

Discover Real Patience in God's Dealings with King Manasseh

2 Kings 21:1-16 • 2020-10-18 • 20th Sunday after Pentecost



With elections just around the corner you hear many claims that someone is just the absolute worst or the absolute best. There are some pretty strong claims. But I don't think many would have argued 2700 years ago about who was the worst king of Jerusalem. Did you catch all that we read earlier about the wicked king Manasseh? He has a laundry list of evils that far exceeds any other ruler in his time. Then almost as if it were a footnote to his record it adds at the end of his account, "Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end." Manasseh makes any other label as "the worst ever" seem pretty tame. How did God deal with the worst king ever? God's dealing with him reveals something incredibly remarkable about God: his patience. Today we discover real patience in God's dealings with King Manasseh.

Of all the kings of Israel and Judah, Manasseh ruled the longest: fifty-five years total. Imagine a ruler over our nation, the same man, having an influence for fifty-five years! But Manasseh used most of it for evil and to bring ruin.

It's not as if he was handed a bad kingdom. Manasseh's father was a godly king. But Manasseh was not at all like his father. He even worked to undo the good done by his father. Manasseh followed the same practices of the Canaanite people which God had detested. He built up the high places which his father had torn down. The high places were centers of worship which usually revolved around cultic worship practices to false gods. He erected altars to the Canaanite god, Baal. There were many types of Baal gods, but they all had a common theme: sexual perversion and fertility rites. Baal worship involved sex acts often in a shrine and with temple prostitutes –both male and female. In the name of Baal sexual intercourse was performed by the worshippers in order to appease the gods. Need I go into the details on what an Asherah pole represented in the fertility cult of Baal? There's more. Manasseh did something which no other wicked king in Judah is said to have done. He bowed down to worship the stars and planets.

He should have known better! He was a king of Judah and over the city of Jerusalem. He had control over the place where the glory of the Lord appeared at the dedication of Solomon's temple for the Lord. The promises of the Lord given to Abraham's offspring and to King David were all his. Yet he did all these evil things!

And Manasseh wasn't content to sin on his own. He enticed the people of Judah to join him. Manasseh took the temple of the Lord and changed it into a center of Baal worship. He constructed his own Asherah pole and set it up in the court where sacrifices were supposed to be offered to the Lord. He put altars to the stars in the courtyard of the temple. Now offerings were made to the stars, Baal, Asherah, and not to the Lord.

Pretty bad, right? But then the list goes on! "He sacrificed his son in the fire." The book of Chronicles tells us that he did this to more than one son. Wicked king Ahab had seventy sons who lived. How many illegitimate sons of Manasseh were consecrated to the devil? Some might argue that this means the sons went through some fire purification rite and were merely singed. I'm not so convinced. The record that remains of the practices of this time in Israel, Judah, and surrounding countries is horrific. One historian notes how they would often dedicate an unborn child to the gods in order to complete some vow or gain some favor. Once the fruit of the womb was born, it was placed upon the outstretched basin held by the image of an idol –burned alive. Horrid descriptions exist of the way the human bodies were burned. This was murder in a twisted method. It is described as slaughter, not a mere purification rite.

And to top off his list king Manasseh could add every conceivable practice – consulting the dead, seeking fortunes, and demonic fortune telling practices. He was wicked!

Why so wicked? We can't say for any particular reason. But at the root of it was abandonment of the Lord. When he saw foreign armies gaining the upper hand, he sought to find help, find refuge, find blessings from other gods. The fertility gods offered rain and crops in turn for perverted rituals. The vow of protection was only good if the child was burned in the fire. The truth of the future only felt secure if it meant consulting the devil's demons and the lifeless stars. It was a sad and pitiful state of spirituality which led Manasseh away from the Lord. He stopped trusting the Lord. Then stopped loving the Lord. Then stopped serving the Lord in faith and instead served evil. He was the worst!

How did God respond? He sent prophets to warn and call to repentance! Manasseh, you see, is a snapshot of what Jesus speaks of in the parable we read this morning. Recall the parable of the tenants. The tenants were put in charge of God's vineyard. God worked hard to make things wonderful for his vineyard. He protected it and provided for it. He cultivated it so that it would be ready to produce fruit for him. That vineyard was the nation of Israel and Judah. The workers in the vineyard were the kings and rulers of the people. What happens when God sends his prophets to them? They don't listen but beat them. That is the picture of Manasseh. He and Judah were unwilling to listen, unrepentant, for so long. How patient would God be? A year? Ten years? Over fifty years!?

God has placed many different people under his vineyard and in care of his vineyard today. You and I are part of the workers in his vineyard today. As a Christian congregation we are entrusted with his Word and his authority. We are workers for the Lord both at church and in our daily lives. And those who you call to serve the church are also especially workers in the vineyard. Called not just by you but by the Lord through his church.

