have repented of similar relational sins, repented of sexual sins, repented of destructive addictions, repented of long-held grievances, repented of destructive lifestyles.

They have turned to the Lord who has led them into the liberating path of a whole new direction.

Christians who become aware of sinful patterns in their lives repent. So, when you find yourself in need of repentance, you will find yourself in great company. It's a big club.

Our church is not a community of "the arrived." We are a church made up of believers in Jesus who are deeply flawed, who are in chronic need of forgiveness, and hence, in chronic need of repentance.

If repentance is what you need today, you couldn't be in a better place than right here.

And if you are in need of repentance, you couldn't have been here on a better Sunday than this. There is no better story to have heard than the hope-filled story of Manasseh, the repentant king.

And there is no better time than right now to turn in humble repentance to the Lord who has been turning messy beginnings into beautiful endings from the beginning of time.

Today we celebrate the freedom we have to come to a gracious Father who welcomes us with open arms when we repent.

He cleanses us of a guilty conscience when we get honest. He strengthens us to walk in new directions by His Spirit AND by brothers and sisters who will support us.

He walks with us as we change directions to take our next steps into faith and obedience.