Josiah, King of Judah

A king named in advance, a lost book found, and a heart that tore its robes

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, November 20, 2022
PASSAGES	2 Kings 22:1-20; 1 Kings 13:1-5; 2 Chronicles 34:3-7; Deuteronomy 28:15-68; 2 Kings 23:21-25
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:01:11 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Josiah followed God with all his heart before he knew much about him, tearing down idols no king before him had managed to clear. When the lost book of the law was found, he tore his robes and repented without excuse. Knowing Scripture is worthless unless we live it — and God, who brought the Messiah through a line of wicked kings, can still restore those who have failed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Josiah is the only king Wes knows of who was named in prophecy before he was born — to Jeroboam, king of another nation, centuries earlier.
- Josiah came from a terrible line: his grandfather Manasseh sacrificed a child and his father Amon was assassinated. Being young did not make a king good.
- Josiah purged idols across the whole land, even beyond his jurisdiction, before he had ever heard the book of the law read.
- When the law was read to him, he made no plea of ignorance. God expects us to know and do his will.
- God honoured Josiah's penitent heart, but the consequences of the covenant already broken still came.
- Josiah may have given Israel the picture of faithfulness it carried into exile and back.

- Knowledge of Scripture does not make you a good Christian; applying it does. And sin need not drive us to despair, because God brought Jesus through Josiah's line.

▶ 1:01:11

Wes Neely, Hope's middle school pastor, started his stopwatch — his dad, probably watching online, always texts him exactly how far over time he ran. Matt had asked him to fill a Sunday before Advent on any topic at all, "which sounds nice until you realise" you must choose one thing from the whole Bible.

A random number and a king

▶ 1:02:29

Stuck, he took inspiration from the apostles casting lots between Matthias and Justus (Acts 1:23–26): "It's biblical." He put the Bible's page count into a random number generator, allowing himself one reroll in case he landed in a genealogy. He landed on the start of Josiah's reign — a period he was already preparing to teach his middle schoolers in the spring. "At the end of it, we'll know as a group if that was God speaking through the random number generator on my phone."

▶ 1:03:51

The era of the kings is hard to read. After Saul, David and Solomon the kingdom splits, and the story becomes "the most unintuitive thing in the entire Bible": Kings and Chronicles each leave things out, and the names barely differ — Rehoboam is opposed by Jeroboam, who is king of Israel, not Judah, "because the J's don't line up." Most kings get a line: reigned this many years, bad, "no good, no fun." Josiah gets much more.

▶ 1:05:37

He is one of Judah's final kings, arguably the last who makes sense as a true king; afterwards they were controlled by Egypt or Babylon. By then the divided kingdom had lasted some three hundred years — Elijah and Elisha, a list of bad kings in Israel and mostly bad ones in Judah, a few decent ones. "For the most part the last three hundred years for the nation of Israel has been an absolute disaster."

Named before he was born

▶ 1:06:37

Josiah's story is told in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34, but he appears first in a prophecy given hundreds of years earlier, a decade or two after the split:

▶ 1:07:04

> "By the word of the LORD a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering. By the word of the LORD he cried out against the altar: 'Altar, altar! This is what the LORD says: "A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you."'"
>
> 1 KINGS 13:1–5 ↗ (NIV)

▶ 1:08:10

Jeroboam stretched out his hand to seize the man, his hand shrivelled, and the altar split as foretold. Wes was fascinated: why Josiah? Why would God name a future king of a different nation to a king who would never know him? He promised to return to the question.

A family line in ruins

▶ 1:09:13

By Josiah's day Assyria had wiped out the northern kingdom. His grandfather Manasseh ranks with Ahab among the worst kings; he burned one of his children as an offering to a false god, and Judah under him did more evil than the nations God had driven out before Israel (2 Kings 21:1–9). His father Amon lasted only a short time before servants assassinated him. "Strike number two for this family line."

