

Josiah's Reforms

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray as we come to this chapter. Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word. Though perhaps unfamiliar and details strange, we pray that you'll give us an understanding not merely for our head knowledge, but so that our lives are reformed to live for Jesus' sake. Amen.
- Amen. Not long after I became bishop a bit over three years ago, I discovered that one of the churches in my area was using a Roman Catholic prayer book, what's called the Missal.
- And the vicar there encouraged the use of the rosary. Is that okay? I was a bit shocked, aghast really, thinking what on earth have I come to?
- Well, that ended, thankfully, in that church, though I only just before Christmas discovered that in another of my churches, the minister was using parts of the Roman Missal.
- That's also stopped. Before Christmas, in fact, the week before Christmas, a church member in yet another of the churches under my responsibility as bishop told me with some alarm that she thought that their vicar was wanting to turn their chapel, they had a sort of side chapel next to or adjacent to the main church, I suppose, into an interfaith prayer space.
- [1 : 3 9] Is that okay? Well, I think I felt a bit perturbed as she was. We've yet to deal with that. The official approval would never be given for that.
- The National Cathedral in Washington, USA, has hosted Muslim prayer services. St. Mary's University Church in Oxford, UK, has had an Islamic preacher.
- Some Chinese Christians around the world, actually, not just in China, are encouraged to keep worshipping their ancestors. Some USA Episcopalian churches blend Buddhist or Hindu practices into their services regularly.
- The Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane, in Australia, had a pride prayer to an erotic Christ once recently.
- York Minster, famous for the fire some years ago, has had a Roman Catholic bishop celebrate Mass there. And on it goes.
- [2 : 4 9] And some would say, well, isn't it great that we can be so inclusive and so welcoming for all these different faiths and traditions and backgrounds and so on?
- After all, surely all roads lead to heaven. It's good to build peace on earth. That's the sort of rhetoric that you will hear from time to time when those sorts of matters are often discussed.
- But in the end, sadly and tragically, it is the lie of liberalism. It's the feel-right folly that all are welcomed. It doesn't really matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.
- And it's the deception of our age, I think. For modern Western Christianity, I think, is suffering significantly because of those sorts of views. The truth doesn't matter, theology doesn't matter, and so on.

But of course we know, I hope we know, that God does matter, theology matters, and right worship matters. And nowhere do we see this more graphically expressed, I think, than in the multiple stories of ancient Israel.

[4 : 03] And in some ways those multiple stories, even in Exodus, but in particular through Judges, Samuel, and Kings, in some ways all those threads are drawn together as we look at this passage or these passages over these weeks dealing with King Josiah and his reforms.

The foundations for right worship had been laid at Mount Sinai. So that's something like 800 years before Josiah in the time of Moses as the people of Israel came out from slavery in Egypt.

Six or seven weeks later, they arrive at Mount Sinai. They spend a week there, a year there before they move into the wilderness. And the right foundations for worship were very explicitly laid.

There were ten commandments. You shall have no other gods before me, no graven images or idols of either the living God or other gods. And various other laws that you see in several chapters through Exodus, all of Leviticus, and the bulk of Deuteronomy as well.

And of course, a third of the book of Exodus, the initial recounting of laws given in the first stages of being at Mount Sinai, include 13 chapters dealing with the dimensions and building of the tabernacle, the place for the right worship, sacrificial worship of the living God.

[5 : 36] This is no small matter, no trivial matter. And it's not a matter in which God gives huge flexibility to his people. And that's very clear.

When we get into the book of Deuteronomy, many of the laws of Deuteronomy are repeated from Exodus and Leviticus' laws are assumed in Deuteronomy. But there are distinctive emphases in Deuteronomy that certainly come out in the books of Kings in general, and in particular, when we get to the reforms of Josiah.

I imagine Andrew said something about this last week. But in Deuteronomy, for example, we get the statement, I am the Lord, God, there is no other.

Absolutely explicitly. It's probably the closest statement to monotheism or the clearest statement of monotheism that you get in the Old Testament. And it comes after an argument in Deuteronomy chapter 4 that no other God has done what the living God has done, spoken at Mount Sinai and rescued a people from another nation to be his own people, and so on.

And as a result of there is no other, I am the Lord, there is no other, a few verses later, we end up with the Ten Commandments. You shall have no other gods before me because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery, out of Egypt.

[7 : 00] And also in Deuteronomy 4, you get a very clear argument and statement that you saw no form of the living God. It doesn't mean, I think, that God has no form.

