

MANASSEH: A PROFILE IN GRACE

This is the story of perhaps the worst King of Judah and one of the most despicable figures in Scripture. Jesus said that He came to seek and to save that which was lost. [Luke 19:10] He meant loving the unlovable, and forgiving the unforgivable. That infuriated His enemies and led to His crucifixion. The best way to understand that almost incomprehensible Grace, is against the backdrop of almost incomprehensible Evil. As in the life of Manasseh . . .

33 *Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years.*

2 Chronicles 33:1

Manasseh's fifty-five-year reign is the longest in the history of any king of Judah or Israel. I wondered why God would allow him to reign for so long, with him being so evil. Why? Why does the Lord let evil go on for so long, apparently unchecked?

- Have you asked the Lord that same question? Why does a Good God allow a Nazi Germany - 6 million Jews extinguished? Or allow the killing fields of Cambodia? Or allow a Putin to roll into Ukraine - scenes of women and children (entire families) killed?
- Not a new question. No surprise that some of the most compelling passages in Scripture begin, "How Long?"

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

Psalm 13:1

*How long, O Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?*

*Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?*

³*Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?*

*Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.*

Habakkuk 1:2-3

Perhaps you've asked that yourself - why allow evil to endure? And for so long?

At the risk of a completely unsatisfactory response to these cosmic questions, I'll offer two possible reasons . . .

Possible Purpose ...

(1) *God's Great Grace* is sometimes best understood against the backdrop of *Great Evil*. That *Grace* has always been there – like the flicker of a candle hidden amid brilliant sunshine. Hide the sun . . . bring on the night . . . and you will see the candle that has always been there, now lighting up the darkened room. "Where sin abounds, Grace all the more abounds." Of course God does not delight in sin. But this is the formula for the ultimate defeat of sin, the ultimate defeat of Evil. And the ultimate triumph of Beauty, and everything Holy.

- Because God's ultimate concern is not our *comfort*, but our *hearts*. He doesn't mind us being comfortable (enjoying your Xbox or Nintendo, or driving an SUV, or going apple picking with your friends, etc.) – but our *hearts* matter more than our *comfort*. There are eternal consequences to our

hearts. And He wants to turn you – turn *us* – into indestructible beings. Satan cannot destroy *love, joy, generosity, patience, forgiveness, peace*. The *Fruit of the Spirit* . . . the Fruit of Grace. The more he tries, the more it flourishes. You could find it flourishing in Hitler’s death camps. You can find it in Ukraine, with people loving their neighbors at the cost of their lives. I have found it in some crazy places: in prisons; at the tent encampments among the homeless and addicted; at deathbeds, at gravesides. It emerges from the human spirit in tandem with the Spirit of God. And when it does, Satan loses.

(2) Second reason . . . God’s almost incomprehensible – almost intolerable – patience and magnanimity. Once the Lord comes on the stage there is no opportunity for Grace or Repentance. Game over. And He knows it.

- ⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

2 Peter 3:9

- Why not kill a Saul of Tarsus? God says, “*Because there is something I see in him that I can use.*” Did God see something in Manasseh that He thought He could use? And frankly, in His eternal purpose, today may not be about Manasseh at all. It is not beyond God to permit this story, and to permit me to be here to tell it, because He sees your – *somebody* here – your own struggle with Evil. And your own need for Grace. And *He loves you*. And He wants you to know it.

So how does Manasseh become Manasseh? And how in the world can anything good come out of him?

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; **Manasseh undoing what his father Hezekiah had done to honor God, and all Hezekiah had done to draw Judah and Israel closer to God.** he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. [Even 3,000 years later I cannot show one of these here – imagine something the size of a Native American totem pole, but in the shape of a male sexual organ: that’s an “Asherah pole”] 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.**

2 Chronicles 33:2-5

“My Name . . .” Yes, you now find altars to false gods in the grounds of the very temple of The God of Israel. **the “courts” – like the parking lot or front porch of the Temple but more than that: it is where the priests offered sacrifices to God for the people** But the real issue is open desecration of the *Name of the Lord*. You may have heard that there is “*power in the Name of Jesus*”. That’s more than a pithy religious phrase. One test of that is the controversy and discomfort there is in this world around the name of *Jesus*. Mention any other biblical or historic figure at work or in polite company and you’re fine. Mention *Jesus* – in reverence – and it could get you fired. Mention *Jesus*, and it can alienate you from your friends. Jesus said, repeatedly, “*in my Name you will heal the sick . . . in my Name you will drive out demons . . .*” If you were the devil, and you didn’t want those things to happen (the sick being healed, the oppressed being free), a good way to stop that is to make sure no-one mentioned or respected that Name. Once you desecrate the *Name of the Lord*, what happens next is not that far of a leap . . .

