

“Josiah: The Reforming King”
Who’s the Boss? – A series on the Kings
2 Chronicles 34-35

Introduction: Take your Bibles and turn to 2 Chronicles 34, 2 Chronicles 34.

You don’t need me to share with you this morning the grim statistics of the diminishing influence of the church in America in order to convince you of it, but I will share a few. Those who research these kinds of things tell us that 80% of churches have either plateaued or are in decline. They tell us that in recent years nearly 4000 churches have closed every year. They tell us that since 1985 every denomination has experienced a decline in attendance. They tell us that 61% of young adults are spiritually disengaged.¹ But you don’t even need those statistics to prove to you what you already inherently know. We look at the culture around us and see increasing signs of rebellion against God, brave new expressions of disregard for His singular position as Lord of all, and appalling new evidence seen every day that our culture is at best post-Christian, if not on the brink of anti-Christian.

And yet, isn’t it easy to exist within our little safe haven of Newton Bible Church and somehow operate under the guise that we are free from the need to reform? Isn’t it easy to look at our sin-filled culture and be duped to presume that our lives are relatively sin-free simply because we don’t see those same expressions of sin in our own lives? Isn’t it easy to be lulled to sleep by the rhythm of righteous behaviors that may or may not flow from a heart of worship? And so, I ask – do you think the church in America needs reformation? Do you sense a great need of the outpouring of God’s grace and mercy that would change the hearts of millions and return them to God? Do you think that the church in Newton needs reform? Do you think that Newton Bible needs reform? Do you think that your heart needs reform? Now listen, the logical and most likely answer to that question in you is – “well, of course my heart needs reform – I know I’m not perfect.” At least, I hope that is your answer, and if it is then as we look at Josiah you will see a way forward to pursuing the reform that only a mighty work of God can bring into a life. But it would also be easy to have that answer in your heart and yet not seek the reform that we know we need. May God open our eyes to what needs to grow and change in each of us so that we have a heart like Josiah’s – one that is reform ready!

Josiah was a young boy when he took the throne. He was only 8! He inherited an ungodly and idolatrous heritage from his father, Amon, and his grandfather, Manasseh. Though his grandfather had repented late in life and had brought some reform to the land by the removal of idols, the reforms obviously didn’t last under the reign of his son Amon. In fact, the one lesson we can learn from Amon’s life is that two years is plenty of time to cause a lot of damage. And so the Lord quickly disposes of Amon and his son of 8 years old is placed on the throne. Josiah’s reign of 31 years is marked by reform. This is what should be written on his monument – the reforming king. He was a reforming ruler because he had a heart that was reform ready. He wanted his life to be pleasing to the Lord and he set himself in pursuit of this kind of life from a very early age. And so his life stands as instructive for us this morning to teach us what the heart of a reformer looks like. What realities are true in the heart of a man or woman that God can use for reform? What does it take at the deepest levels of the soul to have a reform inducing life? Josiah’s life was one that brought great reform to God’s people, and so therefore we see in him what lies at the heart of a reformer.

¹ Statistics taken from www.ministrydesignconcepts.com.

