

Pre-Denominational Christianity

2 KINGS 22-23

Baxter T. Exum (#1267)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
June 1, 2014



This morning I would invite you to think with me about a time when you lost something that was very important. Most of us have had the experience of losing our cell phones from time to time. Or, if not a cell phone, then maybe you have lost a set of keys. Years ago, we tried one of those key chains that would beep loudly when we whistled for it. And that worked for several hours...until we discovered that it would also beep whenever the baby cried! And so, the baby would cry and our keys would start beeping, the beeping scared the baby, and it was just a completely horrific cycle of beeping and screaming! To make matters worse, you couldn't turn it off. As I remember it, we finally had to put that thing in the freezer just to keep it quiet. All of us, though, probably know what it means to lose something.

As we study the Bible this morning, I would like for us to imagine what might happen if we were to lose the word of God itself. From time to time, somebody will leave a Bible here at the church building. Often there is a name written inside the front cover, and we can get it back to its owner. But I want us to imagine this happening on a much greater scale. Imagine that over time every single Bible in our nation disappeared.

Well, this is exactly what happens roughly 640 years before the time of Christ. For just a little bit of history, we remember how God's people were united – they were together – under King Saul, King David, and King Solomon. At the death of King Solomon, though, the kingdom divided, with ten tribes in the north and two tribes in the south. Those in the north ignored God's law from the very beginning. We remember King Jeroboam changing the place of worship, the acts of worship, and even the object of worship. The northern kingdom quickly slid away from God, and God allowed them to be wiped out by the Assyrians in 721 BC.

Those in the south, though, managed to hang on a little bit longer. There were some good kings, and there were some bad kings. One of the worst kings was King Manasseh who ruled from 687-622 BC. Manasseh ruled 55 years and was probably the worst king in the history of God's people. He set up altars for the worship of the pagan god Baal. He set up altars for worshipping the stars. He brought in various wizards and magicians. During this time in the Southern Kingdom, parents were offering their children as burnt offerings to the pagan god Molech. Can we even imagine that? The people were doing pretty much whatever they wanted to do in the name of religion. And then, on top of all of this, the Bible tells us that Manasseh ***“shed very much innocent blood”*** (2 Kings 21:16). Manasseh, then, was an absolutely horrible influence on the people of the Southern

Kingdom. And at some point during this time, the people very quietly stopped reading the word of God, and over time, they even forgot where they put it.

Well, Manasseh's son was Amon. Amon was also evil. Amon, though, was so hated by the people that he was assassinated by his own servants. They killed him right there in the palace. Amon was only 22 years old when he died, so the Bible tells us that the throne then went to his son, only 8 years old, a young man by the name of Josiah. Of these kings of the Southern Kingdom, only about 20% were in any way decent. Josiah was in that 20%. In fact, Josiah is one of only two kings who are described as being **"good."** Only 8 years old! What good could such a young king possibly do?

In just a moment, we plan on looking at several verses in 2 Kings 22 (p. 634). The story of King Josiah's life is found in these two chapters. We can very safely say that the young King Josiah inherited a complete mess in terms of the religious foundation of the nation. The foundation was crumbling. As a young king, what do you do? What were YOU doing at 8 years old? I was in Mrs. Finn's 3rd Grade class at Coventry Elementary School. I had my birthday party at Veteran's Acres Park, and for my 8th birthday, I remember getting a pair of those metal roller skates that strap on your shoes. That's what I was doing at 8 years old. I was roller-skating! The Bible tells us, though, that Josiah started turning the nation back toward God. He started seeking the heart of his father David. David was his father – not physically, but spiritually! David was the last great king to be described as being a **"man after God's own heart."** Even as a young man, then, King Josiah wanted to be like David.

With all of this in mind, and as we think about the possibility of losing the word of God, I would invite you to look with me at 2 Kings 22. I'd like for us to start with verses 1-13 – 2 Kings 22:1-13,

¹ Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Jedidah the daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. ² He did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left.

³ Now in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan, the son of Azaliah the son of Meshullam the scribe, to the house of the Lord saying, ⁴ "Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest that he may count the money brought in to the house of the Lord which the doorkeepers have gathered from the people. ⁵ Let them deliver it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the Lord, and let them give it to the workmen who are in the house of the Lord to repair the damages of the house, ⁶ to the carpenters and the builders and the masons and for buying timber and hewn stone to repair the house. ⁷ Only no accounting shall be made with them for the money delivered into their hands, for they deal faithfully."

⁸ Then Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord." And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan who read it. ⁹ Shaphan the scribe came to the king and brought back word to the king and said, "Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the Lord." ¹⁰ Moreover, Shaphan the scribe told the king saying, "Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read it in the presence of the king.

