

Worship and War

2 Chronicles 35

In the last eight weeks we took a break from our 2 Chronicles series. It is appropriate, therefore, to give a brief summary of where we are in the narrative.

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were written by an unknown author (possibly Ezra). Their purpose was to encourage the exiles who returned to the Promised Land from the Babylonian captivity.

One author observes that 2 Chronicles was written to encourage the returnees “by connecting them to their past. Their promise and hope for a restored Israel could be found in remembering what God did in their history. . . . This history is meant to inspire the people to remain faithful to God as he has been [faithful] to them.”¹

Though the emphasis in 2 Chronicles is on the conduct of kings, the real focus is on the spiritual health of the people. As God had promised in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, giving many specific examples, his people will be blessed if they obey God’s law, and cursed if they disobey. This is an abiding principle that continues throughout time. The Psalmist put it tersely: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD.”² If a nation is faithful to the Lord, it will experience his blessing and will dwell in safety. If a nation rebels against the Lord it will be relegated to the dustbin of history.

Second Chronicles 1–9 focuses on King Solomon. Chapters 10–35 focus on the kings of Judah. Josiah is the last king considered at length; he is the subject of chapters 34–35. The next chapter, chapter 36, is the last; it records the fall of Judah and the decree of King Cyrus allowing the exiles to return after the 70-year captivity. So we’re getting near the end of the book.

Josiah is a good king. The previous chapter begins with a summary of his life: “he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.” Oh, that each one of us would have such a description of our life! Wouldn’t you want history to remember you that way—to do what is right in the sight of the Lord, to walk in his holy ways, not turning aside either to the right hand or to the left. Wouldn’t you like people to remember you that way? More importantly, wouldn’t you like *the LORD* to remember you that way? He is the sovereign over all the universe. He is the one with whom each of us ultimately has to do. He says, “Obey my voice.” He tells us how he wants us to live. He has give us his unchanging law. In regeneration he has written it in our hearts: “This is the way, walk ye in it.” How do we obey?

¹ *The Books of the Bible Made Easy* (Rose Publishing)

² Ps. 33:12

By delighting in God, and in the words of his mouth, by dedicating ourselves to be his obedient servants, by depending on him to equip us to do his will.

This afternoon we read 2 Chronicles 35. Here we have the story of the great and memorable Passover observed during the 17th year of King Josiah's reign, followed by the account of a senseless war that claimed Josiah's life. I have three points: (1) Worshiping according to God's command, (2) Warring contrary to God's command, and (3) A sorrowful end. First,

1. Worshiping according to God's command

Our Confession teaches that "the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will" (WCF 21.1). God says, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deut. 12:32). Jesus said, "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). Man is always and only to worship God in the manner appointed in the word of God.

Josiah at great expense repaired and renovated the temple of God in Jerusalem. The workers did their work faithfully. They removed the heathen idols from the temple. They took out the trash. They repaired the structure. During the renovations the Book of the Law was discovered, which had been forgotten. Josiah restored the true worship. Then he "kept a Passover to the Lord." The Passover was the chief of the three great annual feasts of the Jews. It was kept in remembrance of the Lord's passing over the houses of the Israelites when the firstborn of all the Egyptians were destroyed.³

God appointed the Passover in Exodus 12. Israel was to observe this feast throughout their generations, as an everlasting ordinance. They were to eat unleavened bread with bitter herbs. The unleavened bread would represent the historical fact that their forefathers had to leave Egypt in haste; they did not have time for the bread in their kneading bowls to rise. The bitter herbs represented the bitter suffering that their forefathers endured as slaves in Egypt. The Passover lamb was to be slaughtered "between the two evenings"—that is at 3 PM, in between noon and 6 PM, at dusk at that latitude.⁴ This was the precise hour that the Lord Jesus Christ would cry out, "It is finished," and take his last breath. Jesus himself, the Passover Lamb, would die "between the two evenings"—the ultimate fulfillment of the Passover.