Let's start by reading verses 1-8 of chapter 34. *Read 34:1-8*

- Those first 2 verses are kind of like a header that gives a summary of his life. It's kind of like the cliff notes or the tombstone version of Josiah's life. He was a man who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and who walked in the ways of David his father. He did not turn aside to the right or to the left - he is only the fourth king of Judah that did what was right in the sight of the Lord throughout his life and only Hezekiah is compared favorably to David like Josiah is. So, though he took throne at a young age and though he grew up with pagan idol worship abounding in the land, he wound up being a king who pleased the Lord.
- Now this is not just happen stance. God had promised way back in the time of Jeroboam through the mouth of an unnamed prophet that there was coming a son of David whose name would be Josiah who would take the bones of the priests who offered at the high places and burn them upon the altar that Jeroboam had established in Bethel. You see, God's Word never falls upon the ground. Even in the midst of a nation that continues to loose its grip upon Yahweh God and lose its sight of whose people they are - God is at work to make sure that His plan comes to completion for His glory. And so, Josiah is a fulfillment of His Word. Which means that Josiah's life is a testimony to the working of God in a life. He did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord simply because he chose to be good. He did what was right because God was at work in his life to use him to be a great reforming king among his people, in fulfillment of God's Word. So, we must not lose sight of that reality as we study his life. None of this is to his credit, but to the credit of the God of Heaven who was at work to raise him up as a reforming leader.
- And so, what do we notice right away about the heart of this reforming leader? Well, we are told explicitly that at the age of 16, which the text describes as being still a boy, he sought after the God of David and that this seeking led him to begin a massive purge of the land four short years later. So for the first 8 years of his reign, from when he was 8 until he was 16 years old, he observed a land and a people filled with idolatry and worship of every god you could imagine. And then at 16 years old he determines that he is going to seek after the God of Heaven. This seeking after the truth about the one true God led him to a great and extensive purge of the land of all forms of idolatry. We are told some of the specifics of this purge of the land here in these verses, and then we are given a lot more detail in 2 Kings 22. If you compare the texts you will notice that the chronology doesn't match up at first glance, and this is because the writer of the Kings account is not concerned to tell of the reforms in a strictly chronological way. And so, the easiest way to sum up the reforms is to say that Josiah started by ridding the areas of Jerusalem and Judah of idol worship and then this progressively expanded throughout the whole territory inhabited by God's people, even up into the areas in the North where many of the Israelites had already been carried into exile. Josiah's reforms then re-focus on Jerusalem, and particularly on the Temple during the eighteenth year of his reign, or when he was 26 years old. So the reforms started local and then went regional and national and then came back to Jerusalem. These actions of reform were happening all throughout his reign and let me just give you the list of what he did to rid the land of idolatry:
 - He removed pagan vessels from the Temple
 - He deposed the idolatrous priests
 - He chopped down the altars of Baal and cut down the incense altars
 - He pulverized the Asherah images
 - He broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes that lived in the house of the Lord
 - He defiled and destroyed the high places and deposed their priests
 - He desecrated Tophet, the place of child sacrifice

- He removed and destroyed the sun worship paraphernalia
- He destroyed the altars that had been put up by Manasseh and Ahaz
- He even sought out the oldest form of idolatry set up by Solomon and defiled its high place east of Jerusalem
- He broke in pieces the pillars and cut down the Asherim and filled their holes with the bones of men.
- At Bethel, he did according to the word of the Lord and burned the bones of the priests that had sacrificed there and he burned the altar until it was all reduced to dust.
- He purged the cities in the north by destroying shrines and high places and sacrificing priests.
- This was a rampant reform that took no hostages. There was no mercy shown in this purging effort that spanned Josiah's reign. He was unwilling to allow or put up with any form of idolatry. And so, what does this tell us about the heart of a reformer? Why would he lead the way in this reform? What was true of his heart that would propel him to lead the charge of such drastic measures?
 - **Trait #1 - The Heart of a Reformer is Full of Faith – 34:1-8**
 - Well, the basic answer is that the heart of this reforming king was full of faith. He was surrounded by idolatry and could have chosen any god, or any number of gods to serve and worship. And yet, even though this was his heritage and this was what was around him, he rejected the worship of another god and chose at a young age that his life was going to be about the pursuit of the one true God. This is faith. Rejecting all other gods and staking your entire existence upon the one true God. And Josiah knew that to have a life that sought after God was to have a life that would tolerate no other gods. In other words, because he was convinced that Yahweh God was the only God he was propelled to radical eradication of all other gods. So, this purging of the land is not just an act of radical obedience or the work of some uncontrollable religious fanatic – no, this radical eradication was an act of faith. And it shows us that Josiah was full of faith. He believed and lived his life according to the simple fact there was only one true God and since this was true he was going to order his life according to that reality.
 - This presents us with the first trait of the heart of a reformer. One who is ripe for personal reform and who can lead the way in corporate reform is someone who is full of faith. They must be someone who believes that God alone is God and they must be willing to pursue radical eradication of any hints of other gods in their lives. Not all of us would be able to lead a reform to the national level like Josiah does, but we can all be used by God in our sphere of influence to turn others to the one true God. But this will never happen in your life unless you are full of this kind of God-glorifying faith. Faith that believes that God is and that God is the rewarder of those who seek Him.
 - But there is more in the text to this heart of the reforming king. So, at the age of 26 – in the 18th year of his reign – he sends 3 officials to the Temple to oversee its repair. Let's pick up the account in verse 14. *Read 34:14-19.*
 - There is a lot that we would like to know about this passage that we simply cannot know. For instance, what does it mean that the book of the Law was found in the Temple? Does this mean that they had lost all of the Pentateuch up to this point? Does this mean that Josiah had never read the written Word of God? Was this the whole five books of the Law or was this just a part of it? Why was it lost? We can't answer any of those questions for sure because the text doesn't tell us. I'll give you some of my educated guesses from my study. I think that Josiah had some part of the Law at his disposal because he certainly knew what kind of worship was appropriate