¹¹ When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. ¹² Then the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, Achbor the son of Micaiah, Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah the king's servant saying, ¹³ "Go, inquire of the Lord for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of the Lord that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.

Starting in verse 14, we have the leaders checking in with a prophetess. She warns that God is angry, but she tells them to bring back an encouraging word to King Josiah, that he was doing the right thing. And then I want us to skip over to 2 Kings 23:1-3,

¹ Then the king sent, and they gathered to him all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem. ² The king went up to the house of the Lord and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord. ³ The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to carry out the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people entered into the covenant.

We don't have time to read the entire chapter, but if we skim down through the middle of this chapter and look at verses 4-20, we find that Josiah institutes a series of reforms. He gets rid of all of the altars to Baal and the Asherah. He gets rid of all of the priests who were burning incense to pagan idols and the stars of heaven. He kicks the male prostitutes out of the temple. He kills the pagan priests and burns their bones on their own altars. But then on the positive side, please notice what else happens in verses 21-25 – 2 Kings 23:21-25,

²¹ Then the king commanded all the people saying, "Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God as it is written in this book of the covenant." ²² Surely such a Passover had not been celebrated from the days of the judges who judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel and of the kings of Judah. ²³ But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was observed to the Lord in Jerusalem.

²⁴ Moreover, Josiah removed the mediums and the spiritists and the teraphim and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might confirm the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest 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 and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

As we look back over these two chapters, I would like to use the rest of our time together this morning to try to introduce what we are trying to do here at the Four Lakes congregation. For those of you who may be visiting with us this morning, this might be a rather new concept. But for the rest of us, I would like to use this passage as an encouragement. And to do this, I'd like to divide the lesson into two basic thoughts. First of all, I want us to think about the tragedy of losing God's word. And then I'd like for us to think about the significance of finding God's truth and following it, just as Josiah did.

I. **But first of all, let us think for a few moments about THE TRAGEDY OF COMPLETELY LOSING THE WORD OF GOD.**

We think about the situation in ancient Israel: Not only were they not reading the Bible, but they didn't even know where it was anymore. God's word was missing. The word of God was lost. It is hard for us to even imagine that! Most of us here in this room are at least somewhat concerned with spiritual things. That is why we are here. In the mid 600's BC, though, the people had drifted so far away from God, they didn't even know where the official copy of God's Law was. The official copy in the temple was missing. Nobody knew where it was. When I think of an official document, I think of our own constitution. Several years ago, our family had the privilege of traveling to Washington DC, and besides visiting the church there, and besides our son trying to bring a knife into the White House visitors' center, one highlight of our trip was stopping by the National Archives and getting to see one of the original handwritten copies of the Constitution. So, here is this document we have studied and read about for years. It's right here in this dark room with guards standing on each side of it. But imagine a time coming when we lose that document. That is hard for us to even imagine, and yet that is basically what happened with the word of God in the mid 600's BC. Nobody knew where it was, and nobody knew where it was, because nobody was looking for it. It was there somewhere, but it was lost. It was neglected. Nobody cared. The word of God was missing.

And so religiously, the people drifted over time. Without God's word to weigh in on all of these issues, the people started changing God's plan. And often, the changes were very gradual; often, the changes were well-intended – just a few tweaks to worship here and there, just a few little adjustments here and there, just a few little upgrades to make worship a little more exciting over time – and before long, they end up worshiping idols instead of God; before long, they have male prostitutes moving into the temple; before long, they start offering their children as burnt offerings to Molech instead of celebrating Passover as they should have been doing. Before long, they were offending God, all the while thinking they were doing something good.

Does that ever happen today? Do people today ever lose the word of God and continue making decisions in matters of faith without looking to God for advice? The picture up here is of Thomas Jefferson's Bible. Some of you might know that he didn't really believe in miracles. So, Mr. Jefferson simply cut those parts out! You can find a copy of his Bible in the library here in Madison, but this is the original. The Jefferson Bible ends with the disciples putting the Lord's body in the tomb and leaving. That's it. The end. Jesus died and they all went home. If it was miraculous in any way, Jefferson just cut it out. Hopefully nobody here has done this, but isn't this what many people do when they don't agree with something the Bible says? They may not cut those parts out, but maybe they just ignore those parts. Maybe some of you saw the meme posted on Facebook this week: How People in Our World Read the Bible Today. Isn't this the way it is sometimes? Sure, we believe the Bible, but just a little bit of it! Everybody knows that Jesus said, "Judge not..." but then they skip over everything else Jesus said on the subject of judging! And so the point is: Our Bibles may not be covered under a pile of rubble somewhere, but if we don't read our Bibles, if we pick and choose, if we don't use our Bibles as a guide, then isn't it pretty much the same thing? Isn't that how it started in ancient Israel? Over time, people stopped basing their faith on the word of God. Over time, people started doing whatever they thought was right; they did whatever felt good, and over time, they drifted. Over time, the word of God simply disappeared. Nobody missed it. Nobody asked where that old scroll was. I learned this past week that the average person claiming to be a Christian spends more time watching television in one night than he or she spends reading the Bible in an entire week. Can we lose the Bible today? Absolutely, we can lose the word of God. Not only as individuals, but also as a church. All around us, for years, we have seen so many of the mainline denominations come together at their conventions to vote on one doctrine or another. Those decisions are then handed down, and over time, the word of God is lost. Over time, the word of God is buried

