

Who was King Manasseh in the Bible?

The story of King Manasseh is told in 2 Kings 21:1-18 and 2 Chronicles 32:33-33:20, and he is also mentioned briefly in Jeremiah 15:4. Manasseh was king of the southern kingdom of Judah and the son of the godly king Hezekiah. Hezekiah had undertaken reforms in Judah to rid the land of idolatry. Manasseh, a wicked king, reversed these reforms and did much worse. The first five verses of 2 Kings 21 are a frank and stunning account of Manasseh's apostasy:

"Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. . . . He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, 'In Jerusalem I will put my Name.' In the two courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger." Although we are not given the specifics, Manasseh was also a treacherous king, killing innocent people: "Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end" (2 Kings 21:16). He was pronounced by God to be more wicked than the Amorites who had lived in Canaan before they were displaced by Israel in an act of God's judgment (2 Kings 21:11; see also 2 Chronicles 33:9).

Not only did Manasseh sin personally, but as king he led Judah in forsaking the LORD and worshiping idols. Such was the extent of their sin that God declared He would wipe out

Jerusalem as He had the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 21:13-15). Jeremiah 15:4 notes that it was the sin of Judah, initiated by Manasseh, that brought the judgment that Jeremiah proclaimed (the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the exile of the people). According to Jewish tradition, it was King Manasseh who murdered the prophet Isaiah.

Second Chronicles 33 adds more information not recorded in 2 Kings. God reached out to Manasseh and the people (presumably through prophets), but they would not listen. So God sent the Assyrians who captured Manasseh and took him away to exile (2 Chronicles 33:11). While in exile, “In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God” (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). The apocryphal book the “Prayer of Manasseh” claims to record Manasseh’s prayer of repentance, but it is highly unlikely that the contents of the Prayer of Manasseh accurately represent Manasseh’s prayer.

The repentant Manasseh was restored to his kingdom and started to rebuild Judah militarily (2 Chronicles 33:14), and he also began to institute religious reforms. “He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel” (2 Chronicles 33:15-16).

Even though Manasseh had a personal conversion, he was never able to lead Judah out of

the sin that he had previously led them into. They did not follow him in his reforms. The people continued in their idolatry (2 Chronicles 33:17), and, when Manasseh died, his son Amon “did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord” (2 Chronicles 33:22-23).

Manasseh is a tragic figure in Scripture. Although he repented of his sin, he was unable to undo the damage he had done to the nation or to his own son who followed him. Manasseh demonstrates that, while any sin may be forgiven when we repent, forgiveness does not necessarily remove the natural consequences that flow from disobedience.