and what was inappropriate. At the very least he had some good counselors and teachers who knew the Law – some of the best guesses are that Jeremiah and Zephaniah – contemporary prophets of Josiah – were engaged by Josiah to teach him in the ways of the Lord. We simply don't know for sure. Most likely it was a portion of the Law that was found because it was one scroll, and it was most likely a portion that included a description of the covenant between God and His people and what would happen to his people if they didn't obey him singularly and love him wholly – so in other words, it was most likely a portion of Deuteronomy and most likely the latter half that included chapters 28-29. Whatever section of the Law that it was, it is most important to note the reaction of Josiah to the reading of the Law. He tears his clothes. This was an outward expression of deep grief, distress, and repentance. Now before we think through this response and try to gain a deeper understanding into the heart of this reforming king we must consider some other responses that he could have had here.

- You see, he had been doing pretty well at keeping the Law that he was aware of at this point. He had been zealous for God. He had violently overthrown any trace of idolatry he found in the land. And so he could have easily heard this reading of the Law and been self-justified. He could have easily thought that he was sure to be blessed by God because he had been so faithful to love and serve God. Or, if he knew better than that he could have easily poo-pooed the words that were read and gotten angry with God with a thought like – “I do all of this for you God and now you're going to condemn us for all of our past sins?” And yet, what does he do? In light of the reading of the Law he tears his robes! Why does he do this? This is not some contrived or theatrical response that was choreographed prior to the event. This was what flowed out of the depths of Josiah's heart in this moment – grief and distress at the reading of the Law. What had to be true in Josiah's heart for this kind of response to come out when it was squeezed by the intensity of this situation?
- Well, he had to truly believe that God was real. He had to believe that these words that were being read were from God – that they were indeed God's Word. He had to believe that God would indeed keep His Word – meaning that all these curses found in the text would actually come to pass on the people who refused to heed God's Word. He also had to know and understand that the sins of the people of Israel were worthy of this type of judgment described in the Book of the Law. In other words, this type of response to the reading of the Law was an act of faith. If he didn't believe these things mentioned then he would not have reacted this way to the reading of the Law. You see, without faith God will be disregarded in our heart, marginalized in his power and authority over us and his words will be easily dismissed when we don't like them. Without faith in God we will be prone to believe our own self-exalting assessment of our hearts and lives rather than God's honest assessment. And so, without a heart full of faith we will not be ready for repentance when the word of the Lord calls us to such.
- Josiah was a great reformer of God's people because Josiah's heart was ready for repentance because his heart was full of faith. He was ready to receive God's Word and he was ripe for admitting sin and changing course because he was full of faith.
 - **Trait #2 - The Heart of a Reformer is Repentance Ready – 34:19**
- And so we see how crucial faith is to the heart of the reformer, and how this readiness for repentance is an outflow of that faith. Reform in your heart will require repentance and so the heart of the reformer will be one that is full of faith and so it will therefore be repentance ready.
- And then notice what Josiah does next. His response of repentance in the face of hearing the Word of the Lord is followed by a determined seeking after God's mercy. *Read 34:20-21.*

- He inherently knew that they deserved God's wrath, and yet he sought after God's mercy. In light of hearing the words of the Law that guaranteed the immanent hand of God's wrath upon His disobedient people Josiah decided to seek God. What must have been true in Josiah's heart for this to be squeezed out of him in the midst of a situation like this? Well, he must have believed that God was a God of mercy who delights to show mercy on those who seek Him. He must have believed that God was his only hope in the face of certain and well-deserved wrath. In other words, he must have had great faith in God that he would show mercy upon him and his people in light of the judgment they most certainly deserved. Without this kind of deep faith in God's mercy it would have been easy for Josiah to be a fatalist about this whole thing. "Well, I guess we are going to get what we deserve so I might as well just cocoon and bunker down and get ready for the worst of it all." Without faith it also would have been very easy for Josiah to have responded to this Word from the book of the Law with rebellious actions and attitudes. In other words, he could have easily – if his heart was not full of faith in God – he could have easily been enraged by this pronouncement of judgment and determined that he didn't want to serve a God who was going to treat his people this way and therefore he could have rejected God and His word and gone his own way in the wake of this pronouncement of judgment from the Law of God. But he didn't because he had a heart that was full of faith in God that he was a God of mercy and this faith propelled him to seek this God. And so, this is our third trait of the heart of a reformer – it is a heart that seeks God's mercy by faith.

