

*Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah. <sup>2</sup> He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. <sup>3</sup> He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. <sup>4</sup> He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name." <sup>5</sup> In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. <sup>6</sup> He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.*

*<sup>7</sup> He took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple, of which the LORD had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever. <sup>8</sup> I will not again make the feet of the Israelites wander from the land I gave their forefathers, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them and will keep the whole Law that my servant Moses gave them." <sup>9</sup> But the people did not listen. Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites.*

*<sup>10</sup> The LORD said through his servants the prophets: <sup>11</sup> "Manasseh king of Judah has committed these detestable sins. He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols. <sup>12</sup> Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. <sup>13</sup> I will stretch out over Jerusalem the measuring line used against Samaria and the plumb line used against the house of Ahab. I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. <sup>14</sup> I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and hand them over to their enemies. They will be looted and plundered by all their foes, <sup>15</sup> because they have done evil in my eyes and have provoked me to anger from the day their forefathers came out of Egypt until this day." (2 Kings 21:1-15)*

### What is the Lesson of Israel?

It's no secret that I love history. But one of my best friends has a different opinion. He calls history "boring." What do you think? Are you like me and you read history for entertainment or are you like my friend who hates it? Those of you who hate history probably flinch whenever I start to tell you what was happening in some Old Testament reading. And I'm not up here just to spout Old Testament history. You don't come to church for a history lesson. Even though the Bible contains a lot of history and all of it is true and understanding it will help you understand its message, the Bible never writes history so that people like me can read it and be entertained,. Nor does the Bible engage in the kind of scientific history that university professors do. What I mean is, their interest, at its purest, is to learn as much as we can about what happened. But the Bible isn't simply trying to add to our knowledge of what happened. All the history in the Bible has a point. God only presents those parts of it that make the point that he wants to make. Today, we're going to look at a fairly obscure historical reference and ask ourselves the most basic question about Old Testament history: **what is the lesson of Israel?**

#### I.

Very simply put, the answer is: **God's patience is endless.** Now, that might not seem to be very clear from this reading. It's all about judgment. The king mentioned here, Manasseh, deserved that judgment. He was the son of King Hezekiah. For generations the people of Israel had drifted farther and farther from the Lord. The people set up high places, worship sites where they could follow the gods of the neighboring peoples. Hezekiah stamped those high places out. But Manasseh his son brought them all back. Worse, Manasseh re-introduced the worship of the Canaanite gods, Baal and Asherah. Those gods were worshiped through temple prostitution and human sacrifice and Manasseh even sacrificed some of his own children to them. He set up altars to false gods in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem and he led the people astray again.

How did Manasseh go so bad? We could point to all kinds of things, but in the end, we don't know enough about him personally to know why he turned his back on the Lord. We know only that he did. In the process, he led Israel back down a road that she had traveled over and over again since God first brought them

out of Egypt. God had worked a whole series of dramatic miracles to free them. God had brought them to the Promised Land and conquered their enemies. But that was 800 years before Manasseh was born. Even though God was with Israel through all that time and he delivered them again and again, again and again they followed desires of their sinful flesh and they turned to other gods.

God's judgment on Manasseh was a small example of what was going to happen to Judah. It had already happened to the ten northern tribes. They had been conquered and carried into exile. Eventually, Judah was going to go into exile too. But long before it happened to them, it was going to happen to Manasseh. Judah was a small country surrounded by superpowers. The king of Assyria was going to march in and depose Manasseh and take him to Babylon in chains. That was to be a sign to the entire people of what would happen if they continued down the path of unbelief. In the end, God carried out that threat. Jerusalem was destroyed. Blood ran in the streets. The survivors were forced to leave their homes and live out their lives in exile.

This reading ends with that threat. If we didn't know any more about Israel's history, we would have to conclude that the lesson here is: "be faithful or else!" Certainly, part of the lesson is that God's wrath over sin is real. God does punish people who do wrong. That's what hell is all about and this punishment on Israel is really just a little taste of what hell is like. But these verses that we have before us today are one small part of a much longer narrative: the story of God's love. What God threatened and did to Manasseh and to Judah are actually chapters in that very long story.

How is that the story of God's love? First of all, because God didn't want any of this punishment to happen. God sent prophet after prophet to warn them of where they were going. Sometimes the people listened, most of the time, they didn't. But God kept reaching out to them and their kings. Even in the midst of God's judgment, when the people were already in exile, God spoke through Ezekiel and said, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that he turn from his ways and live." Right up until the day that Jerusalem's walls were breached, God had prophets working inside it to call them to repentance. In exile, God sent them still more prophets and leaders. And after seventy years, God brought them home. In the ancient world, that was unheard of. It's all an amazing story of God's love.

And it all had a preview in the life of Manasseh. Our text doesn't mention it, but we know that in exile, he repented. He sought God's forgiveness and God freely gave it. In fact, God had the king of Assyria return him to Jerusalem and put him back on the throne where he worked to undo the damage he had done. In the same way, more than a century later, God purified Israel through their exile. Never again would they openly practice idolatry.

