

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years.² He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.³ He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them.⁴ He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever."⁵ In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts.⁶ He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger. ... The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention.¹¹ So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.¹² In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.¹³ And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.

¹⁴ Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah.

¹⁵ He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city.¹⁶ Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel.¹⁷ The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to the LORD their God.

¹⁸ The other events of Manasseh's reign, including his prayer to his God and the words the seers spoke to him in the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, are written in the annals of the kings of Israel. (2 Chronicles 33:1-6, 10-18)

How Does God Deal with Sinners?

Have you ever heard of King Manasseh of Judah? Probably not – unless you've read 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. He lived about 2600 years ago on the other side of the world. He led a life so different from ours that it may seem like there's nothing you could say about him that would have anything to do with us. But that isn't true. This morning, we have most of what the Bible says about King Manasseh before us. And it didn't sound particularly complimentary. But Manasseh is a tremendous example of **how God deals with sinners** – that means how he deals with people like us.

I.

Manasseh was the son of King Hezekiah, one of the best kings that Judah ever had. Now, the kings of Judah weren't just political leaders. God charged them with keeping the faith of the nation pure. So in the Bible, a good king is one who leads his people to be faithful. A bad king harms their faith. King Hezekiah was a good king. But he died when Manasseh was only twelve. It seems pretty clear that Manasseh fell under the influence of the idol worshippers in Judah who didn't like Hezekiah's insistence on the Bible. In fact, there's evidence that in his last years, even Hezekiah's leadership in the faith faltered somewhat. So Manasseh didn't get the example or the guidance from a believing father that he needed.

So what became of him? You heard the sad list in our text for this morning. Manasseh brought back the worship of Baal and Asherah. They were fertility gods. A regular part of their worship included shrine prostitutes plying their trade. Manasseh practiced human sacrifice. He burned his own son to the heathen god Molech. He also worshipped the stars – looking to them to guide and reveal his destiny. And he built altars to them right inside the temple of the Lord. Manasseh practiced divination. Divination means trying to read the future. He visited mediums to try to learn from the dead things that are hidden from us. He practiced sorcery – casting spells. All this from the man who was supposed to keep Judah's worship pure.

How did God deal with him? The superpower at that time was Assyria. God moved some of their generals to arrest Manasseh, to put him in chains and put a hook in his nose, like the ring of a bull, and lead him

away to the city of Babylon where the brother of the king of Assyria ruled. One minute, Manasseh was on top of the world! The next minute, he was helpless and in prison and in absolute terror.

Sad to say, every sin that Manasseh committed is alive and well in our society today – and it all tempts us. Idol worship is all around us. This country has a rising tide of non-Christian groups that invite our children to join them. Every day, Christian churches in America make concessions to the idols around us. In the name of diversity, Christian pastors allow non-Christians to lead worship in their churches and they join in discussions labeled as attempts to increase understanding. But their real purpose is to find ways to make Christianity less offensive to non-Christians – that means to change Christianity. And, sad to say, the worship of money, the worship of self, the worship of popularity and the approval of the unbelieving world around threatens to replace the Lord in the hearts of our children, even if they never join a non-Christian group.

Now you might take solace in the fact that human sacrifice, at least, isn't allowed in America. But isn't every abortion that takes place in this country a sacrifice to the great god Me? Unborn children are slaughtered because they would interrupt the lives of the men and women conceived them. Is that any different from what Manasseh did with his son?

And divination and sorcery are incredibly popular today. In the years that I've been a pastor, I've watched the section of bookstores labeled "New Age" grow from a little corner someplace to large, prominent displays that cover whole walls. Go look at the titles of the books on those shelves. They'll tell you how to read Tarot cards and summon the dead and read the stars to find your destiny and how to cast spells.

And all this tempts our children today just like it did Manasseh. He's a prime example of why young people need to keep hearing God's Word. Have we been faithful in making sure that the teenagers in our congregation and in our families faithfully hear the word of God? Or are we abandoning them to all the forces out there that want to drag them away from the word? Don't we have to admit that we could do a lot better? All too often, we figure that if they were confirmed, they should be OK. But just because your child stood up here at twelve or thirteen and promised to remain faithful does not mean that he or she is done. The devil isn't done trying to drag that child away from the faith.

If they fall away, what will happen? What happened to Manasseh? God sent prophets to call him back, but he refused to listen. So God sent those Assyrian generals to capture him and drag him away in chains. Notice, God did not say to Manasseh, "I know your dad didn't do a good job raising you to be a faithful believer. I know he died just when you needed him most, so I understand that it's confusing for you." God held him responsible for his own sin.

Today, we like to make excuses for sin. Their parents don't teach them right. They're poor. They got a raw deal out of life. All that might be true. But God doesn't accept excuses. Every sinner has to stand before him on Judgment Day. After all the whining is done, God is going to say, "Did you trust in me? Did you live for me?" When the answer is no, the verdict will be the same: eternity in hell. Yes, we parents who don't teach our children to be faithful are sinning. But they will pay the price because they also sinned. **How does God deal with sinners? He holds them accountable for their sin.**

II.