in the rubble of man-made religious doctrine. Over time, books about the Bible have a way of replacing the actual Bible. When I first started preaching, I met with a young woman who wanted to know more about the Christian faith, and when it came time to start, I suggested that we study through the book of Mark. At that point, she started sobbing. She said, “All my life I have attended private religious schools, and this is the first time I have actually studied the Bible. Up until now, I have only studied religion books, but never the Bible itself.” You see, for her, the word of God was missing. As with the nation of Israel, God’s law was lost. First of all, then, we see the tragedy of losing God’s word – not only then, but now as well.

II. As we continue thinking about this passage, I would suggest a second main thought here, and that is: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDING GOD’S TRUTH AND FOLLOWING IT.

And again, after many years without the word of God, they find it. They are cleaning out all of the junk in the temple, and somebody finds the book of God’s law. They bring it to Josiah. Now they know exactly what they need to do. And so with this in mind, we find Josiah leading the nation through several steps.

First of all, they read it! As we discovered in 2 Kings 22:10, Shaphan the scribe reads the entire book in the presence of the king. Then, in response to hearing the word of God, King Josiah tears his clothing (2 Kings 22:11). In the ancient world, this was a sign of grief. Josiah was torn up over how far the nation had drifted away from God’s original plan. Josiah could see what was being done in the nation, and now God’s word was held up almost as a mirror, and side by side, the contrast was terrifying – the contrast between what they should have been doing and what they were actually doing. Then, starting in 2 Kings 23, the king has the Law read to the entire nation – priests and prophets, small and great – the king himself stood before the nation and read the word of God from cover to cover. He then made a covenant before the Lord to keep the commandments with all of his heart and soul. And then we see the long list of reforms – they cleaned house, they stopped all of those evil practices, they reversed all of those changes that had entered into their worship over the past 800 years or so. He did not blame his family heritage, he did not use his father or grandfather as an excuse, but he took God’s word as the only authoritative rule for the nation, and he made what must have been some very tough decisions. Sometimes today somebody will discover what the Bible says about the plan of salvation or the simple nature of the New Testament church, and their objection is, “Oh, but if I change my faith at this point, I will be condemning my parents. I will be condemning my grandparents.” Notice, though: King Josiah did not use his father and grandfather as an excuse. Instead, he fixed the problem.

I am reminded of an old story about a man who owned a country store that was passed down to him by his grandfather, and on the counter he had a mark for measuring off yards of cloth. He had personally owned the store for more than ten years, his grandfather had owned it for many, many years before that, but one day a customer comes into the store and complains, “This yard of cloth I bought from you is only 35 inches long.” Well, that cannot be! Nobody else has ever complained. I’ve been selling cloth like this for ten years, and my grandfather for decades before that. The man, though, went to another part of the store and found a yardstick, he brought it back to the counter, and sure enough, the mark on the counter was an inch short – that mark made by his own grandfather many decades earlier. The question is: What should the man do now? Obviously, he needs to change that mark on the counter! And yet by changing the mark, in no way is he saying that his grandfather was dishonest. Obviously, a mistake was made at some point, but by correcting the mistake, the man is simply doing what his grandfather hopefully would have done if he had been presented with the same information. I think of something a friend of mine posted online last week, “In religion, when someone who is honestly mistaken hears the truth, one of two things will happen. Either he will cease to be mistaken, or he will cease to be honest.” Thankfully, Josiah decided that he would cease to be mistaken.

And then, not only did Josiah decide to stop doing what was wrong, but he also decided to restore worship to the way God had originally intended. They restored the Passover celebration (we find this in 2 Kings 23:21-22). And what is amazing to me is: The nation had not truly celebrated the Passover since the days of the judges, not even in all the days of the kings. In other words, this is something that even King David had missed. Josiah, though, restored worship to the way God had originally intended it, something that had not been done for nearly 750 years. This would be like us failing to partake of the Lord's Supper for 750 years. It is hard to imagine, but Josiah, when he saw something that did not match up with the word of God, he fixed it, he changed it, he restored it, he put it back the way God originally meant it to be.

