

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Manasseh: Adam's Bad Boy

"MANASSEH was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem. But he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord like unto the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel" (II Chronicles 33:1).

So begins the record of a bad son of a good father, Hezekiah.

Manasseh was the most wicked, most idolatrous, most ungodly of all the kings of Israel; nay, of all the characters portrayed in the gallery of the Old Testament.

And the astonishing fact is that this boy who was crowned as king at the age of twelve had a good father and a good mother, and at that time Isaiah the prophet was Court-preacher!

Hezekiah, the successor of the weak king Ahaz, came to the throne as a true patriot and reformer. He was a Puritan and an iconoclast in his hatred of idolatry. Not only did he cleanse the land of all its local shrines to pagan gods but he even **"broke in pieces the brazen serpent which Moses had made"** and which had become an object of worship.

He cleansed the Temple, reformed the priesthood, offered great sin-offerings for the people and held a Passover at which **"six hundred oxen and three thousand sheep were sacrificed"** (II Chronicles 29: 32). **"So the service of the house of the Lord was set in order and Hezekiah rejoiced and all the people."**

It was after this great reformation that the King proclaimed a fast and sanctified the people. They offered willingly and abundantly in proof of their repentance. The record of Hezekiah is that **"in every work that he began in the service of the house of the Lord . . . and in the law and in the commandments to seek his God, he did it with all his heart and prospered."**

Such was Hezekiah (*the Lord is my strength*) the father of Manasseh, and his mother's name was Hephzibah (*my delight is in her*). When the crown-prince was born they named him, Manasseh (*forgotten*) - that was the name of Joseph's first-born in Egypt, **"for, said he, God made me forget all my toil and all my father's house."**

We do not know why good King Hezekiah, and his wife with the beautiful name of Hephzibah, named their son Manasseh, *"forgotten."* But to many readers of the Bible, Manasseh is a forgotten name and his long reign of fifty-five years (fourteen terms of our Presidents) is an unknown story.

Yet he was in many respects the most remarkable of all the kings of Judah.

At the age of twelve he began to reign and the record is one of increasing wickedness, rebellion against GOD and the undoing of all the reformations made by his father Hezekiah.

The story of his abominations and his apostasy from the Lord is narrated in Kings and repeated in Chronicles. But the earlier record takes no note of his repentance and restoration.

Manasseh, like David and Saul of Tarsus, greatly sinned but also greatly repented. And, as Paul tells us, **"the things written aforetime were written for our instruction, that we through faith and patience might inherit the promises."**

Consider first his long career of wickedness.

We read that it was from his early youth up, against his father's example and noble efforts of reform, that the young prince began to sin. He must have had at least one wise counselor and warner. Manasseh lived at the court in the days of Isaiah the prophet.

Read the first chapter of that prophecy to see the environment of Manasseh:

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (Isaiah 1:2-4).

"Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats" (Isaiah 1:10-12).

Besides the voice of the Prophet, Manasseh had the prayers of his parents and their godly example. Although only a lad during his father's fatal illness, he knew how the word of the Lord came to that father and saved his kingdom from the invasion of the Assyrian. Yet here is the record of his misdoing, the awful particulars of his sin against GOD and man:

"And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the LORD cast out before the children of Israel. For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove [sex-worship], as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD said, In Jerusalem will I put my name. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards: he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger. And he set a graven image of the grove that he had made in the house, of which the LORD said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever: . . . Because Manasseh king of Judah hath done these abominations, and hath done wickedly above all that the Amorites did, which were before him, and hath made Judah also to sin with his idols: Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab: and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies; Because they have done that which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day. Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; beside his sin wherewith he made Judah to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the LORD."

What a record!

There is an old Tradition given by Josephus, that Manasseh, when he shed innocent blood, also killed Isaiah the prophet by sawing him in twain. The reference in Hebrews, 11th chapter, "**they were sawn asunder, they were slain with the sword,**" is said to be to Isaiah. This tradition is based upon an apocryphal book, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (5:11).

The sins of Manasseh sprang from his idolatry. The foolish young prince, in spite of his father's good example, abandoned himself to all the impiety and sensuality of Moloch-worship and putting up shrines to Baal.

These Baals were no mere creations of idle speculation. They were symbols of the powers of reproductivity. Therefore, their worship (like that of the old Canaanites) not only legalized but promoted sensual indulgence, especially when the cult of the female symbol Ashtoreth, added its peculiar seductiveness.

Hosea the prophet describes the nature of this worship and how it grieved the Lord, in the second chapter of his prophecy:

"Their mother hath played the harlot, she that conceived them hath done shamefully. For she said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink . . . And now will I discover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers and none shall deliver her out of my hand . . . And I will visit upon her the days of Baalim, wherein she burned incense to them, and she decked herself with her earrings and her jewels, and she went after her lovers and forgot me, saith the Lord" (Hosea 2:5, 10, 13).