We sometimes think, oh, that's God's spirit, you don't see God. It's actually a lot of anticipation of seeing God in scripture. But certainly no form of God visually was seen by God's people.

I think whatever form there is of God was hidden behind the cloud of glory on Mount Sinai and then subsequently wherever that cloud of glory would be. But as a result of that argument and the clarity of that argument in, say, Deuteronomy 4, we end up with the second commandment in Deuteronomy 5, you shall have no idols, no graven images, no form of the living God.

And in Deuteronomy 4, it explicitly forbade the imagery of God to be built in statues or carvings or whatever it might be that represented humanity, animals, fish, birds, sun, moon and stars.

And Deuteronomy 4 expresses it in that order, which is the reverse of the creation order. As if to say, idolatry unravels creation, goes backwards in a way. Now all of that, I think, is critical background for understanding what Josiah's doing because this book of the law or book of the covenant that was found by Hilkiah the priest has no doubt in my mind and most scholars' minds is the book of Deuteronomy or at least the substantial part of the book of Deuteronomy.

[8 : 40] Now all of that sounds very simple. But in a polytheistic, that is in a many-god world, it is actually quite complex. You see, when Israel arrived in Canaan in the promised land in the time of Joshua, they weren't arriving into a land which had one god.

Our god is this, your god is that, you can't have both, it's that or this. That's not what the case was. Everywhere in the ancient world was polytheistic.

That is, there were gods of sun or moon or stars, there were gods of this place or that place, this city, the thunder, the lightning, the fires and so on. Every aspect of creation and geography had its own god.

Egypt was the same. Interestingly, Egypt had one ancient pharaoh who was a monotheist and he's regarded in Egyptian history as the heretic. But actually, in the ancient world, there was no monotheism anywhere apart from that one Egyptian pharaoh and the Old Testament.

So what does that mean? When Israel comes into the promised land, here are all the Canaanites and they've got a multitude of gods. They've got a god for this and that and the other. Now the ancient Norse gods, there are multiples of them.

[9 : 55] If you go to the Greco-Roman museums of Europe, you will see the gods of Apollo and Hercules and Zeus and Diana and so on. Multiples of gods. That's what it was like in ancient Canaan.

So for a Canaanite, here come the Israelites. They've got their god, Yahweh or Jehovah. Well, let's add him onto our mantelpiece as well. There's no harm in that.

And so the temptation to accumulate gods was part of a polytheistic world. Ancient Israel was being thrust into that sort of milieu in effect.

It's not our god or your god. It's, well, we've got lots of gods and we're happy to adopt yours as well. And Israel would feel that polytheistic, many gods, inclusive of various gods, pressure, I think, socially and probably politically.

and most kings of Israel and Judah fell into this, what we call syncretism, which was really stupid. Syncretism is the mixing up, the combining, the merging of various different gods and perhaps God's traditions, bringing them all together.

[11 : 09] So the Israelites by and large in the inhabitation of Canaan worshipped Yahweh, mostly. There were times when Yahweh was actually kicked out by Queen Jezebel, for example, and Manasseh to a degree.

But they'd worship him along with the other Canaanite gods and in Canaanite places of worship and in Canaanite ways of worship. They just sort of syncretized, blended it all in.

That's a bit like some of the pressures on some churches around our world to have a sort of Christian worship that includes Buddhism practices or worship of ancestors or Hinduism practices and so on.

There's certainly many Asian churches in my experience that have been under the influence or under the pressure to try and blend in in a way, not be quite so different in their own different cultures around Asia, the exception for that would always be Islam.

But with Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and so on, the pressure to be inclusive and syncretistic remains quite strong. And I think in our Western society, we are feeling the pressure for that at different times.

[12 : 24] And that's what I think some of those examples I gave from around the Western world show that they've capitulated, I think, into a syncretism that is fundamentally abhorrent to God, as Josiah's reforms indeed make clear.

One reason also, I think, that ancient Israel fell into the trap of worshipping Canaanite gods alongside Yahweh in different ways was that the worship of these Canaanite gods was immoral or maybe even amoral.

That is, they didn't have high ethical standards. Now, as we read Exodus and Deuteronomy, for example, we realise that God's standards morally, not just the worship side of things, that God's moral standards are exceptionally high.

Love your neighbour as yourself, be generous to the poor, an equality between people, and so on and so on, and honesty, integrity, and not merely in action, but even in heart and attitude and thought, and that's in the Old Testament as well as in the New.

But in the Canaanite religions, a bit like the Greco-Roman world and the multitude of different religions in our world today, there are lower moral standards.