That's terrifying – for us as parents and for our children. God is a God of justice. He's holy and sin must be punished. But at the same time, God is a God of love. And in Manasseh, we see how God worked not just to punish Manasseh, but to draw him back to himself. God warned Manasseh because he hoped that hearing that he was sinning would be enough to pull him up short. But when the king refused to listen, God took a harder line with him because God wanted him to repent. God wanted him to live forever. Because Manasseh was so hardheaded, he only repented when he was in chains, hundreds of miles from home, alone and terrified. But God was willing to send that hardship and even that terror to break the pride the ruled this king's heart.

It worked. In prison, Manasseh humbled himself before the Lord. He recognized who was really responsible for getting him into this situation. He couldn't blame his father for failing to teach him. He couldn't blame the people at court who had led him astray. He couldn't blame God who called his father home to heaven when Manasseh was only twelve. He had to take responsibility for his own sin. All that is what it means to humble himself before God. Then Manasseh prayed for deliverance. The text even says that he prayed to "the God of his fathers." Hezekiah's teaching had not been totally lost. God had tucked the memory

of the gospel away in Manasseh's heart so that when all hope was lost, he turned back to the true God and begged for forgiveness and for rescue.

And God gave it. Now, he doesn't give us any details of how it happened, but God brought him home. God put him back on the throne. God rescued him from a place no one else could reach him and gave him a reborn faith and a new life. God wants to do that for every sinner. You see, what God wants from us is simple: he wants us to trust in him. He wants to be our God in our lives. That's what we're supposed to teach our teenagers and our younger children. That's why we operate an elementary school and a high school. That's why we bring our families to church, even when our teenagers do their best to let us know how lame it is and how much they're rather be somewhere else on Sunday morning.

God wants to forgive us. But he doesn't just look the other way when we sin. God works to bring us to repentance. Repentance begins when we humble ourselves before God. No matter how unfair life has been to us, God expects to trust him. When we don't – when we feel sorry for ourselves and we sin, when we value what people around us think more than what God says and we disobey God, when we're tired of that same old, same old of church services and we go looking for something new and we depart from the true God, when we're tired of fighting with our teenagers so we let them sleep in on Sunday morning, that's all our own fault. Repentance begins when we humble ourselves before God and we admit that.

Sometimes, God puts the screws to us. He doesn't want to. God would prefer if we would just listen to him when he calls us to repent. But if we harden our hearts, if we stick our fingers in our ears so we can't hear our pastors and our parents calling us back, God may send hardship and even tragedy into our lives to get us to stop and look at what we're doing and where we're heading. Sometimes, the only way God can get our attention is by sending something as hard as the imprisonment he sent Manasseh. But he only does that because he loves us. He wants us to turn to him in repentance and trust that our sins are forgiven.

Why are they forgiven? Not because we change our lives. Not because we say we're sorry. Our sins are forgiven because Jesus died for those sins. Six hundred years before Jesus was born, Manasseh took refuge in the blood that our Savior would shed on the cross to take his sins away. And God forgave him. You see, God is a God of justice. All sin must be paid for. But God sent his Son to pay for our sin. The Son of God entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and he was born in Bethlehem so that he could die on the cross. Jesus didn't die because the Jewish temple guards captured him. He didn't die because Pontius Pilate was too weak to save him. He died because he chose to die. He died because you and I are sinners and we needed him to suffer death and hell so we don't have to. He died to pay for us and for all people who will ever live. He died for us parents who haven't always done a good job of teaching our children to be faithful. He died for our children and all their sin.

Repentance is trusting that fact. No sin that you've committed is greater than the death Jesus died. Manasseh worshipped false gods. He killed his son on the altar of Molech. He put idols in the temple of God and led his people astray – and in fact, it's clear from the end of the reading that he did so much damage that he couldn't repair it all. The people did not return wholeheartedly to God. But Jesus still died and paid for him. He proved that when he rose. Manasseh was forgiven for Jesus' sake. And so are we. Our time may be no better than Manasseh's was, but it's also no worse. Our idol worship and the idol worship of our children is no greater or less. Jesus died and paid for it all. And Jesus rose and swept it all away. Trust in what he has done when you come face to face with your sin and its consequences. Trust that God has forgiven you.

Then turn from your sin. Manasseh changed his life. He applied himself to governing and defending his people instead of to witchcraft and idol worship. More important than that, he worked diligently to remove the idols. He restored true worship to the temple. He himself worshipped the true God again. True repentance always leads to a change in our lives. We can't always fix everything that we've done wrong. Manasseh couldn't. The people still didn't live completely in accord with the Old Testament law. Sadly, Manasseh's son was as bad as he was in his worst days. The damage was done. That may be true for us, too. But we can repent and trust our sins are forgiven. And we can live in repentance. We can show with our words and our actions that we have returned to God. We can work to restore what we've damaged. That's what God wants from us. **How does God treat sinners? He works to bring them back to him.** That was true 2600 years ago when this king lived. It was true when Jesus lived and died and rose to take our sin away. It is true today. And it will be true until the Lord returns. God loves you that much. Amen.