Before the coming of Christ, Israel was to observe the feast of Passover as an "everlasting ordinance." They would not need a special command from God each year to observe it. God had told them once, and that was sufficient. In the New Testament the Passover has been replaced by the Lord's Supper, which is a symbol of the church's fellowship. We, his disciples, are sustained by Christ, the bread of

³ Easton's Bible Dictionary, "Passover"

⁴ בֵּין הָעֶרְבָיִם (dual, pausal) Ex. 12:7, Lev. 23:5

life. Our church uses unleavened bread to highlight the connection between the Lord's Supper and the Passover. Clearly, unleavened bread was used at the inaugural observance of the Lord's supper, when our Lord observed it with his disciples. We do not believe that using leavened bread invalidates the sacrament, but it is our preference to use unleavened bread, because that was what the Lord used in the institution of the Lord's supper.

The Bible says that men shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.⁵ This clearly refers to all of life, and if it refers to all of life, then, in an even stronger manner it refers to worship.

God takes his worship very seriously. Worship is important. Man's chief end is to glorify God. All of us must be committed worshipers of the one true God. And the only worship that is acceptable to God is that which is accordance with his revealed word. Man has no authority to add anything devised by man to God's worship.

At this great Passover commemoration animal sacrifices that were appointed by God were offered. "The singers, the sons of Asaph, were in their places, according to the command of David" (35:15). Moreover, "the gatekeepers were at each gate," admitting only confessing Israelites intent on worshipping God, and excluding those who did not profess the true faith. Second, we see

2. Warring contrary to God's command

The chronicler records that "after all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Necho king of Egypt came up to fight against Carchemish by the Euphrates; and Josiah went out against him." It is a simple, straightforward, factual account.

Necho II, the king of Egypt, decided to go to war against the king of Assyria. He led a powerful army and marched northward, but King Josiah refused him a passage through his territory.⁶ To Josiah this looked like an imminent threat that had to be repelled by force. Necho sent messengers to Josiah, asserting that he had peaceful intent, that his real target lay further ahead, that God himself had commanded him to undertake this mission.

Necho was not a prophet of God. There is no evidence that he was a believer in the God of the Bible. But God is sovereign; he is not limited in how he can speak. God spoke through Balaam's ass—a dumb animal (Num. 22:28)! At Sinai he spoke audibly from heaven, giving his Ten Commandments distinctly in the hearing of all the people. The Israelites understood the words and were so shaken with fright that they told Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."⁷ God gave his law, and two and a half million people heard clearly and understood. There was no P.A. system! God spoke directly, and

⁵ Deut. 8:3

⁶ Easton's Bible Dictionary, "Necho II"

⁷ Ex. 20:19 NIV

not through a prophet. Two and a half million people were terrified at the sound of his voice and realized intuitively how dangerous it is to deal directly with him who is absolutely holy without a mediator.

On the present occasion the Egyptian king flatters himself into thinking that God had personally spoken to him and was commanding him to make war. Necho's intent was not to be a worshiper of Jehovah God. Rather, his interest was purely selfish. He wanted to enlarge his kingdom and make a name for himself. Nevertheless, Necho's words warning Josiah not to engage him in battle were in fact a warning from God himself. Our text makes it plain; it says that Josiah "did not heed the words of Necho *from the mouth of God*. So he came to fight in the Valley of Megiddo" (35:22).

War is one of the effects of the fall. Jesus warned that throughout history we will hear of wars and rumors of wars (Matt. 24:6).

Should a nation go to war? In the Bible a just war is a defensive war. God "made all the nations . . . and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (Acts 17:26 NIV). His word declares, "Thou shalt not steal." Just as it is wrong for private individuals to steal another person's property, so it is wrong for nations to steal another nation's territory. Nations have the right to secure their own borders and repel invaders, but no nation has the God-given right to wage an offensive war. *Waging a defensive war is just, but waging an offensive war is unjust*. It's as plain as that.

It is true that God commanded Israel to go to war against the Canaanites. It was to be a war of total destruction. They were to leave no man, woman or child alive. This would be a temporal judgment on the Canaanites, whose idolatrous practices, including child sacrifice, were an abomination in the sight of a holy God. God would use Israel to execute divine wrath upon the Canaanites. As God had told Joshua, the city of Jericho "shall be doomed by the LORD to destruction [תָּרַם]" (Josh. 6:17). The city was accursed. Israel was not to salvage any of the booty. It was all to be destroyed.

