

THE THREE Rs OF FAITH
[Reform, Renewal and Revival]
2 Kings 22 & 23 (Selected)
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PROLOGUE

Today is Rally Day. It is a time for us to rally behind God's intention that all Christians--children, youth and adults--learn to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Now some congregations say Christian Education Sunday or Kick-Off Sunday or Sunday School Round-Up. A cynic might say this is "Welcome back to church now that summer is over Sunday." But whatever we call it, this is a time for spiritual renewal.

In the early days of Israel, the people came together once a year to renew their covenant with God. Later, when this practice was discarded, reformers like Josiah and Nehemiah would rally the people and give them the opportunity to renew their covenant. Let us consider today to be such a day and renew our commitment to the Lord.

PREFACE TO READING

Our Scripture reading is from the historical book known as 2 Kings and tells us about one of the most remarkable persons ever mentioned in the Bible – a young man named Josiah who trusted in God like his ancestor King David.

SCRIPTURE

{22:1} Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. {2} He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. {3} In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, {4} "Go up to the high priest Hilkiyah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; {5} let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the LORD; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house,

{4} The high priest Hilkiyah said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD." When Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it.

{10} Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "The priest Hilkiyah has given me a book." Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. {11} When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes...[and said]

{13} "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."

{23:1} Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should

be gathered to him. {2} The king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. {3} The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant. {4} The king commanded the high priest Hilkiah, the priests of the second order, and the guardians of the threshold, to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven.

Moreover Josiah put away the mediums, wizards, teraphim, idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, so that he established the words of the law that were written in the book that the priest Hilkiah had found in the house of the LORD. {25} Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him (2 Kings 22:1-5, 8, 10-11, 13; 23:1-4, 24-25 NRSV)

INTRODUCTION

If you were asked, “What are the three Rs of Education?”, how would you answer? The traditional answer is: “Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic.” Perhaps you are like me in that even as a child I found it strange that only one of the three Rs actually starts with the letter “R.” Be that as it may, people talk about the three Rs because they are concerned with what is foundational for education.

In a manner of speaking, there are also three Rs for faith: Reform, Renewal and Revival. They have the added advantage of all starting with the letter “R.” Long ago, King Josiah discovered that these are foundational for our ongoing relationship with the Lord.

1. WE NEED REFORM MORE THAN REPAIRS

He discovered that WE NEED REFORM MORE THAN REPAIRS. This is because REFORM FOCUSES ON WHAT IS IMPORTANT.

Josiah became king of Judah when he was only a child but came to faith when he turned sixteen years of age. One of the things that his new-found faith led him to do was repair the Temple in Jerusalem, which had fallen into disuse and decay. During the course of the repairs a “Book of the Law” was discovered. Hilkiah, the high priest, found the book and gave it to Josiah’s secretary, who in turn read it to the King. Upon hearing the words of the book, Josiah ripped his clothes, in those days a sign of great anguish and guilt, and humbled himself before God. He was convicted by the question, “What good was it to repair the Temple if the purpose of the Temple has been forgotten?”

Today we may well ask, “What good is it to renovate a church building if we forget the purpose of the building?” Or, “What good is it to we make changes to one’s life if the purpose of life has been forgotten?”

A new pastor was trying to change his very old-fashioned parish by teaching them new responses. He said to them, “When I say, 'The Lord be with you,' you will reply all together,

'And also with you.'" Then they practiced that over and over again. The Sunday came for the introduction of the new responses. But something happened to the microphone, and the pastor, trying to adjust it, said in a loud voice, "There is something wrong with this microphone." The congregation responded, "And also with you!"

"The Book of the Law" found by Hilkiah was probably the Book of Deuteronomy - a major book of the Bible. Note the irony - the Word of God had been lost in the Temple! Josiah responded to the Word of God by making changes according to the Word of God. This is what is known as Reform.

The Apostle tells us:

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17 NRSV).

To be Reformed is to be willing to be taught, corrected and trained by the Word of God. It is to be shaped by the Word of God. Only this way can we know what is important and why do what we are supposed to do.

2. WE NEED RENEWAL MORE THAN REGULATIONS

Josiah also discovered that WE NEED RENEWAL MORE THAN REGULATIONS. This is because RENEWAL STRESSES PERSONAL COMMITMENT.

It is the tendency of those in authority to deal with problems by making more rules. This is true of civil authorities. It is also true of religious authorities.

In Jesus' day, the religious group known as the Pharisees had thousands of rules of conduct. For example, they had thirty-nine rules for how to cut cloth previously belonging to someone who was now deceased. Breaking any of these rules was considered a serious sin against God. Personally, I do not know how they could remember all the rules let alone abide by them.

Jesus recognized that all these rules, far from helping people in their faith, were keeping people from having a relationship with God. So he said:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead" (Matthew 23:27 NRSV).

History has shown that the more laws a nation has the less lawful the nation becomes. What is needed is not more regulations but personal commitment and responsibility. This is the approach Josiah took. He rallied his people and then he and his people renewed their covenant with God.

3. WE NEED REVIVAL MORE THAN RELIGIONISM

Josiah discovered that WE NEED REVIVAL MORE THAN RELIGIONISM. This is because REVIVAL SEEKS A LIFE ONLY GOD CAN SUSTAIN.

Religion can be a good thing if it means giving back to God what *God* wants of us. It can be

a bad thing if it is used to justify getting what *we* want. The people in Josiah's day were quite religious but they preferred the religions of Baal and Molech. The religion of Baal (along with his mother/consort Asherah) was popular because it provided religious justification for adultery and multiple sex partners. The religion of Molech was popular because it justified murder, through human sacrifice, especially of the very young and very old. Times have changed, language has changed, but people have not.

Josiah tried to get rid of the evil practices associated with Baal and Molech. But Josiah soon realized that although he could bring about Reform, only God could bring Revival.

When American Christians hear the word "Revival" they tend to think of certain kinds of churches and emotionally driven evangelistic meetings. But Revival as a religious term was coined by Presbyterian preacher James McGready while serving in the wilderness of Kentucky in 1799. Instead of going from isolated cabin to cabin, he held revivals that lasted several days and attracted settlers from miles around. McGready would preach, baptize, and marry, while the settlers joined in the praying and singing and caught up on the latest news. Families would camp overnight rather than return to their homes and so these gatherings were also called "camp meetings." McGready's success has been frequently and widely imitated.

The word Revival means "second life." (This has nothing to do with the Internet and the popular practice of creating an alter ego online called "Second Life.") It is found in the Bible as "regeneration" or "rebirth" or "born again." The Apostle Peter puts it this way:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3 NRSV).

Only the One who created us in the first place can give us a new (second) life that lasts forever.

I came across a copy of a letter issued by Greenville County Department of Social Services of Greenville, South Carolina. It said:

"Dear Sir,

This is to inform you that your food stamps will be stopped because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances."

Change in your circumstances? This is a change only God can bring about. This is a life only God can provide.

CONCLUSION

Josiah discovered that Reform, Renewal and Revival are foundational to faith. We need Reform, Renewal and Revival. We need to be willing to be shaped by the Word of God, have a personal trust in the Son of God, and be given a new kind of life by the Spirit of God. The kingdom of God is not going to advance by our churches becoming filled with people, but when the people in our churches are filled with God.