Now that doesn't mean they were cured of sin. Sadly, by the time Jesus came, unbelief ruled again, not in form of idol worship, but in the form of works righteousness. The people believed that God was pleased with them because they were pleased with themselves. Jesus called them to repent. On his way to the cross, he wept over Jerusalem because they were not willing to be gathered by him. But that didn't stop Jesus from coming. Jesus came because God's love for Israel was boundless. God promised them again and again that he was sending a Savior. Jesus was that Savior. He came to undo all that their sin had caused. Jesus came to free them not from physical exile, but to set their souls free from slavery to sin and death and to bring them home to heaven.

He has done exactly the same thing for you and me. That is the real lesson here. God's patience with us is endless. When you add it all together, God put up with Israel's unfaithfulness for 1500 years. And he kept his promise and sent his Son to them. All along the way, he worked to call them back to him. He cared for them and protected them and even in hardship, he worked for their eternal good. For two thousand years, he has done the same for the New Testament Church. And he has done the same for you and me personally. How many times in our lives have we wandered away from God? How many times have we let temptation draw us into sin and behavior that we know he condemns? How many times have we dwelt on our own sinful desires instead of focusing on God and his love? How much punishment do we deserve? God's patience with us began on the day we were born. Every day since then, the sinner in our hearts has rebelled against him. But God claimed us in the waters of holy baptism. God forgave the sins of our youth and the sins of our old age. God listened to us when we repented again and again and again. Never did he say, "That's it! I'm done with you! You have sinned one time too many!" Always God is there with open arms to forgive us.

Yes, there have been consequences for our actions. Sometimes, we're like Manasseh. We insist on sinning and God has to get our attention. He does that because he loves us. His patience never fails. It was

lived in the 33 years that Jesus was perfect in our place in this life. God never had to call him back. God never had to be patient with Jesus while he sinned because every single day of his life, he listened to and lived for God. He did that so that his perfect life would count for us. God's patience reached its greatest extent on the cross, where Jesus laid down his life for us. In that moment, he did away with all the sin that had piled up against us. His blood erased it all. Three days later, God's patient love brought Jesus back from the dead. When he burst out of the tomb, he exploded our sin and he made us God's forever. Ever since that day, in the world, in the church, in our personal lives, God has been patiently reaching out to us. Reaching out to the lost with the good news that God has found them. Reaching out to believers with the good news that in Christ, all our sin is still gone and God still welcomes us back to him.

## II.

All that is what Israel's history really means. There is nothing more pertinent to our lives than the history of God's love. And it is history. These things really happened. They're not stories or legends. They're facts. The facts of Manasseh's life illustrate one more reality about Israel that is pertinent for us. **What is the lesson of Israel? God will have a people.**

In the end, Israel did stop being the people of God, but not because that's what God wanted. To this day, God holds out his hands to that same people of Israel that he loved patiently for all those centuries in the Old Testament. The problem is that they rejected him. For 1500 years God promised to send Jesus to them. He managed the whole world so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem in Judea from the line of David the King – from the line of Manasseh. To keep that promise, God brought Judah back from exile. God sent prophet after prophet to prepare his people for that moment. God finally sent John the Baptist to say that the time was here. But for the vast majority of the people of Jesus' day, it didn't matter. They didn't want his kind of a Savior.

But God was determined to have a people. So he made a new one. The true Israel of God is all those people of every age, New Testament and Old Testament, who trust in that Savior God promised to send. God made us to be the new Israel. When he did that, our ancestors were oblivious. They were running around Europe or Asia or Africa somewhere, worshipping whatever gods they worshipped. They knew nothing of how God had ordered the world so that Jesus would be born. But God knew them. He knew us. And he ordered all things so that we would be born just where he needed us to be so that the gospel would reach us.

Many unbelievers have remarked on that fact that religion tends to travel in families. I'm Lutheran because my parents were Lutheran. My mother's parents and grandparents were Lutheran. I would guess that many of us here could tell a similar story – especially if you expand from Lutheran to Christian. Very few of our parents were unbelievers. But just because God uses ordinary means to bring us to Jesus does not mean that he isn't working. God doesn't drop steaks from heaven on my grill on Sunday afternoons. My wife and I both work so that we can buy what we need to feed our family – and it isn't steak very often. Did we go to work? Did we study for years to be able to hold down the jobs we have? Of course, we did. But God is still working. He works through our natural gifts, and the education we got and our effort. But it is still God who is taking care of us. God works through the Church and God works through Christian parents so that he can proclaim the gospel to those he has chosen to be a part of his new people – to us.

And because God works through that message that Jesus died and rose for us, that message changes us. Now we trust our Savior. Now we are the people of God. God is lavishing on us all the care that he lavished on Old Testament Israel and he has made all the promises he gave to them ours. Jesus took away our sins and gave us eternal life. God will be with us every day that we live here. He will work in our lives, and he will bring us home to heaven because that's where his people belong.

You don't have to share my love of history to appreciate what God has done. Israel is absolutely essential to us reaching heaven. Through them, God gave us Jesus. Through them, God gave us the Scriptures. Through them, God even gave us a warning of what happens if we are unfaithful. But first and foremost, they are a model of the love he has for all people, love that he still has for Israel. God has made us his new people. Remember that love and let it change your life. Amen.