

2017 SOP Day Sermon

Steps to the Knowledge of God by Michael Sokupa

Scripture Reading:

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

Introduction

This year, 2017, marks the 125th anniversary of the publication of the book *Steps to Christ*. I hope you have had an opportunity to read it through. If not, I challenge you to take time before this year ends to read it through again “for the first time.” Through this book countless thousands have come to know Jesus. Let us reflect on a few principles from *Steps to Christ* as we examine a Biblical story.

The first observation we can make today is this: When the knowledge of God is lacking, there is a corresponding crisis of faith in the life. In Hosea 4:6 the crisis is presented this way: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me.”* The entire section of Scripture from which this verse emanates—verses 4-10—is a message of judgment for not only a lack of knowledge, but rejecting knowledge when it comes.

In case you are wondering what the Bible means by knowledge, the meaning is clearly spelled out in verse 1: “Hear the word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land; There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land.” What a serious indictment for people who claimed to be God’s people! Yet, we see in Israel’s history a pattern playing out, namely that of lacking a knowledge of God. Let us examine closely a piece of this historical puzzle: the fascinating story of young King Josiah in 2 Chronicles 34. This story is rich with lessons that may help us not only analyze the situation of Israel, but also see how God works out His plan to give yet another chance for repentance.

Imagine a country with an eight-year old President. Absurd, you may say, yet it did happen in Israel during one period of its history. The story in 2 Chronicles 34:1 begins with the young 8-year old king. On the surface, there was a leadership crisis. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. There was a much deeper problem, especially when one examines the leaders that preceded this young monarch. “Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. But he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel” (2 Chronicles 33:1). Manasseh was the grandfather of king Josiah. “Amon [father of Josiah] was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. But he did evil in the sight of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done; for Amon sacrificed to all the carved images which his father Manasseh had made, and served them” (2 Chronicles 33:21,

22). Judging by his background and predecessors, Josiah had few positive role models to emulate. In fact, his career in leadership begins in a crisis.

A national moral crisis had gripped the kingdom. Not only were the kings worshiping other gods, the entire nation had been plunged into idolatry. Idolatry corrodes a relationship with God like rust corrodes iron. A slow but gradual decline of morality overtook Israel as it adopted idolatrous practices. Their minds became darkened through rampant idolatry and their knowledge of God was well-nigh obliterated. From the time of Hosea to the time of Jeremiah and Huldah, prophets living during Josiah's reign, idolatry had eclipsed the knowledge of God. The prophets sent messages of appeal to both kings and subjects, but their overtures met with no sustainable success.

The temple bore clear evidence of the general state of apostasy in the nation. The temple was in a state of disrepair (2 Chronicles 34:8). The reading of the Word of God was neglected (2 Chronicles 34:14). During the time of Hezekiah, Ellen White states "provisions had been made for the daily public reading of the book of the law to the people by teaching priests. It was the observance of the statutes recorded by Moses, especially those given in the book of the covenant, which forms a part of Deuteronomy, that had made the reign of Hezekiah so prosperous" (PK 392). Things changed for the worst during the reign of Manasseh. Ellen White further observes that Manasseh "had dared to set aside these statutes; and during his reign the temple copy of the book of the law, through careless neglect, had become lost. Thus, for many years the people generally were deprived of its instruction." (PK 392) These three crises are not uncommon even in our time. What did Josiah do to turn the tide? How did he deal with these crises in the nation he was now leading?

1. Josiah dealt with the symptoms first.

According to 2 Chronicles 34, king Josiah "in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images" (Verse 3). This extensive iconoclasm started in Jerusalem, from there it moved to the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon and Naphtali (Verse 6). This exercise on its own amounted to external reform; it did not touch the heart. There is a need to address external matters that are an open sin and rebellion against God and His law. But if we are simply tearing down these "idols," we are merely dealing with symptoms and we have not addressed the heart of the problem.

King Josiah began by removing the visual symptoms of Israel's inner apostasy—the apostasy of the heart. Josiah knew this was not going to be enough to turn the hearts of God's people back to Him, so he took another step.

2. Josiah ordered the repair of the temple.

As his next step in the reform movement, the young king ordered the repair of the temple. Josiah felt it essential to restore the symbol of Israel's spiritual connection to God. He was not okay with his own palace in exquisite condition, but God's House in disrepair. Josiah's

reverence for the temple begs the question, “How do we care for the place where we worship today—God’s church?” “Does your church look worse than your house does?”