The whole chapter describes with wonderful power and pathos the almost uncontrollable force of the appeal of this nature-worship on Israel. Symbols of vice became objects of worship and in their sexual frenzy they offered up little children to the god by fire-sacrifice.

That this should be done in Jerusalem and images of Baal set up in the holy-places seems incredible. Yet this very thing Manasseh did and taught his people to do, for he offered up his own children to Baal.

"He caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom" (II Chronicles 33:6).

No wonder that this gorge, used for such idolatry and infamy, should at a later date have become Gehenna (the valley of Hinnom, or hell) (Jeremiah 2:23; 7:31 ff.; 32:35). The Arabian geographer, Idrisi (1154 A. D.), already uses the name Jehennam (hell) for this wady, and that is its name in our day - a monument to Manasseh's wickedness.

The record does not spare giving the horrible details of cruelty, lust and idolatry. Both Jeremiah's and Isaiah's condemnation of Israel are based on such deeds by GOD's chosen people. GOD's indignation is expressed in terrible language: **"I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, turning it upside down!"**

But the mercy of the Lord endureth forever. He remembers His covenant.

Perhaps the prayers of Hezekiah and Hephzibah followed Manasseh in his wayward career like the Hound of Heaven in Francis Thompson's poem. The story does not end in sin but in forgiveness. The mercy of GOD was heard in the message of Isaiah; O Manasseh, **"Come now and let us reason together . . . though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."**

O Manasseh, hear the voice that entreats thee, Turn back to GOD!

When the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, he fled from his royal throne and hid in the thorn-bushes of the palace-garden. They caught him, bound him with fetters, and carried him captive to Babylon.

He fled from GOD; but GOD caught up with him.

"I fled Him,
down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him,
down the arches of the years;
I fled Him,
down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind;
and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him,
and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot,
precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after." [1]

The long-delayed prayers of Hezekiah were answered. Hephzibah's mother-love also pursued him like the Hound of Heaven.

We read: **"He sought the Lord and humbled himself greatly before the Lord of his fathers."**

He prayed to GOD and there is a very ancient record of his prayer for pardon in the Apocrypha called,

The Prayer of Manasses

"O Lord God Almighty . . . Thou hast appointed repentance to me that am a sinner: for I have sinned above the number of the sands of the sea. My transgressions, O Lord, are multiplied, and I am not worthy to behold and see the height of heaven for the multitude of my iniquities. I am bowed down with many iron bands that I can not lift up mine head, neither have any release: for I have provoked Thy wrath, and done evil before Thee: I did not Thy will, neither have I kept Thy commandments: I have set up abominations and have multiplied offences.

Now, therefore, I bow the knee of mine heart, beseeching Thee of grace. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned . . . I humbly beseech Thee, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me and destroy me not with mine iniquities. Be not angry with me forever . . . Amen."

Like David's Psalm of penitence, like the cry of the prodigal, like the prayer of the thief on the Cross, Manasseh's heartbroken, bruised, repentant soul found forgiveness and rest.

"For the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and of great mercy. He will not always chide neither will He keep His anger forever . . . "

No better description of GOD's search for Adam's bad boy, Manasseh, can be found, outside of the brief Scripture record, than in the last stanza of Thompson's poem:

"How hast thou merited -
Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?
Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of my love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home;
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"

Manasseh came back home. His repentance was real. How do we know it? By his life after he returned to his father's faith and his father's GOD.

Restored to his throne, we read the new record on a new white page of his life.

"Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God. Now after this he built a wall without the city of David, on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entering in at the fish-gate, and compassed about Ophel, and raised it up a very great height, and put captains of war in all the fenced cities of Judah. And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank-offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel" (II Chronicles 33:13-16).

And at the close of his life we read: **"So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his own house: and Amon his son reigned in his stead" (II Chronicles 33:20).**

It is not strange that among the greatest saints, as among the greatest sinners who repent, their last words and their lasting words are prayers for forgiveness.

Manasseh's Prayer may not be in the canon of Protestant scripture but it is a noble Psalm of confession. Read it, and it will remind you as it did me of the great Hymn to GOD the Father by John Donne whose life also had its dark side before he became a great preacher and poet.

"Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done;
For I have more.

"Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sins their door?"

“Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallowed in a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done;
For I have more.

"I have a sin of fear, that when I've spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine, as he shines now and heretofore:
And having done that, thou hast done:
I fear no more." [2]

Amen.

1 The Hound of Heaven, by Francis Thompson.

2 *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne and the Complete Poetry of William Blake*.
New York, 1941. p. 272.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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