[13 : 43] We see in this passage, for example, I think reference which we'll come to to possibly child sacrifice, but also to temple prostitution. Now, you can imagine that a religion that's around that has low moral standards has an attraction to it.

I think one of the problems we Christians feel, not that we really have, but we feel at least, is that because we have such, or God has such high ethical standards for our behaviour in all aspects of life, that we feel sometimes sort of a bit marginalised in our society, and so the pressure on our church and parts of it capitulate is to weaken, slacken, and loosen our ethical practices and standards as though somehow we'll be more acceptable in our society.

Well, it's one thing to be acceptable in society, but that doesn't necessarily mean acceptable to God, it seems to me. And ancient Israel fell into the same trap. One of the things they say about Western society these days is that there's quite an appeal for Eastern spirituality, spirituality that comes out of Buddhism in particular, but Hinduism and other Asian religions, not so Islam, but other Asian religions apart from Islam, I think.

And I think one reason for that attraction is because people feel a need for and want some form of spiritual experience, but they don't want the moral demands that, for example, Christianity brings.

That's why I think so often people are attracted to Eastern religions and spirituality, because they're actually not really attracted to high morality. and I suspect ancient Israel was a bit like that.

[15 : 28] They may not have rationalized it or thought much about it, but the appeal of the Canaanite religion, they're after all living in Canaanite territory, doesn't have that or carry that high moral demand with it.

And so what we find if you read through one kings and into two kings up to this point is that almost without exception, every single king failed.

You may know that after Solomon died, the kingdoms divided in two. Every king without exception in the north, what was called Israel, failed at the level of worship and devotion to God.

And in the south, which lasted for another 140 years longer, there were only eight good kings. and all of them failed in some way or other.

The best of those eight is Josiah. But even the good kings that preceded him, like Hezekiah or Jehoshaphat or Asa or others, they all failed at the level at which they failed.

[16 : 36] It was to deal with other religions and the syncretism or blending of the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Canaanite gods. It's interesting, as you may know, every king is assessed on their religious devotion to God and the implementation of that as king.

We're not reading an economic history or a political or a military history. So it's interesting, one of the kings in the north, Omri, was a significant international player, very powerful man, ruled for, what was it, 17 or so years.

One paragraph in kings, that's all. A bad king. Because he didn't get rid of the high places worshipping other gods. Doesn't matter about his military prowess.

Doesn't matter about his politics, whether he expanded the country or didn't. Didn't matter how many tweets he had or anything like that. He simply failed religiously.

And that's the assessment time and time again. You never get a statement in kings to say, this king was pretty good because he expanded the country, the army was strong, the economy was good, the unemployment was down.

[17 : 49] Oh, but he did a few religious things badly. The first things are irrelevant in the assessment of the kings here. So we come to Josiah and some of what I've said I realise may have been overlapping with Andrew last week.

And also I think Andrew would have commented last week about Josiah having been predicted in chapter 13. Interestingly, he's only one of two people in the Bible other than Jesus, the Messiah, who's predicted by name in advance of their time.

The other was Cyrus, the Persian king in Isaiah 44 and 45. And Josiah is predicted in 1 Kings 13. That's a long time before he comes, 300 plus years.

And so what it means, I think, is that as you read through 1 and 2 kings and you see the repetitive nature of the failure of the kings, if we're paying attention to the detail, we're thinking, when's this Josiah coming?

When's this Josiah coming? And of course, finally he does come as king in the year 640 BC. You would have also seen last week the prophetess Hulda's words that even if Josiah reforms, as he was already doing in the previous chapter, God's judgment against Judah, that's the name for the southern kingdom, and that's all that's left by the time of Josiah because it's 80 years before Josiah began as king, the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria.

[19 : 23] Even if he does reform, God will not withdraw the promise, really, of judgment on Judah. We'll come back to that issue a little bit later as well.

But despite her saying that, I mean, you could imagine that she says, look, you know, God's going to bring judgment on you. And Josiah says, well, why bother doing anything? Why don't I just sit around and laze around in my palace pool here in Jerusalem or wherever it might be?

But he doesn't do that. And what we read in today's chapter is a very significant, thorough, and widespread reform. And it's utterly religious.

We don't see a reform of the economy. We don't see a reform dealing with issues of poverty. We don't see a reform dealing with international matters. It is all thoroughly religious to do with worship and places of worship and so on.

So despite Holder's words, the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the capital of Judah. And we're talking about the southern part of what is Israel today.

