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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

RELIGIOUS REFORMS IN JUDAH

by Rev. R. C. Todd

LESSON: 2 Kings 22: 1 to 23: 30

During the period in which the Kingdom of Judah was subservient to Assyria, the Assyrian religion was the official religion of the country. That, along with the Baalism, mentioned in a former lesson, really made the religious situation in Judah corrupt. Last week we hinted at the rise of power of Babylon. The rise of this new power meant a decline in the political and military ascendancy of Assyria, and that Judah was in a position to act more independently than she had for years. The political situation was greatly to the advantage of anyone wishing to undertake religious reforms, since there was no longer the political pressure in favour of Assyrian heathenism.

The reforms came in 621 B.C. during the reign of King Josiah. The Temple of God was being repaired, and during the course of the repairs a "book of the law," now embodied in the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible, was discovered. The condemnation of corrupt religion was so vehement in this book, that on reading it the King was greatly disturbed and distressed. A public meeting was held at which the King vowed to keep the law of God set forth therein, and the people vowed to support him. There followed a vigorous policy of suppressing the shrines of heathen worship throughout the country, which eliminated many corrupt practices which had entered into religious worship. The centre of worship was made to be the Temple of Jerusalem, where it could be more easily regulated and kept pure.

While much needed purification of worship was brought about by this policy, it is doubtful if the reforms touched the inner spiritual life of the people as a whole, for in the lesson to follow we shall see that the society of Judah was by this time so corrupt that the reforms under Josiah were not able to save it from ruin. The prophetess Huldah declared that any reform undertaken by Josiah would not preserve the nation beyond his own time. Temporarily, however, the nation's doom would be stayed. (2 Kings 22: 15-20.)

It turned out that during Josiah's reign, the message of Assyria was permanently dispelled by the fall of that nation to the armies of the new power, Babylon. A political vacuum was created in which Judah asserted her independence. That independence, however, was threatened by Egypt, and in battle against Egypt, King Josiah fell. Dominance saw-sawed for some time between Egypt and Babylon, with the weight of power ultimately going to Babylon.

While the religious reforms under Josiah did not permanently stay the doom of the nation, they did have some good permanent results. The Book of Deuteronomy came to light; worship was henceforth centred in Jerusalem, and the semi-heathen shrines throughout the country were at last eliminated. But they do not seem to have created any revival of spiritual or national life in Judah. The process of social disintegration was only temporarily interrupted. The reason partly lay, no doubt, in the external nature of the reforms. Necessary and useful though they may be, changes made in the outward conditions of worship do not necessarily have a profound effect upon the spiritual life of people. Enforced by the government, these reforms of Josiah's necessary though they may have been, did not reflect a popular desire for reformation. The shrines of heathen worship may have been closed, but they were not replaced by a genuine revival of faith in God.

There are several things we might note as to the relevance of this lesson. 1. The reforms under Josiah were made possible through an effort to repair the temple. The "book of the law" was discovered in the Temple and became the instrument of reformation. We might do well to-day to look for the beginning of reformation of any aspect of modern life in repairing the life of the Church. In taking the church seriously, so as to desire to repair it, improve it and revive it, we may well discover the incentive and the inspiration for wider reformations.

2. It was the discovery and fresh reading of the scripture which drove Josiah to undertake his reformation. When men feel the impact of God's Word they are driven to action. Where no action comes from the reading of the Scriptures, that is a sign that God's Word has not been heard. But when the Scriptures come to life, so that men hear the living word of God, men themselves come alive in response to it. The times of real reformation, as in the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, and in the Methodist revival under Wesley, are times when the Bible, far from being regarded as a "paper-pope," comes alive for men as the living word of God.

3. The relationship between the religious and public life of Judah, must was symptomatic of national decay. The character of religious life in a nation — whether it is dynamic or dull, self-critical or easy-going, genuinely concerned about relationship with God, or merely formal and institutional — is closely related with

the social, political and economic life of the nation, as well as with the general spiritual fibre of the people. While the problem of reform in the modern world is concerned with many things, besides specifically religious subjects, it is not possible to effect any kind of far-reaching reforms in any realm by ignoring the question of God. Human life was made for God; and human life therefore cannot be corrected and made over without reference to God.

4. As we have seen, external improvements under Josiah did not re-create the life of Judah. The deeper issues of life were missed altogether. Reforms of any kind — religious, social, political, economic — are not easily achieved. They are not made merely by reading more scripture; they are not made by merely taking more interest in religion, merely by building up the membership and finances of the Church. This does not mean that men can do nothing. In fact it means that they must do a great deal of confession, repentance, and praying for the aid of the saving grace and power of God, while at the same time listening for hearing and obeying, the living Word of God, in the Scriptures and in the preaching and teaching of the Christian pulpit.



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