Now it would be easy for us to point to other workers in the vineyard and decry them. To a certain extent we must speak out against the Manasseh types in God's house today. Of course, we must not condone but condemn the Christian pastors and all Christian witnesses who have turned aside from the Word of the Lord. They offer sacrifices in his house and with his name, but with a divided heart. There are sadly, many who take on the name Christian, and who believe they are pleasing God by supporting sexual apathy, perversion, and "open-minded" practices as they call it. They are not serving the Lord. They are going down the path of Manasseh. And there are those who carry the name of the Lord, and yet turn a blind eye to the offering of children to the altar that goes by the name "choice." A god no less ugly than Baal. The burning of the child with chemicals no doubt is just as gruesome and pleasing to the devil as the child offered up to Molech in the fire. It would be easy for us to point out these obvious errors. And it pains me deeply that so many are lost in sin and blind to these truths –so many who are called to be workers in the vineyard but end up being the tenants who beat and kill God's true prophets.

But it starts by examining our own hearts. What about your heart? What about your fruits? When God comes on the last day in judgment what will he see? Will there be a harvest that you have carefully tended or a heart that had carefully tried to hide its sins? I know my own heart struggles to produce anything good and cannot of its own produce a good crop. Like Manasseh I too by nature waver in trust, consider the prosperity of the wicked, and don't always repent as quickly as I ought of sin. You don't worship Baal or consult demons, but what sins do you hold onto as you give in to the altar of self-indulgence? Your body is a temple of the holy spirit. Is your heart free from any altar that offers sacrifice to things other than the Lord? There is a word of warning on every page of Scripture. The human heart –yours, mine – is very prone to evil. And it quickly follows the temptation to set up false gods, false altars, and abandon faithful love to God.

Manasseh's sin was so bad that the Lord said it was worse than the sins of the unbelieving nations driven out before Israel came to Canaan. They were all destroyed and told to be killed by the Lord. They had reached the end of the warning. Now Manasseh has had his warnings for so long, so long, the longest reign. God said he would do something so terrible it would make the hair on your head stand up when you hear about it. He described the coming judgment on Judah. It would be like when you finish a meal and tip your plate upside down to clear it off. He would wipe them off his plate as refuse. Manasseh was captured by the King of Assyria. He had a hook placed into his nose – no doubt to shamefully lead him off by it as captive. He was bound with bronze shackles and led off as a prisoner. Where were his dead children, his Baal, and his stars now?

What follows for Manasseh is the most remarkable thing of it all. Of all the bad kings of Israel and of Judah, he alone is listed as repenting. When all this happened, the Scriptures record in 2 Chronicles 33 that he cried out in repentance to the Lord. And he was restored and pardoned. He then produced fruit. God had been so patient for that fruit!

Jesus, in the parable of the tenants, describes how God is so patient that he eventually carries out his patience by sending his own Son to the tenants. All the people of Israel, all the sinners of the world were slow to come to repentance and quick to attack the truth. Yet God is patient. Far more patience than the many decades he gave Manasseh. He gave the whole history of the world his patience. In a world turned against him and without fruit he still patiently suffered long. He still sent his prophets. He still sought fruits and repentance with faith. Finally, his Son did come.

Jesus was rejected by the workers in the vineyard –the chief priests and the Sanhedrin. He was killed and crucified on the cross. But this was all a part of the display of God's great patience. For in him all who believe are pardoned of their sins. The Son of God alone fulfilled what Baal, the stars, and all the demons could not: our redemption and forgiveness. We will not be wiped off the plate as wretched sinners, but stand clean and forgiven alongside even wicked men like Manasseh.

Manasseh returned to Judah and he tore down the altars to Baal. He removed them from the temple of the Lord and told the people that they were to worship the Lord, the God of Israel alone. How will you as a worker in his vineyard respond to the sending of his Son? What altars need to be torn down in your heart in order to put God first?

God is patient. He had worked fruit and found fruit where you would never have expected it. Manasseh is the only reformer king who started out evil but fully turned for good. Why was there this turn around? Because God is patient. He seeks fruit with great patience. He wins that fruit by his own cultivation and his work through the gospel. And we produce fruits of faith despite ourselves and because of his working in us.

How are you at extending that same great patience to others? What about those who support abortion? What about those who cry out "It's my body so I'll do what I want," and turn the blessings of sex into a nightmare of shameful acts and perversion? How patient are you with such people? What about those who look to the horoscopes and the stars for truth? How willing are you to again and again be longsuffering for a neighbor, a family member, an unfruitful branch? Yes, Jesus' parable has a word of warning. His patience is not to be trifled with. Now is the time of salvation. And his coming is near. But as we wait, how patient will you be? Let it be real patience, following his own -a patience he gave to Manasseh, to you, and gives to all. Discover real patience in God's dealings with King Manasseh.