[20 : 32] That's the kingdom that has been separate from the north since the death of Solomon all those years before. Josiah went up to the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, the temple that Solomon had built, with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets, all the people from the least to the greatest.

Now that's sort of a little bit clumsily spoken in a way, but it's saying that everybody is with him. This is not just Josiah. This is everybody from the least to the greatest.

And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which had been found in the temple of the Lord. Now this must have been a very significant event. The idea that we lose part of the Bible would be an astonishing thing for us to consider.

After all, there's Bibles in all of these pews. Probably several of you, most of you have probably got several copies of the Bible at home. You might even have more than one version on your phone and on your laptop.

For us, the Bible is so accessible in multitudes of ways. But then not so. Handwriting meant that the scripts of the Bible were much rarer.

[21 : 50] People would not have a copy in their home. They would be dependent on the priests reading it so that they would learn it. So the idea that in a long reign of Manasseh, the grandfather of Josiah, over 50 years, the whole Deuteronomy at least has been forgotten and lost, is not sort of too surprising, if we can put it like that.

So for many of these people, this great crowd of people, this might have been the first time that they've heard this read. I take it that it probably is the whole of the book of Deuteronomy that was read, may just be a part of it.

And the reasons for that, I'm not sure if Andrew touched on this last week, I didn't check on that, but would be that the things that Josiah does here matches the emphasis in particular in Deuteronomy.

It's not foreign to Exodus and Leviticus, but in particular the language follows Deuteronomy. So we see that the king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant. Now the covenant was made at Mount Sinai in Exodus 24.

It was already renewed in Deuteronomy for the later generation before they entered the promised land. Remember the adults who came out of Egypt die in the wilderness, their children become the adults to go into the promised land.

[23 : 13] And so in Deuteronomy 29 and 30 the covenant is renewed for that generation. And it's renewed in the presence of the Lord to follow the Lord and keep his command statutes and decrees.

Those three words together is very Deuteronomy, not so much Exodus, with all his heart and all his soul. That's Deuteronomy. It's not in Exodus. The phrase with all your heart and all your soul is found in Deuteronomy 6 and several other times in Deuteronomy.

It's not found before then. So that's why, why, you know, some of the reason why it's almost certainly Deuteronomy that has been found in the temple and is now guiding the reforms that Josiah brings about.

And all the people pledge themselves to the covenant. Again, there's an echo of that final bits of Deuteronomy with the people renewing the covenant, the end of the book of Joshua, the next generation does the same.

And then comes, so this is a heartfelt reform, the king leading the people, but the people pledging themselves, not just imposed by the king.

[24 : 20] And then what follows is a long list. of reforms prompted by the reading of scripture to the people. So the king ordered Hilkiah, the high priest, the priest next in rank and the doorkeepers to remove from the temple of the Lord, all the articles made for Baal and Asherah, the male and female gods of Canaanites.

Here are those things, those pagan idols that have been brought into the temple of the Lord. That's the syncretism. Manasseh had done that. It had been done earlier at times as well. And all the starry hosts, that is the worship of the sun, moon and the stars.

Manasseh brought that in, but it was there in other times as well. You see echoes of it in the prophet Ezekiel and it's explicitly prohibited back in Deuteronomy 4. You shall not worship the things that God made.

God's the creator. He made the sun, the moon and the stars. But this is what they worshipped. So here is the apostasy of Manasseh now being thrown out basically by his grandson Josiah.

And behind all of this is the understanding that Yahweh God will not share his glory with another. He's not inclusive for the sharing of glory or worship.

[25 : 37] He is the creator of all things. There is no other God as Deuteronomy 4 made very clear. So it's right for God to be exclusive and say I'm not going to tolerate all this stuff.

See inclusivism is a virtue of our age but it's not a practice of God. He's inclusive in the sense of wanting anyone and everyone to come to him but to come to him and worship him in his terms and in his ways.

And he's not inclusive in the sense that he'll accept the worship of others with himself. You cannot serve two masters. As Jesus would later say of course.

So Josiah burned all these things. These probably totem poles made out of wood. They would mostly be almost pornographic. That is the idols of the male and the female gods would emphasize the various sexual organs as part of the immorality of those religions.

And they're burned outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron Valley. And he took the ashes to Bethel. In verse 5 he gets rid of the idolatrous priests.

[26 : 50] The Kidron Valley here is the same valley of course that Jesus crosses on that last night when he goes to Gethsemane to pray and he would have crossed it as you go in and out of Jerusalem between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem itself.

