

AN OLD TESTAMENT PRODIGAL

II Chronicles 33:1-13

On one occasion Hezekiah was seriously ill, seemingly facing immediate and inevitable death. The prophet, Isaiah, visited him and, among other things, said, "Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live." (II Kings 20:1) The king "turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord." God granted his request and prolonged his life, even promising him fifteen additional years. Three years later, his son, Manasseh, was born. It was anticipated that in Manasseh God would cause Hezekiah to forget all his sorrow and grief and the evils which he had seen.

It may be said that there are four kinds of parents:

1. Those who do wrong and instruct their children to do wrong.
2. Those who do not serve the Lord but encourage their children to do so.
3. Those who fear God but allow their children to forsake Him and to disobey His commandments.
4. Those who love God and obey His commandments and lead their children to do likewise.

Hezekiah did right in the sight of the Lord. He knew that it was his duty to rear his son in the fear of the Lord. He often prayed for Manasseh, who was only twelve years of age when his father died.

I. His Childhood.

1. Manasseh was the son of a godly father.

Hezekiah was a man of undoubted piety and great spiritual power. He was one of the best kings Judah ever had. It is no small privilege to be the child of a godly father or a saintly mother. It is a great thing for a youth to have a godly father to train his tender mind; and, even though such a parent should be taken away early, yet the privilege is an eminent one.

2. Manasseh received good training.

He was well-taught. He was never able to forget the example or the instructions of his father. As for his mother, we cannot say with certainty that she was a godly woman. It would seem that she was, because her name was Hephzibah, which means "God's delight." If she was true to her name, Manasseh had the special favor of having parents to train him in the way in which he should go.

However, Manasseh was born to his father in his later years, after the father had expected to die childless. It is entirely possible that, being highly prized, he was also greatly indulged. Those children who are doted upon by their parents are greatly to be pitied, for they are apt to be allowed to have their own way, which way is usually a wrong one.

3. Manasseh lost his father at the age of twelve.

It is always a great trial for a family when the head of the house is taken away while the children are young. Just when the guiding, encouraging, and restraining power of the father is needed most, it is mournful to see it removed. Manasseh was much to be pitied when his godly father was called away, and he was left amid flatterers and idolaters.

II. His Career.

Manasseh came to the throne of Judah when he was only twelve years of age. Fancy being a king at the age of twelve! That is enough to turn anybody's head; and, although Manasseh had all the advantages of a good home, his head was turned completely by the

wonder of being king. In those days, a king could do whatever he liked, and nobody could curb or control his power.

It was the misfortune of Manasseh to pass the most critical part of his life, his transition from childhood to manhood, in an atmosphere fraught with moral corruption unfavorable to the formation of manly sentiments, holy purposes, and virtuous happiness.

1. Manasseh disregarded his father's godly example.
2. Manasseh sought to please himself.
He resolved to do whatever seemed good to him. Hezekiah did what was right in the sight of God; but not this young man who succeeded him.
3. Manasseh sinned.
"He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." That sentence describes his life as a whole.
4. Manasseh undid the actions of his father.
"For he built again the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down, and he reared up altars for Baalim, and made groves, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them." (II Chronicles 33:3). Soon after his father's burial, Manasseh began undoing in the kingdom all that his pious father had for years endeavored to accomplish. "He built again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed." He gloried in repairing the altars that his father had thrown down and in throwing down the altars which his father had built up.
5. Manasseh defied God in His own sanctuary.
He desecrated the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem by setting up a carved image, or idol, in it. He fell back to the disgraceful level of his grandfather, Ahaz. He named his son, Amon, after an Egyptian idol.
6. Manasseh fraternized with the Devil.
He did so by seeking after all kinds of supernatural witcheries and wizardries. It seemed as if he could not get far enough away from God. In spite of his father's example, he cast off the fear of the Lord and sinned against God with a high hand. By rapid stages he went down from the purity of boyhood to the depths of sin. He wallowed in sin of various forms. "He observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit and with wizards." He heaped up vile idolatries.
7. Manasseh dedicated his children to the Devil.
His inveterate sinfulness is found in his treatment of his children. In a cruel manner, he dedicated his poor, helpless children to the monstrous demon, Moloch. Nothing would content him but that his own children should be the sworn adversaries of God. One would think that nobody would dedicate his children to the devil; yet many do.
8. Manasseh led others astray.
He was a king and had great influence--what he commanded was done. He was bold and arrogant in leading others astray. All Judah and Israel felt the force of his influence, and the people seemed as eager for idolatry and for every kind of vice as the king himself was. The sad thing was that his wickedness was not confined to himself, but he corrupted the people. Evil is like an infectious disease, and it spreads quickly. Remember that when you are tempted to do what is wrong. You harm not only yourself, but others also.
9. Manasseh persecuted the people of God.
He was the first persecutor in Judah of the true religion. He removed the Ark out of the Holy of Holies. His reign was a "reign of terror" to the prophets of the Most High. It is a tradition among the Jews that, because Isaiah told Manasseh of his sins, the prophet was placed between two planks and cut asunder with a saw. We cannot vouch for this tradition; but, terrible as is the legend, it is not at all improbable.
"Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, until he had filled Jerusalem from

one end of it to another." Manasseh refused to allow God's prophet to rebuke him for his sins. The reason why men hate God and His servants is because the truth is too much for them. The king was so zealous in carrying out his idolatry that he could not bear the sight of a man who would not bow before his images.