▶ 1:10:44

People remember Josiah as the young king, as if youth made him good. But Manasseh was twelve when he began. Josiah was eight. Wes, who spends a good deal of time with Hope's middle schoolers, cannot imagine one of them running the nation — "the ones sitting in here thinking, oh, I would probably do a good job: no, you guys would do the worst job, I guarantee it." Josiah surely had advisers and his mother's help, and likely did not act on full kingly power until about sixteen or seventeen.

Tearing down the idols

▶ 1:12:36

At sixteen he began to follow God — perhaps after studying his father's and grandfather's reigns and being repulsed. And then he began fulfilling the old prophecy:

▶ 1:13:03

> "In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols… He burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem. In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them, he tore down the altars and the Asherah poles and crushed the idols to powder and cut to pieces all the incense altars throughout Israel."
>
> 2 CHRONICLES 34:3–7 ↗ (NIV)

▶ 1:14:37

Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon and Naphtali were northern tribes, not Judah's to govern. But Josiah recognised that idolatry was why Israel had fallen, and went as far as his military could take him. At twenty, he did what no king of Judah before him had managed.

The book in the temple

▶ 1:15:39

In his eighteenth year Josiah sent his secretary Shaphan to the high priest Hilkiah to pay the workers repairing the temple — carpenters, builders and masons — adding that "they need not account for the money entrusted to them, because they are honest in their dealings." Anyone who has hired a contractor, Wes joked, will think this must be the crux of the chapter. Jokes aside, it shows trust running both ways, and a king well respected by his people.

▶ 1:17:58

> "Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, 'I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.' He gave it to Shaphan, who read it… And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes."
>
> 2 KINGS 22:8–13 ↗ (NIV)

▶ 1:18:24

This is the part that boggles Wes's mind. The king of God's chosen people, now in his mid-twenties, had never heard the words of the law. Kings tells it out of order; the real sequence is that he became king, destroyed the idols, and only then heard God's word. He knew of Israel's God through stories, but he tore down the high places without ever having been told by the law that they were wrong. And if the king had never heard it, almost no one had. "This entire period of history, Israel is completely lost in the dark."

No plea of ignorance

▶ 1:21:15

Josiah sent his officials to inquire of the Lord: "Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book." What he did not say was *if only I had known sooner.* We might plead ignorance — "I get one freebie, right?" — but Josiah knew that would not hold weight with God. "You're following him or you're not." That is a sobering reminder that we ought to know what God wants and cannot shrug, "I'll just do whatever, and if he tells me I did it wrong, I'll repent."

▶ 1:23:14

Where in that long book did the robe-tearing start? Probably not the plagues in Exodus. Wes guessed Deuteronomy 28, the list of blessings and curses at the renewal of the covenant:

▶ 1:24:32

> "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field... The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone."
>
> DEUTERONOMY 28:15–68 ↗

▶ 1:26:30

Defeat, scattering, siege so terrible people would eat their own children. "Not a lot of good things in the nation's future if you're Josiah." Wes noted one detail: the curses mention "your king whom you set over you," centuries before Israel had a king. God was never caught off guard; astute readers would have known that asking for a king would not go well.

Huldah's word

▶ 1:27:53

In that era prophets were God's main way of speaking to a stubborn people — "he's going to say a bunch of mean things, you're not going to like him, you'll probably try to kill him." Josiah wanted one urgently, and his messengers found the prophetess Huldah in Jerusalem.

▶ 1:28:50

> "Thus says the LORD, behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants… But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him… because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD… and you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place."
>
> 2 KINGS 22:15–20 ↗

▶ 1:29:48

Last time he preached, Wes had spoken of David, whose sentence fell in his son's days rather than his own (2 Samuel 12:13–14). So too with Josiah: God accepts a penitent heart, "but that doesn't mean that the consequences are just completely wiped out." The covenant was God's own, and the sin was already committed.