- **Trait #3 - The Heart of a Reformer Seeks God's Mercy by Faith – 34:20-21**

- For after all, isn't this an essential part of God's reforming work? Isn't it an act of mercy? And yet, how often do we miss his reforming work in our own heart because we do not seek his mercy by faith? How often do we search for our own solutions or run to another savior? The heart of a reformer is a heart that is well aware of its own need for more of God's mercy, and of God's character as being a God of great mercy, and so this deep faith propels the heart of the reformer to seek God's mercy for himself and for others.
- As these men go to inquire of the Lord and seek God's mercy, they go to Huldah the prophetess. And her words from the Lord make clear that Judah and Jerusalem will indeed suffer under the curses of the Law that are due to them, but then look at what she says about Josiah in verses 26-28. *Read 34:26-28.*
- This idea of a humble heart is an important one to the Chronicler. He has made clear back in chapter 7 that if God's people will humble their hearts and seek Him when the drought or the trouble comes then God will hear from Heaven and heal their land. And so this humble heart becomes a rubric by which to judge each of the kings of Israel. The last three kings in particular have had this idea of humility explicitly at the center of their story. Manasseh is said to have humbled himself in the face of his exile and affliction in Babylon and because of his great humility God answered and spared him. Then Amon his son is said to have not humbled himself before the Lord but rather he chose the path of idolatry and pride-filled rebellion against God. And then here with Josiah we are told that he humbled himself before the Lord and had a tender and pliable heart and because of this his pleas for mercy were heard and God would not allow the curses of judgment to fall during his lifetime. By highlighting humility in Manasseh and its lack in Amon and its prevalence in Josiah, the Chronicler – and more importantly, the Holy Spirit – is making a point about humility. Humility is the seedbed of the kind of faith in God that induces the type of reform that Josiah leads. In fact, reform in our lives and in our church

and in our land will never happen if humility is not the trademark quality of our hearts. The heart of a reformer is humble.

▪ **Trait #4 - The Heart of a Reformer is Humble – 34:26-28**

- And what does this humility look like you ask? Well, consider Josiah. In the face of promiscuous idolatry he singularly sought the Lord. In the wake of a heritage that rebelled against God and went its own way, he humbly obeyed and didn't turn to the right hand or the left. In response to the finding and reading of some of the most condemning words in Scripture he tears his robes and sends men to inquire of the Lord. He had a right view of God that never caved and was never tweaked depending on his circumstances. He had an undying faith in the God of Heaven as the one true God and so therefore he was going to stake his life on the authoritative word of this God. This is humility. It is an understanding that God is God and I am not. It is a willing submission to God as God. It is evidenced in a desire to live life in light of God as the one and only true God. It is evidenced in a life that hears, believes, and obeys God's Word.
- Without a humility like this there will be no reform like this. Humility is the seedbed of faith and faith is the non-negotiable of heart reform.
- Now, you would think that after hearing these words from Huldah the prophetess that cleared Josiah and his people and let him know that judgment was coming but not when he was alive that Josiah would have reclined back in his easy chair – breathed a sigh of relief – ordered a cold drink, and basked in the relief. You would think that the tendency of your heart and mine in this situation would have been to rest upon our laurels of spiritual achievement that allowed us to qualify for the “missed judgment by the skin of your teeth” club. But what does Josiah do? Well let's pick up the text in verse 29. *Read 34:29-33.*
- What does Josiah do in the aftermath of God's mercy being shown to him? Well, he calls everybody together to rehearse with them the book of the Law that has been found and to reiterate, and in some ways reinstate, the Mosaic covenant between them and God. He was not content to rest on what had already been accomplished. Nor was he willing to let this Law of God be marginalized by God's people again. It was not going to be on Josiah's watch that this Book of the Covenant found its way back into obscurity. No, this truth from God was going to take center stage in the life of God's people if Josiah had anything to say about it. And notice in the text that this gathering of the people and this calling them to a renewed commitment to Yahweh was definitely something he was making them do. So, verse 32 makes this clear when it says that he made all who were present join into this covenant with God. Then in verse 33 it says that Josiah did further reforms as he took away all the abominations that belongs to the people of Israel and pointed them to serve and obey Yahweh God alone – and they did. It may not have been in their heart to do this, but it was definitely in Josiah's heart. Verse 31 says that he stood before the people and made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord and keep his commandments with all his heart and all his soul. And this is exactly what he did. We are told by way of summary in the account in 2 Kings 23 that:
 - Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him. (2Ki. 23:25 ESV)
- Josiah loved God and served God and obeyed God with all that he was and all that he had. And he made sure that his people knew that and he did all that he could to bring them along to love and serve Yahweh God alone. And so I ask – how does this happen? What is it in the heart of Josiah that produces this kind of response to the mercy of God? What can we learn here about

what the heart of a reformer looks like? Well, simply said – The heart of a reformer is mercy induced.