Same valley. Verse 5 he does away with all the idolatrous priests appointed by the kings of Judah to burn incense on the high places of the towns of Judah and on those around Jerusalem.

Those who burned incense to Baal, the sun, the moon, the constellations and all the starry hosts. So here are priests who've been appointed by other kings and probably appointed dynastically.

That is, I mean he's not going to get rid of a king, a priest who's been appointed by somebody 200 years ago. They'd be dead but probably you appoint that priest and their son, grandson and so on continue. What we see here reflected I think is that the whole structure of priesthood and religion has fallen apart since the laws of Moses.

So in the time of Moses God chose the tribe of Levi to be the priestly tribe. The Levites would live all over the land in all the villages of the land and different Levitical priests would come in to Jerusalem for the sacrificial worship and then go back to the villages where there was no sacrificial worship.

[28 : 07] But here it seems that kings have made other people priests. That is, broken the laws of the Pentateuch in effect. Josiah now is overturning that, getting rid of that.

Deuteronomy along with Leviticus and of course Exodus make clear who the real priests indeed should be. And notice again the reference to the range of gods in verse 5, all of which flies against the idea of God the creator of all.

They're the ones who burn incense to Baal, the male god, the Asherah pole, that's the female god, probably carved with multitudes of breasts on it here, was taken from the temple of the Lord to the Kidron Valley and burned there.

So that was also dealt with. There's an element of repetition here. It's interesting, as you read it, you might think, why don't we just get a summary verse that just says Josiah got rid of everything bad?

But by listing it one after the other after the other, we get the sense of thoroughness that every single thing that's bad is got rid of. And all of this is within Judah for the time being.

[29 : 13] And the grinding of it to powder at the end of verse 6 reminds us of the destruction of the golden calf by Moses who ground it to powder and threw it away into the water and so on back in the book of Exodus 33 and 34.

So the idea of idolatry being gotten rid of as if Josiah's a bit like Moses was, getting rid of the idolatry of Aaron and others at Sinai then.

The quarters for the male shrine prostitutes, they've got rid of. Now we might think, what's going on here? Who are male shrine prostitutes? The idea was because Canaanite religion was a fertility religion to produce rain and crops and animals and children, you would go to the gods, go to their temples or high places and one way in which to, if you like, excite the gods to provide children or rain or crops or animals would be you'd engage in sexual relations with the temple prostitutes.

That is, having sexual relations with the temple prostitutes would somehow be a way of those gods giving you children and rain and fertility. Immoral religion, basically.

And it seems to be almost gender fluid as far as we can tell from Old Testament times. All of that gets thrown out. The women did weaving for Asherah. It's hard to imagine that Asherah God needs something woven, but nonetheless the weaving, whatever it was for, whether it's clothing the statues or something else in the religious paraphernalia, all of that goes as well.

[30 : 50] In verse 8, Josiah brought all the priests from the towns of Judah and desecrated the high places. So he didn't just stop them, but somehow he desecrated them, defiled them, so that in effect they would not go back to worship there.

When I've led trips to Israel, one of the places I've liked to go to, it's not on all the itineraries, but it's a town called Arad. Now you may think I've never heard of that, but if you've read your Bible, it's there a couple of times.

It's not particularly well known or noticeable, but in Arad, which is south of Beersheba, south of the Dead Sea, heading towards Egypt in that direction, Arad was a little mound and it's ruins, and in the ruins the archaeologists have found a worship place, a high place of worship.

But what they've found also is that the dimensions of the central place of sacrifice and worship are in the same proportion as the temple of Jerusalem, but smaller.

And what they've also found in the ruins is animal fat. And the dating of the animal fat is the 7th century BC. Josiah was king in the 7th century BC, from 640 to 609.

[32 : 06] It's not proof, but the most likely explanation is that the last sacrifice in that place was in the time of Josiah before he closed it down, and it was never used again.

Now that's slightly speculative, but it's pretty reasonable, it seems to me. That is a little bit of evidence that at least supports or matches what we're reading here.

So all around Judah would have been these high places on hills, under big green trees, places of fertility, all of them, it seems, without exception, closed down by Josiah from Geba to Beersheba.

That's a way of saying, you know, from Cape York to Wilson's Promontory, or if you want to include Tasmania, you know, the bottom of Tasmania as well, I suppose, where all the priests had burned incense, all closed down, all defiled or desecrated.

He broke down the gateway at the entrance of the gate of Joshua, the city governor, which was on the left of the city gate. Although the priests of the high places did not serve at the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, they ate unleavened bread.