This is what we call positive law. It was a command given to Israel for a particular time and place. It is not standing law, applicable in all times and places. No civil or ecclesiastical government in our day has divine authority to go destroy the Canaanites, or any other people. The destruction of the Canaanites is typical of the final judgment, when "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Ps. 9:17). At the final day the wicked shall be destroyed from the presence of the Lord. The threat of final judgment should motivate every person to "flee from the wrath to come" and seek refuge in the Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus told his disciples, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be *damned*" (Mark 16:15–16).

The Bible says, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD’” (Jer. 17:5). We depart from the Lord by placing our primary trust in the arm of flesh. In the words of the hymnwriter, “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in his strength alone; *the arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own.*” God’s will for our lives is that we put our complete trust in him alone. It should be easy for the Christian, but it’s not. It’s easy in theory but hard in practice. After all, we are saved by trusting in Christ alone for our salvation. Scripture is very clear: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Moreover, Scripture tells us in Psalm 89:18, “The LORD is our defense; and the Holy One of Israel is our king” (KJV). NKJV, NASB and ESV use “shield” instead of “defense,” but the meaning is the same, as *shield* is clearly a defensive, not an offensive, weapon.

Here is a principle that all the nations of the world need to learn.

God desires his people to live in peace, not to seek to rule people by conquest. It is his will that as his kingdom advances “he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isa. 2:4).

In an earlier time it was understood that America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy” (John Quincy Adams), it was understood that the mark of a good president was to keep our country *out* of war. Now, we have perpetual war. How tragic!

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. His followers should be instruments of his peace, wise as serpents, harmless as doves. We are to fight the good fight of faith, waging war against the devil, who was a murderer from the beginning. But we are to preach we the gospel of peace. Psalm 33 teaches: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people He has chosen as His own inheritance. . . . No king is saved by the multitude of an army; a mighty man is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a vain hope for safety; neither shall it deliver any by its great strength. Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield” (Ps. 33:12, 16–20).

The Christian can live a life of confidence, knowing that the Lord is our protector. “Though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident” (Ps. 27:3).

Josiah got into trouble by picking a fight. Starting an offensive war is contrary to God’s command.

Thirdly, we see

3. A sorrowful end

In the present battle it is recorded that “the archers shot King Josiah; and the king said to his servants, ‘Take me away, for I am severely wounded.’” His servants brought him to Jerusalem, where he died, and all Judah and Jerusalem mourned his death.

It was tragic and senseless. Pharaoh Necho did not have a hostile intent with regard to Judah. His goal was to get to Carchemish, not engage Judah in battle.

The secular histories corroborate the biblical account: in the spring of 609 BC Necho personally led a sizable force to help the Assyrians. At the head of a large army, consisting mainly of mercenaries, he took the coastal route into Syria, supported by his Mediterranean fleet along the shore, and proceeded through the low tracts of Philistia and Sharon. At Megiddo he engaged the Judean king, Josiah, and had him killed.⁸

It was a tragic and sorrowful end to a good king, who did what was right in the sight of the Lord and walked in his holy ways, not turning aside either to the right hand or to the left. Though he loved the Lord and dedicated himself to stamp out idolatry and encourage the pure worship of God, though he worked tirelessly to repair and renovate the temple, though he was visibly moved and tore his clothes upon hearing the holy Scriptures when the law of God was found during the temple renovation, at the last he acted on impulse, going to war against the Egyptian king Necho, who had warned him that he was only traveling through the land and did not come to threaten him. As Jesus would later say at his arrest, when Peter drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear, “Put your sword back in its place . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”⁹

Even a godly king can be deceived. On this occasion Josiah failed to consult the Lord or seek the wisdom of godly counselors. He reacted in fear to the presence of a great army marching through his territory and *took it upon himself* to do something about it. Oh how each of us should guard against self-deception!

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necho_II accessed 2-3-24

⁹ Matt. 26:52 NIV