▪ **Trait #5 - The Heart of a Reformer is Mercy Induced – 34:28-33**

- By this I simply mean that the mercy of God had a life-changing effect on Josiah. He goes from tearing his robe to seeking the Lord for mercy to calling all of Judah together to re-commit themselves to a covenant with God. What happened in Josiah's heart to pave the way for this type of response? Well, mercy happened. God should have and could have brought great judgment upon His people, just like he already had to the ten northern tribes. But instead, in response to Josiah's humble seeking for mercy for his people, God showed them more mercy.
- This is so astounding to Josiah that it is life changing. Mercy does not make him idle and complacent. He does not presume upon this further display of God's mercy and sit back with fire insurance and let life pass him by. No, he is unwilling to be idle in light of such mercy. In Josiah's mind the only fitting response to mercy like this was a further pursuit of God like what we see in the text. This is what mercy does to a heart full of faith. It stokes the fire of desire that burns up the dross of complacency. Faith is bolstered by mercy and it is sprung into the actions of obedience and commitment by the mercy of God shown to a life.
- This is evidenced further by Josiah in chapter 35. After the renewal of the covenant, we are told that Josiah leads the people to keep the Passover. You will remember that it was Josiah's great-grandfather – Hezekiah – who had led the last Passover in Judah. But Hezekiah's Passover paled in comparison to Josiah's in the sense that Josiah's was run according to the Law and it was observed by people from all over Judah and Israel. You remember that the Passover was the first feast of the calendar year. There are 7 annual feasts that are prescribed in Leviticus 23 for the people of Israel. Each feast is a time of solemn assembly where they leave aside all other responsibilities and take a break so as to focus on and be reminded of the Lord their God. It was also to be a time of remembering something specific about the Lord so as to re-orient their hearts toward God, and during these different feasts they were to bring some type of prescribed offering to the Lord.
- And so, this feast of Passover was the first one to be observed of any calendar year. And what was it remembering? Well, it was pointing to the great mercy of God that had been shown to the nation as God rescued them from the mighty grip of the Egyptians. You remember that the last plague that was brought that finally brought Pharaoh to his knees was the death angel passing through the land and striking dead the firstborn in every house unless the house was anointed on the lintel and the doorposts with the blood of a sacrificial lamb. In other words, the Passover was a time of remembering God's mercy through judgment. God had passed over the homes where judgment had been placed upon a spotless lamb. This lamb's blood had been shed and that blood now adorned the doorway, the entrance to the house. Mercy came to them at great cost to the lamb. The lamb had stood in the place of the oldest son. And this feast of the Passover was a yearly reminder of this great mercy shown by God. And yet, for over 300 years, no Passover like this one had been kept in the land. They had forgotten mercy, and so they had abandoned life altering obedience.
- Do you see how intricately these are connected? Mercy induces faith-filled reform in our hearts and lives. And so Josiah is calling his people to gaze upon the mercy of God so as to be stimulated to faith-filled reform. This is what mercy does in the heart of a reformer – it induces and provokes faith to be active in our lives.
- And so, for us to be rescued from our complacency and jolted from our apathy we must be reformed in our hearts by regularly considering the mercy of God that has been so marvelously

shown to us through the Sacrificial Lamb – Jesus Christ. A right understanding of my deserved judgment cast upon the innocent and undeserving Lamb of God should propel a deep gratitude that compels a life of complete worship. In the place of the Passover the New Testament Church has been granted the regular observance of the Lord's Table where the symbols of bread and juice point us to the reality of God's mercy. And this mercy should have the effect of propelling your faith to whole-hearted obedience that seeks reform like Josiah.

Conclusion: Josiah was a man used of God to bring great reform to his people. This was possible because he was a man full of faith in God. He was a man whose heart was repentance ready. He was a man whose humility provided the perfect seedbed for faith to grow. He was a man who sought God's mercy by faith. And he was a man who gazed upon this mercy and was propelled to greater worship and obedience. And so the obvious question is – are these things true of your heart? Do you have the kind of faith in God like Josiah had? Is your heart ever ready to repent and turn from sin when the Scripture points it out? Is humility of heart a trademark of your life? Are you seeking God regularly for His mercy, knowing and believing by faith that he is a God of great mercy? Does this mercy, both God's past mercies and his new mercies – do they compel you to further worship of God? Let's pray.

Benediction:

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1Ti 1:17 ESV)