So here at the end, we ask ourselves a question: What does this passage mean for us today? Can we learn anything from young King Josiah? Absolutely, yes! We can learn something from what happened here! And what we learn applies to the Lord's church. Wouldn't it be rather safe to say that the religious world is pretty much in a state of chaos right now? We look around us, and we see 2,000 years of history since the Lord's church was first established, and over those 2,000 years, we see man-made tradition plastered on top of man-made tradition, little tweaks here and there, even large leaps into outright error from time to time along the way.

Looking at so many of those doctrines that have been added by many churches through the years reminds me of the man who just loved outdoor cooking. To those of you who were in the adult Bible class this morning, I might say, "Hear the parable of the man who loved outdoor cooking!" Here is a man who loved to grill out in his backyard. He loved the outdoors. And so in his backyard he built a huge stone barbeque pit. And then, to make it a little easier and to avoid some of the mud under his picnic table, he poured a concrete slab. And then after a while he upgraded to a very nice table and chairs out there on the new patio. And then, after a few cookouts were ruined by rain and snow, he built a roof overhead and put a chimney through the roof along with a range hood to pull out all of the smoke. And since the vent hood required electricity, the wires were already there, so he went ahead and added some lighting and some electrical outlets for his coffee maker. Summer came around, and he added screen to the walls to keep the bugs out. Winter rolled around, and he added windows. And then, to do it up right, he built a tile covered work cabinet, complete with a double sink and running water. This man just loved outdoor cooking! That is what happened in ancient Israel. That is what has happened to many of the churches we see around us today. Immersion is replaced by sprinkling, because it's a little bit easier. Simple congregational singing begins to be supplemented by an organ or a harp, because somebody thinks it sounds better. Before long, religious leaders start wearing ornate robes and gowns, because somebody thinks it looks better. Somewhere down the line somebody adds the burning of incense as a religious ritual, because somebody thinks it smells better, and on and on and on. Hundreds upon hundreds of years of minor adjustments, until we hardly recognize the church Jesus purchased with his own blood. And the question for us is: What can we do about it?

Here at this congregation (with all of this in mind), our commitment is to go back and use the word of God as our only guide. Our goal is to use the word of God as our only creed, as our only manual, as our only pattern in all things we do. Is it possible, though, to restore the Lord's church in modern times? Is it possible to have the church today just as it was envisioned by the Lord himself? Is it really that simple? Keep in mind: We have the written word. Keep in mind: We have the pattern. When I was a kid, I remember my dad comparing it to the game of chess. Yesterday afternoon, I went down in my basement and found our chess set. It's all beat up. I noticed the board itself is missing. We probably had to use the board for a game of checkers at some point down the line, and we never put it back. I didn't go through all the pieces. I doubt they're all there. My kids probably ate a few here and there. But I did find the instruction book. I did find the manual. I did find the "Rules of Chess." So I want us to imagine something. Imagine that we fast forward 2,000 years into the future.

Imagine that archaeologists are digging in the earth, and they find the remnants of an ancient civilization known as Madison. They dig and they dig, and they burrow into what is now my office, and they find this little booklet, "The Rules of Chess." It looks like an interesting game, they say. But nobody has ever heard of it. In the year 4,014, nobody has ever seen a chessboard. Nobody has ever seen a king, or a queen, or a pawn, or a knight, or a bishop, or a castle. Here is the question: If all they had was this booklet, would they be able to restore the game of chess? Yes, they would! Because in this booklet there is a diagram of the board, there are pictures of the various pieces, there are detailed instructions. For those of you who may be visiting this morning: This is what we are trying to do with the Lord's church! We are trying to cut through 2,000 years of well-meaning additions, we are using the word of God as our only guide, and we are trying to restore simple New Testament Christianity. Sometimes we refer to pre-denominational Christianity. We are trying to go back before the concept of denominationalism. We are trying to be the church Jesus established.

Some might look at this is being rather arrogant. We, though, think of ancient Israel as being arrogant – constantly tweaking God's plan to try to make it better. Like Josiah, though, our goal is to sweep all of those changes aside and to do the best we can to restore God's original plan for his church. This morning, then, we would invite you to investigate.

Conclusion:

As we close, we would also invite all who are here this morning to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to this earth to die for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We respond to that news by pretty much doing the same thing. We die to sin, we are buried with Christ in baptism – an immersion in water for the forgiveness of our sins – and then we are raised up out of the water as the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, we would invite you to pull us aside after the service. Feel free to give us a call or send a message to the email address on the front of the bulletin. But, if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com