[33 : 05] Now that perhaps implies that, okay, these priests have done the wrong thing. They're not allowed now to come to Jerusalem and make offerings there after Josiah's reforms, but they are perhaps given permission to eat unleavened bread with their fellow priests.

Topheth is destroyed. That's in the valley of Ben-Hinnom. Now if you've been to Jerusalem, the Hinnom Valley is on the very south of the old city of Jerusalem. It's the garbage dump.

There are cemeteries there dating back hundreds and hundreds of years. This was a place of sacrifice of children, as verse 10 here says.

Molech was the god of one of the neighbouring nations of ancient Israel. Here are they adopting other practices, grossly immoral. They wouldn't have sacrificed every child, of course.

They'd have died out. But presumably when there's a catastrophe or a significant event, a child might be taken to be sacrificed as a way of trying to appease their gods. Just an appalling thing to do.

[34 : 07] But then, of course, remember that in our history, Romans did things like that. They left children out. And other cultures have sort of done the same, not least with female, girl children in different cultures in history.

So this appalling practice was stopped by Josiah. He removed from the entrance to the temple of the Lord the horses dedicated to the sun, as if somehow the sun is going to provide the military protection, whereby if you go back into the Pentateuch, but it's echoed time and again the prophets, not least in Isaiah's early chapters, it is God who provides military victory.

That is, kings were not allowed to accumulate horses for themselves. That's what Deuteronomy's law about the king in Deuteronomy 17 says, because it's God who provides the military strength.

So here is Josiah cleaning up where people have basically failed to trust God. they've gone to other gods and other methods for their future and security. And it talks about where they were, burn the chariots as well at the end of verse 11.

Various altars are destroyed in verse 12. Only one place of sacrifice, that's emphasised in Deuteronomy 12 verse 5. Clearly that's been forgotten from early days.

[35 : 28] Josiah restoring what Moses' law originally said. And various high places near Jerusalem are mentioned in verses 13 and 14, including ones that Solomon had established.

Solomon, the last king of the united people of God, ended his kingship in about 920 BC, so 300 years before this. These places of worship that Solomon had built because he'd married foreign wives who worshipped other gods, which he shouldn't have done to start with, Josiah finally smashes them all down in verses 13 and 14.

What that shows us is that Judah's religion had been thoroughly corrupted for 300 years. The whole of the history of Judah has had corrupted religion, basically. And it shows their abandonment of scripture for so long as well.

The idolatrous and immoral practices all being gotten rid of. But it doesn't stop there. Because the next section, which sounds much like the first, you need to realise that the first section we've just looked at is all about Judah.

But now what happens is that Josiah does a clean-up job in what was Israel in the north. Josiah, because he was a strong king, he actually extended his territory from Judah to reincorporate some of what had been the kingdom of Israel in the north.

[36 : 54] That kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians in 722. The Assyrians, by Josiah's time, are becoming weak. And Josiah takes the political opportunity to expand his territory into what the Assyrians had taken.

And so now he does a clean-up job there as well. And so what we find here are the similar things from what we've just read, but applying to places like Bethel.

When Solomon died and the kingdom divided in two, the north was ruled by Jeroboam, a former army commander of Solomon. The south was Solomon's son, Rehoboam.

Jeroboam, in order to validate his kingship because he's not descended from Solomon or David, decided that he would completely create a totally new religion. He appointed his own priests, not Levites.

He set up boundaries of territories or provinces, not the tribal boundaries of the time of Moses. And because he didn't have Jerusalem in his territory, in order again to validate his kingdom, he created two places of worship in the north Dan, in the south Bethel, built their shrines with golden calves, echoing the sins of Sinai.

[38 : 10] A totally new religion. He created new feasts and new festivals. And Josiah does a clean-up job of all of that as well. Bethel's the focus from verse 15 onwards.

And of course it's at Bethel that the prediction of Josiah by name was made back in chapter 13 as well. Bethel is where the man of God predicted Josiah.

It's where Jeroboam, the king's hand, withered by prophetic rebuke at the altar that he had made. And where the man of God is buried. And interestingly in verse 17, the king asked what is that tomb?

The people said it marks the tomb of the man of God. And Josiah says leave it alone. Isn't it interesting that even in such an apostate kingdom, this man of God was still remembered 300 years later.

And his tomb had stood all that time, it seems. So what it's saying to us is that Josiah's clean-up job didn't stop at Judah, but it extended to Israel the whole of, if you like, sort of imagining the reunified people of God.