III. His Chastisement.

One cannot do wrong without suffering for it. Some people think they can. They commit sin, and nobody seems to know about it; but, sooner or later, they have to face up to the consequences of every sinful deed. The world is a very small place; and the day will come, maybe years afterwards, when they have to face the consequences of the wrong they have done to others. With Manasseh, a day came when he had to pay bitterly for his folly. God had sent many holy men to warn Manasseh, but "neither he nor his people would hearken unto them." At last, determined to make him an everlasting monument of grace and mercy, God stirred up the kingdom of Assyria against him, and caused Manasseh to be dragged from the thicket where he had hidden himself and carried, a poor, miserable captive, in fetters to Babylon.

Manasseh was thrown into a prison in Babylon. For twelve long years, he lay and languished in a dungeon, which was a dark hole down under the foundation of a fortress. Perhaps he never saw the light of day except when a jailer would open a door in the roof and let down with a rope just enough bread and water to keep him alive.

Perhaps it was the best thing that could have happened to Manasseh. For there he had time to think about God and the evil of his wicked ways. There in the darkness and loneliness of that dungeon, he realized what a fool he had been.

IV. His Conversion.

1. His Penitence.

Manasseh was awakened to the sins of his terrible, ungodly career. He was filled with sincere and heartfelt contrition on its account. At its commencement his conversion was wrought instrumentally by his afflictions. The king of Assyria came against him, and he was unable to resist the assault. Thinking of his godly ancestors and their holy faith, Manasseh meditated, considered, reviewed his life, and loathed himself. And "he humbled himself greatly." The grace of humility, beautiful in all who come before God, is absolutely indispensable to a penitent and is the certain highway to spiritual promotion.

2. His Prayer.

He called his ways to remembrance, confessed his guilt, justified God in all that had come upon him, and in all that ever should come upon him, and realized that it was far less than his iniquities deserved. Then he poured out his soul in fervent prayer, "offering his supplications with strong crying and tears," and wrestling, as it were, with God, as he thought how he had wrecked his life and lost the godly heritage that had been left him. He was moved to cry for mercy from that God against whom he had sinned. He prayed unto Him with the language and feeling of:--

- (1) Confession, acknowledging his trespasses;
- (2) Submission, owning the just judgment of God upon him;
- (3) Supplication, entreating God's favor and forgiveness.

He asked God to forgive him the sins of his past life, which prayer God heard and answered.

3. His Pardon.

The Lord heard Manasseh! Blood-stained hands were lifted to Heaven, yet the Lord accepted the prayer. The Lord pardoned and smiled upon the penitent. Who would have

thought that such a sinner could ever obtain mercy? Yet God pardoned Manasseh and set him forth, a pattern to magnify the exceeding riches of His grace.

4. His Peace.

Manasseh received a saving knowledge of God through His pardoning mercy. Although he had sinned so grievously, God was good to him, and saw to it that he was released from prison, restored to freedom, and once again made king in his own country.

5. His Proof.

Manasseh's conversion was authenticated by a change of mind and a change of conduct. He did his best to undo what he had done and to restore what he had damaged. Restitution must be made for wrong done, or repentance is a sham. All the evil we have done we must labor to remedy, or our penitence is only skin-deep.

What happened when Manasseh got back home again? He turned from his wicked ways, and loved, and served, and honored God all the rest of his life. He took away the foreign gods out of the Temple of the Lord and removed from both the Lord's House and the city all the altars he had built for their worship. He repaired also the altars of the Lord and commanded his subjects to serve the Lord God of Israel only. He did all that he could to undo the evils of his earlier life. He devoted the rest of his days to God, to reform and reparation, to the practice of piety and virtue, and to the promotion of religion among his people.

While this story has a very happy ending, let us not forget that there was one very sad feature about the reign of Manasseh. Although he repented of his sins and became a good man, he was never able to blot out all the evil he had done. As Matthew Henry once said, "A pardoned sinner may get back his comfort, but he can never get back his credit." Though a man may have been pardoned, yet he may have been the occasion of sin in others which never will be blotted out. How strange is this! A man may lead others into such evil that in it they will abide and perish although, through mighty grace, he may himself be forgiven. Manasseh found it was much easier to drag his people down than to lift them up. His nation never quite recovered from the wickedness into which he had led it, and that must have been a source of great grief to him as long as he lived. It is always easier to lead folks astray than it is to bring them back.

Let us, then, learn this solemn lesson: it is always easier to commit wrong than to remedy it. So let us make the earnest resolution now that we will not allow our lives and the lives of others around us to be ruined by sin; but let us ask God to take our lives and make them His vessels, so that we may be temples for the Holy Spirit and channels of blessing to others.

Because God saved this terrible sinner, let no one then despair. On the other hand, let no one presume upon His mercy and go on in sin under the hope that he or she shall at last repent and be saved. Today God calls you; tomorrow the door of mercy may be shut. God grant that you may now repent of your sins and believe on Christ and, henceforth, like Manasseh, devote yourself entirely to the service of God.