But even this effort by Josiah to repair the temple, good as it was, was not good enough. This again was another external exercise. Money was collected, builders and craftsmen were assigned to the task of renovating the temple (2 Kings 22:4-6). Despite the negative and gloomy condition of the people’s spiritual lives, there were reasons for hope. For example, there was no need for auditors, for 2 Kings 22:7 reveals that “there need be no accounting made with them of the money delivered into their hands, because they deal faithfully.” Even though the people were idol worshipers, not all was lost. There were people that were faithful even in small ways. This is a cogent reminder to us today that even in the worse situations, when it seems like all have forsaken God, there is always something redeeming on which to build.

In bringing the people back to the knowledge of God, king Josiah dealt with the problems that he could see, and used what he had at his disposal—his leadership and authority. He exercised his leadership and used his authority to clear the territory of all the idols. But until the book of the law was found in the temple during the renovations, he did not have anything to guide him in the laws and practices required by God. God must have seen the faithful work of His young leader, because something great happened to change the fortunes of the land. One day Hilkiah the priest excitedly exclaimed: “I have found the book of the Law in the house of the Lord” (2 Kings 22:8). The rediscovery of the book was significant because it’s discovery was the starting point for restoring the knowledge of God and His plan for Israel. The young king now moves to the next step in the reform movement.

3. Josiah focused on the nation’s “the lack of knowledge.”

It does seem from the passages we have read on the story of Josiah that the king himself had not read the book. When the book was found by Hilkiah the priest, he gave it to Shaphan and he brought it to the king and read it to him (2 Kings 22:8-10). Some believe that this book was the book of Deuteronomy. It is also likely, according to some Bible scholars, that this book was composed of all the books of Moses. Ellen White states that “Josiah was deeply stirred as he heard read for the first time the exhortations and warnings recorded in this ancient manuscript” (PK 393). The Bible captures the king’s response this way: “When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes” (2 Kings 22:11). Ellen White comments further:

The encouragements offered as the reward of obedience were accompanied by prophecies of judgements against the disobedient; and as the king heard the inspired words, he recognized, in the picture set before him, conditions that were similar to those actually existing in his kingdom. In connection with these prophetic portrayals of departure from God, he was startled to find plain statements to the effect that the day of calamity would follow swiftly and that there would be no remedy. The language was plain; (PK 394)

The king could not have reached this level of understanding with just a casual reading of the book. The plain language of the Book of the Law met with an eager mind to understand the truth. Ellen White offers several principles on the study of the Bible that leads to the knowledge of God. We will pick a few of these to show-case the way she exalts Scripture and the guidance she offers to the earnest seeker for truth. This will hopefully apply the message from the story of Josiah to we who live in the 21st Century. Here are two questions to consider as we move on: How can we get to know God through His Word? How can we allow God to reform us through His Word?

a. We should study the Word of God for ourselves

King Josiah did not listen to the interpretation of any of his men. They were learned scholars of the Word, but they read to the king a plain “thus says the Lord.” The unavailability of Scripture during the reign of Josiah, led the people to depend on the priests for the interpretation of Scripture. Ellen White cautions in *Steps to Christ* p. 89 that we should not depend on other people’s interpretation of Scripture.

We should not take the testimony of any man as to what the Scriptures teach, but should study the words of God for ourselves. If we allow others to do our thinking, we shall have crippled energies and contracted abilities. The noble powers of the mind may be so dwarfed by lack of exercise on themes worthy of their concentration as to lose their ability to grasp the deep meaning of the word of God. The mind will enlarge if it is employed in tracing out the relation of the subjects of the Bible, comparing scripture with scripture and spiritual things with spiritual. SC 89

Pastors and theologians today should reject the notion that they are sole interpreters of the Scriptures.

b. We should study the Word of God diligently

King Josiah must have paid very close attention to every word that was read to him from the Book of the Law. Ellen White points out:

But there is but little benefit derived from a hasty reading of Scriptures. One may read the whole Bible through and yet fail to see its beauty or comprehend its deep and hidden meaning. One passage studied until its significance is clear to the mind and its relation to the plan of salvation is evident, is of more value than the perusal of many chapters with no definite purpose in view and no positive instruction gained. Keep your Bible with you. As you have opportunity, read it; fix the texts in your memory. Even while you are walking the streets you may read a passage and meditate upon it, thus fixing it in the mind. SC 90

The reading of the Bible has declined among Christian denominations. This was revealed by a number of studies that were done by the Barna Research Group some years ago. We need to study God’s Word faithfully and apply it in our daily life.

c. We should approach the study of God's Word with prayer.