⁶ *He sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, **the prophet Ezekiel describes that the child –always a male – was speared but then was passed through the open flame of an altar and roasted alive** practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. **these are people who contacted the dead and other “spirits”** He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger.*

2 Chronicles 33:6

Manasseh sacrificed his children to demons. How do you do that? I believe these verses represent a progression. A slow, consuming madness. Perhaps it began as a 12-year-old. Perhaps at one point Manasseh realized he was hearing about this Holy God from a very imperfect vessel – his father. Hezekiah was a fine King. Exemplary in so many ways. But in his latter years (15 years God gave him as extra credit) some of that gold lost its luster. Could that have mattered -- those inconsistencies – to Manasseh? We only have ever learned about our Holy God from imperfect vessels. Your parents . . . your pastors . . . we have all been imperfect vessels (and recipients of God’s mercy and Grace).

And Judah was an outlier – a postage stamp smaller than Vermont worshipping a single, invisible God. Surrounded by an entire world that was all going the opposite direction. And they seemed to be “spiritual people”, that had access to “spiritual power” without the nuisance and inconvenience of God with His expectations and His laws.

At some point, Manasseh took a first step to do whatever was already brewing in his heart. And what you do, you become. Then he moves those altars to false gods into the courts of the House of God. (*“Let’s see what God has to say about it?”*) Then things become so corrupt that he sacrifices (kills) his children as an offering to these gods - perhaps he was even applauded as “heroic” and “progressive” (*“He loved his people so much he was willing to sacrifice his own children”*). What was once unthinkable becomes the laudable, the courageous. The evil becomes the good. And the Lord lets it play out. But even now, this wasn’t the worst of it. The worst – the ultimate provocation – was yet to come.

⁷ *He took the image he had made and put it in God’s temple, of which God 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. . . .”* ⁹ **But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites.** ¹⁰ *The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention.*

2 Chronicles 33:7-10

Manasseh did everything he possibly could do to rub God’s nose in it and tick him off, putting this idol – *2 Kings* tells us it was an Asherah pole –inside the temple itself. Shudder to think where ... the Holy Place beside the incense altar and table of show bread? ... the Holy of Holies? Even then, God warned Manasseh through His prophets. Including the prophet Isaiah. What did Manasseh do? *“They paid no attention”* is an understatement. Tradition says Manasseh had Isaiah shoved into a log and sawed in half. What is left for God to do?

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.*

2 Chronicles 33:11

Justice. They dragged him by the nose, like an animal, and locked him in a hole thousands of miles from home. Finally. . . Justice. And humiliation. Because his ultimate sin was *Pride*. And God directed the cure at the heart of Manasseh’s disease. The *Pride*.

¹² *In his distress he sought the favor of **the Lord his God** and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors.* 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.***

2 Chronicles 33:12-13

V. 12. Grace. GRACE. *“He sought the favor of the Lord HIS God . . .”*. We may disown the Lord, but the Lord does not disown us. We may deny Him, defy Him, and do everything we can imagine to tick Him off, but He is still your God. You are still His. Incredibly patient, incredibly merciful, and full of Grace. *“Well Pastor Sam, you have no idea what I have done . . . you have no idea who I am . . .”* That’s why it’s called Grace.

But why the pain? C.S. Lewis - pain is the megaphone of God. God resorts to it to rescue us from a madness that will destroy us. That cancer that becomes a grace; that bankruptcy or layoff becomes a grace; that scandal that drags your name through the newspaper (or Facebook) becomes a grace. It may have taken some pain; it may have taken some discomfort. But you’re Home. And you wonder what took you so long.

Now Lion of Judah . . . God heard Manasseh and *“was moved”*. Sometimes the thing that angers us the most about God is not His Judgement but His Mercy. We would prefer to see God fry a *sin vergüenza* like Manasseh, burn in Hell. Be prepared for returning “Manassehs”. We have trouble with the Lord’s Grace. It bothers us to see God showing grace - and favor and even blessing - the “Manassehs” who repent and turn to Him. What do you do with a God who hears the prayers and repentance of a Manasseh? Or a Saul of Tarsus? Until you’re the one who needs to be forgiven; until you’re the one who needs Grace. *Mercy triumphs over Justice*. We need to make room for returning “Manassehs”.

And if you are “Manasseh” . . . some advice . . . you cannot undo the past - you can’t bring back the children you killed - but you are not a slave of your past either. *“If anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation.”* Do everything within your power to live for Christ now - which is what Manasseh did.

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.*

2 Chronicles 33:14

This is about setting up boundaries. If you’ve been given the Gift of Grace, don’t let just anything into your heart; Don’t let just anything into your mind; Don’t let just anything into your life. *Guard your Heart—it is the wellspring of life.*

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.*

2 Chronicles 33:15-16

That is the purpose of Grace. A new beginning in Christ. Tell the world about the God who loves you.