[39 : 15] The senses of thoroughness, no high place is left unturned in a way. No idolatrous priest is overlooked. Josiah does what Israel should have done at the original conquest according to the laws of, say, Deuteronomy chapter 7.

And what his clean-up job shows us is that syncretistic worship is abominable to God. It's not a matter of just using God's name or using Jesus' name and then doing what we like.

Not at all. And in a pluralistic and interfaith sort of world, we're in a similar environment in a way to what ancient Israel was living in Canaan.

The pressures they faced and capitulated to are similar to pressures that we often face, I think, as a church today. We're told time and again that Yahweh is a jealous God.

Not jealousy in the sense of envy, wanting something that somebody else has got that belongs to them. But jealous in the sense of wanting what is rightly yours. And for Yahweh, for God, the creator of the universe, the exclusive devotion of his own people in particular, Israel, Judah, but indeed ultimately the people of the whole world to worship him and him alone, is his right.

[40 : 30] And so for God to be exclusive of other gods and practices is not at all proud or vain or egotistic from God because it does belong to him.

And Josiah has grasped that, I think, as he's heard God's word read and preached. Deuteronomy 6, presumably part of what Josiah was reading and had been found in the temple.

The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength. The focus here is on proper worship in a proper place in a way that God demanded back in Deuteronomy chapter 12.

Josiah's reforms were not begun by finding this book. I think Andrew touched on this last week. They were probably begun in part from the influence of the prophet Jeremiah.

And it's actually because he was reforming that the book was found and added to the reforms. And this now is sort of adding to the initial reforms here. And politically, Assyria was weak.

[41 : 38] And so Josiah wanting to expand the territory fitted in with all of this as well. Another significant reform is Passover. And that's mentioned in verse 21 onwards.

You imagine discovering that you should have been celebrating Christmas every year and have been completely forgotten. It's hard to imagine, although it's not impossible to me to imagine that in 50 years' time, the Christian religious basis for Christmas will be almost entirely forgotten by our wider society.

That's increasingly the case, it seems to me. I mean, it's quite legitimate. It's not a joke when people say, oh, gosh, the church get in on Christmas as well. And people say that and they mean it.

They don't realise that this is actually a Christian festival. Well, you imagine that we've never heard of Christmas and suddenly we pick up the Bible and think, hey, Jesus is born in Bethlehem. We should celebrate this. Well, Passover was their key festival.

It commemorated in March, April each year, as we call it in our calendar, the liberation of God's people from Egypt, from slavery, ultimately towards the promised land.

[42 : 54] Lengthy instructions are given in Exodus 12, 13 and 14. But it's been forgotten for centuries, probably, not just in Manasseh's time.

Maybe not since the time of Judges is what verse 22 says. That's a long time before. That's before King Saul. So that's about nearly 400 years Passover has been forgotten.

Well, Passover is described in Leviticus as well as in Exodus and it's described in Deuteronomy as well. And so in 622 BC, the 18th year, the same year that was mentioned at the beginning of chapter 22, here it is celebrated again.

And the key to it is not just a festival. It's the nature of God. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

So the celebration of Passover is critical for understanding the true nature of this one God besides whom there is no other. No other God has brought a people out from another nation as Yahweh did for Israel all those years ago.

[44 : 00] So in a way, it's the actions of God, what God has done that validate the exclusive claims of God and therefore his right to exclusive worship.

And all of that is being brought together, I think, in the reforms of Josiah, which simply matches what's in the Pentateuch that brings all of that together as well. It's also important, I think, to see then, as Passover is mentioned here, how important remembering is.

So Passover was a remembrance festival. They'd forgotten it for 300 years or more. How important it is for us to keep remembering what God has done.

Because when we fail to remember who God is and what he's done, then our worship will be diluted, will become syncretistic, and our morality will collapse.

We need to keep remembering. We're not looking for something new. We are being reminded week by week in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, year by year in key Christian festivals, of the glory of the living God who demands our exclusive worship.

[45 : 09] And scripture has that function for us, to remind us again and again so that we do not forget and our lives do not drift away like ancient Israel's did.

In verse 24, he gets rid of all the mediums, the spiritists, and all those sorts of people, prohibited explicitly and at length in Deuteronomy 18. But how common it is even in our day for Christians to be superstitious, to not like horoscopes, not like the number 4 or 8 or 13 or any other number for that matter, it seems to me.

Where I used to live in Malaysia, we didn't have floor 13. Sort of gap. Strange building. You know, there's a building here and then there's a gap. And then, well, not really, but they just jump a number, you know. I mean, you fly in AirAsia and some of these Asian airlines, there's no row 13.