The knowledge of God comes through earnest seeking for understanding. In this endeavor, a prayerful study of Scriptures is a must. Ellen White describes the book that was discovered in Josiah's time as "a treasure of knowledge."

Thus Josiah, from his earliest manhood, had endeavored to take advantage of his position as king to exalt the principles of God's holy law. And now, while Shaphan the scribe was reading to him out of the book of the law, the king discerned in this volume a treasure of knowledge, a powerful ally, in the work of reform he so much desired to see wrought in the land. He resolved to walk in the light of its counsels, and also to do all in his power to acquaint his people with its teachings and to lead them if possible, to cultivate reverence and love for the law of heaven. PK 398

There is a recognition on the part of the king that it is not enough to deal with what is on the outside. The king therefore, led the people to the knowledge of God through a study of the book that was discovered. The king did all he could within his power to acquaint his people with this re-discovered book. His aim was to restore the people to a fervent relationship with their Creator.

We cannot obtain wisdom without earnest attention and prayerful study. Some portions of Scripture are indeed too plain to be misunderstood, but there are others whose meaning does not lie on the surface to be seen at a glance. Scripture must be compared with Scripture. There must be careful research and prayerful reflection. And such study will be richly repaid. As the miner discovers veins of precious metal concealed beneath the surface of the earth, so will he who perseveringly searches the word of God for hid treasure find truths of the greatest value, which are concealed from the view of the careless seeker. The words of inspiration, pondered in the heart, will be as streams flowing from the fountain of life. SC 90

The impact the book had on the king shows that it was read thoroughly with keen interest. There are lessons we can learn from the story of Josiah that relate significantly to principles found in the book *Steps to Christ*.

The story of King Josiah teaches first about the importance of repentance. Second Kings 22:11 and 2 Chronicles 34:19 both state that when the king heard the Words of the Law "he tore his clothes." Tearing one's garments was an act of mourning. The king expressed sorrow for sin. The act by itself does not guarantee a genuine repentance. After being convicted of sin, the people on the Day of Pentecost cried out, "What shall we do?" Peter's response was "Repent" (Acts 2:37, 38). In Acts 3:19, he elaborates: "Repent therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out."

"Repentance includes sorrow for sin and a turning away from it. We shall not renounce sin unless we see its sinfulness; until we turn away from it in heart, there will be no real change in the life." SC 23

Ellen White in her chapter on repentance, points to several examples of a kind of repentance that is not genuine and Biblical: Balaam, acknowledged his guilt when he saw the angel with a sword before him. "But there was no genuine repentance for sin, no conversion of purpose, no abhorrence of evil." SC 23

Judas also feared the consequences of his betrayal without acknowledging "that he had betrayed the spotless Son of God and denied the Holy One of Israel" SC 24 In contrast,

the prayer of David after his fall, illustrates the nature of true sorrow for sin. His repentance was sincere and deep. There was no effort to palliate his guilt; no desire to escape the judgment threatened, inspired his prayer. David saw the enormity of his transgression; he saw the defilement of his soul; he loathed his sin. It was not for pardon only that he prayed, but for purity of heart. He longed for the joy of holiness – to be restored to harmony and communion with God. SC 24

This was Josiah's experience, as Huldah described it. But the king was not satisfied to have this peace with God alone. He wanted the entire nation, every family and every individual, to have this conversion experience and to grow in the knowledge of God. The same burden needs to weigh heavily in the heart of every leader of God's church for the wayward and erring people of God.

We may have flattered ourselves, as did Nicodemus, that our life has been upright, that our moral character is correct, and think that we need not humble the heart before God, like the common sinner: but when the light from Christ shines into our souls, we shall see how impure we are; we shall discern the selfishness of motive, the enmity against God, that has defiled every act of life. Then we shall know that our own righteousness is indeed as filthy rags, and that the blood of Christ alone can cleanse us from the defilement of sin, and renew our hearts in His own likeness. SC 28

With a sincere repentance, followed by a confession of sin, the king longs to be closer to God. He has removed the idols and the Scripture had confronted him regarding sin, he has acknowledged his sin and now he confesses: "for great is the wrath of the Lord that is poured out on us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord, to do according to all that is written in the book" (2 Chronicles 34:21).