The best king Judah had

▶ 1:30:55

Josiah led many reforms; idol worship hit an all-time low, and Judah kept a Passover unlike any since the judges (2 Kings 23:21–25). On Wes's tier list, Josiah sits with David. He was killed in battle against Egypt (2 Kings 23:29–30), and the nation collapsed fast: his son reigned about three months, another son ruled as Egypt's puppet, Daniel was carried off within a few years, and within twenty-five years Babylon finished the job.

Why name Josiah in advance?

▶ 1:34:04

Back to the question. Idolatry existed before Jeroboam, but never as the norm; Jeroboam made his own nation with its own gods, not even paying lip service to Yahweh. God was giving him a peek at the end: "Josiah is going to be the one who puts an end to what you've started."

▶ 1:35:04

And timing mattered. Daniel would have grown up under Josiah, knowing a united Judah worshipping Yahweh, and his generation may have carried that into exile. When Israel returned under Ezra and Nehemiah, we do not read of idols in the new temple. Josiah gave them a picture of what the nation was meant to be — so that in exile they understood why they were being punished, and what to rebuild.

▶ 1:36:55

So much so that when Jesus came, his opponents were not idolaters but people too strict with the law. "Jesus isn't going around smashing false idols." Without Josiah, perhaps he would have had to. Josiah closed a three-to-four-hundred-year chapter in which Israel hardly knew the word of the Lord existed.

What we take with us

▶ 1:37:53

The takeaway that resonates most with Wes: "Knowledge of the Scripture does not mean you're a good Christian." Josiah knew only what people had told him, and led the greatest reform in Israel's history because he followed God with all his heart. You could memorise every verse in five versions, "but none of that matters unless we take it and apply it to our lives." Wes, who loves knowing the intricacies of how the Bible fits together, said that one is for him.

▶ 1:39:31

Second, boldness. Josiah did not stop at his own jurisdiction; he went north and south, "because that's the right thing to do." And unlike David, we see no great sin recorded against him. "If we can be a little bit more like him, obviously the church would be a lot better off." Josiah was not just a good king; he was a great one.

▶ 1:41:36

Finally, Israel was punished for its sins, accepted it, and knit itself back together, knowing God would restore them — and he did. We will make mistakes too, and being a little better than Manasseh "doesn't mean a lot to God, because we are still sinful." Yet we need not despair. God brought the Messiah through this very line: Josiah is a descendant of David, and Manasseh himself is in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:10–11).

> *"The sin that we have ought to be destroyed with the fervour that Josiah destroyed the idols — but with the confidence that that sin is not going to destroy us as beloved people of Christ."*

▶ 1:43:12

He prayed that the church would be bold like the young king, respond to sin with a repentant heart like Josiah, and follow God ever closer, knowing that his instruction, however hard, comes from a loving heart.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Acts 1:23–26
- 2 Kings 22:1–20
- 1 Kings 13:1–5 (NIV)
- 2 Kings 21:1–9
- 2 Chronicles 34:3–7 (NIV)
- 2 Kings 22:8–13 (NIV)
- Deuteronomy 28:15–68
- 2 Kings 22:15–20
- 2 Samuel 12:13–14
- 2 Kings 23:21–25
- 2 Kings 23:29–30
- Matthew 1:10–11

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Josiah came from a family line of terrible kings. What does his story say to someone whose family history is painful?
2. Josiah tore down idols before he ever heard the law. What “high places” in our culture or our own lives need tearing down?
3. When the law was read, Josiah made no excuses. Where are you tempted to plead ignorance with God?
4. Wes said knowing Scripture does not make you a good Christian. How do you move from knowing the Bible to doing it?
5. How can you hold both a fervour to destroy sin and a confidence that it will not destroy you this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely is Hope Chapel’s associate pastor and youth pastor, and works with the church’s middle schoolers and high schoolers. Much of his teaching with them urges them to talk with their friends about Christ, on the logic that you talk about what matters most to you. He preaches from the Hope pulpit from time to time; earlier messages include Malachi (August 2025) and On the Incarnation (November 2025).

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ulO2oRUE9o&t=3671s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.