It's just a gap. Well, it's not really. It's just that it goes 12 to 14, you know. That sort of superstition is not uncommon among Christians today. That is because we lose the sense of the sovereignty of God and the clarity and sufficiency of his scripture to help us understand what we should be doing and what's going to come and so on, then we end up chasing all sorts of other things as well.

There's no place, I think, for Christians and this sort of superstition, spiritism, horoscopes or anything of the like that Josiah cleaned up and that Deuteronomy 18 prohibited explicitly.

[46 : 42] So as verse 25 says, neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did with all his heart and all his soul and with all his strength, Deuteronomy words, in accordance with all the law of Moses, which is found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

But despite all of that, God did not turn away his wrath as he said he wouldn't turn it away. As Huldah had said in the previous chapter, maybe that doesn't seem fair.

Even though he'd been told that his reforms would not sort of stop the judgment, why did Josiah go ahead and reform?

The scholars seem to be divided a bit on this. Some say that he was trying to manipulate God or change God or get God to change his mind or something like that. OK, if I try really hard and we really do a very good job of all this reform, maybe God's threat will stop.

And after all, that has happened in history. God said to Moses, I'm going to destroy this people and start again with you. And they made a golden calf. Moses prayed and God changed his mind.

[47 : 50] At least that's the language that's sometimes used. So maybe Josiah thought that he would change God's mind or persuade God that his reforms were big enough and deep enough and significant enough for God to stop his threat.

But he didn't. And the others say that Josiah knew that God wouldn't change his mind, but that didn't stop him reforming. Because it's right to worship God in God's way.

Now, that's an appealing alternative to me. Maybe the both of them are a bit combined because our motives are often mixed. And notice then that if that is the case for Josiah, that he did it simply because he knows this to be right, even though God's judgment is nonetheless coming, there's little benefit for Josiah himself.

He's not in it for himself. He's not in it that God's judgment might stop and that he might be king forever and ever sort of stuff. He's doing it simply because it's the right thing to do.

I think sometimes we're encouraged to do things because of what we get out of it. Even sometimes as Christians, certainly I think for Josiah, that's that's not the case.

[49 : 04] He's not in this for what he would get out of it. He's in this merely for the honor and the glory of the one true living God. Josiah models, I think, scripture changing us.

He finds the great book of Deuteronomy, which is most of you know, I did my PhD on and and under God's word, he himself is changed and reformed.

He repents. He has sackcloth and ash and so on. And as I was preparing this, it made me think again. How often does God's word change us?

Are we so familiar with it, unlike Josiah, that we don't let it penetrate us anymore? Are we too resistant to change?

When did scripture seriously challenge, convict or change or reform us in our attitudes, thinking or behavior? When did you last read the Bible and turn from wrong ways?

[50 : 07] Some of you may have heard of Anna Magan. I'd never heard of her because I don't watch television and I rarely see films. Apparently, she's an actress who at times has been it all suffered from anorexia, but in recent years become a Christian and turned to Christ.

And she's written a memoir, which you can find in the bookshops called *Metanoia*, not the catchiest of titles. It's the Greek word for repent, for turning.

Her life has turned around as she's come to know God and understand the scriptures. And I wonder if for us, some of whom have been Christians for many, many, many years, if God's word still is changing us or not.

Josiah, I think, is a model for us for that to happen. I guess some of us are tempted to be too complacent in our faith, maybe. Josiah, I think, warns us against that.

And Josiah's reforms, in particular thinking about worship, the one God, loving the one God alone, not syncretizing that with the worship of any other gods, sounds simple.

[51 : 22] But actually, because we live in a culture or cultures, we find that the values and the gods of our cultures, we often don't discern them as sharply as we ought.

So the gods of our cultures are not going to be statues that we're going to put on the front of our mantelpiece or up the front of a church building. But the gods of our cultures of security, of money and wealth and comfort and fun and pleasure, even of family, sometimes they're good things.

But when they're raised to the level of being our idol or our God, then we end up syncretizing our faith, not dissimilar from ancient Israel. So we need to keep critiquing the influence of our culture onto us.

And Josiah, I think, helps us think about the rigor by which we ought to do that. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, help us to keep reforming our lives, that we worship you alone, no other idol or no other God.

[52 : 29] Help us to live under your word and let it permeate our thinking and our behavior. Help us to be alert to where our culture and its values or other religions and their gods may somehow tempt or attract us wrongly.

And we ask this for the glory of your son, Jesus. Amen.