The king's acknowledgment of both individual and corporate sin was accepted by God, but confession must also be accompanied by genuine repentance and transformation of life. While this is not our work, we need to surrender and place ourselves at God's disposal to have Him work an acceptable change in us.

"Confession will not be acceptable to God without sincere repentance and reformation. There must be decided changes in the life; everything offensive to God must be put away. This will be the result of genuine sorrow for sin." SC 39

Josiah knew the story of the exodus. He knew that God could raise another nation and allow the rebellion of His people to consume them. Josiah had a heavy burden for God's people. He had fulfilled what we would call "duty" before God as a leader. But he was working toward making sure that no one was lost. Do you have a burden today for a family member, a son, daughter, parent, sister, or brother who is not responding to God's call for salvation? How about a friend or coworker? You may have done all you can, but do not give up. Nobody thought that the Saul would ever repent. He was actively persecuting God's people. But God was at work, and His purpose was finally achieved in Saul, who later became the Apostle Paul.

The examples in God's word of genuine repentance and humiliation reveal a spirit of confession in which there is no excuse for sin or attempt at self-justification. Paul did not seek to shield himself; he paints his sin in its darkest hue, not attempting to lessen his guilt. He says, 'Many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities' (Acts 26:10, 11). In another confession, Paul declared: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim 1:15). SC 41

Even in our rebellion, God has a way of reaching out to us, to work out his purpose for our salvation. The next stage in the process is consecration. "Then the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book" (2 Kings 23:31).

The king, having consulted with the prophetess Huldah, was aware of the condition of Israel. He knew that there was judgment lingering over the nation due to the long tide of apostasy. The message from the prophetess assured the king that he will have a time of peace throughout his reign. When the king dies, the pending judgment will fall on Israel. The message was clear and specific. The king decided to call the entire nation, not just to inform them about the judgment, but to give one last appeal. He led the nation into covenant renewal. By doing this he hoped that the tide would turn and Israel would be saved. Ellen White presents thoughts on consecrating ourselves to God in similar terms to the covenant renewal in the time of Josiah.

Many are inquiring, 'How am I to make the surrender of myself to God?' You desire to give yourself to Him, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair. What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change the heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can

choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him. SC 47

While the surrender of the will is an individual matter, the cooperation of the people with king Josiah was amazing. They cooperated with him in taking down the idols nation-wide. We do not hear of any resistance or complaint. They cooperated with him in the replacement of the idol worship with true worship in a restored temple. The discovery of the book was welcomed, the word from the prophetess Huldah was received without any resistance. The king had the book read in the presence of both young and old. The entire nation listened to the Word of God that had been kept away from them for many years. The Scriptures were kept away from people in Josiah's time, and for many centuries after him there are eras where the Word of God was placed in the shadows. For example, this year marks 500 years since the Reformation and the nailing of the 95 theses by Martin Luther. The reading of the Bible was eclipsed by tradition for many years before Luther. He and the Reformers who were his contemporaries brought the attention of the people back to the study of God's Word.

The people in the time of Josiah seemed to have a desire for salvation. The same is true today, according to Ellen White:

Desire for goodness and holiness are right as far as they go; but if you stop here, they will avail nothing. Many will be lost while hoping and desiring to be Christians. They do not come to the point of yielding the will to God. They do not now choose to be Christians. SC 47

Through the right exercise of the will, an entire change may be made in your life. By yielding up your will to Christ, you ally yourself with the power that is above all principalities and powers. You will have strength from above to hold you steadfast, and thus through constant surrender to God you will be enabled to live the new life even the life of faith. SC 48

The story of Josiah and the inspired counsels found in *Steps to Christ* both challenge us to come to the knowledge of God. The study of the Word of God is critical to the Christian's life and practice. Without it we are prone to go astray, as Israel did in the years when apostasy enveloped the nation. The study of the Scriptures and the counsels of the Spirit of Prophecy remain important in the work of Christ to transform lives in preparation for eternity with Him.

**All Scriptures quoted are from the New King James Version of the Bible.*