

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: The Death of Josiah

A reader of the books of II Kings or II Chronicles may have found reason to pause at the disturbing record of the death of Josiah. This record would seem to be an example of a failure of the prophecy of God and a good example of a contradiction in Scripture. However, when we look at it closely, we will see that it is in fact a grave lesson to those who would carelessly misuse the Word of God.

Since II Chronicles gives us a more complete picture of this event than II Kings, we will focus our study on that book. In II Chronicles 34:23-28, we read the grim prophecy of the impending punishment of the LORD upon the nation of Judah. Verse 25 states, **“Because they have forsaken Me and burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands. Therefore My wrath will be poured out on this place, and not be quenched.”** However, in verse 28 God promises leniency upon Josiah, the righteous king who had sent to the prophetess with such concern to see what the LORD was going to do about Judah’s many sins. **“Surely I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place and its inhabitants.”** This verse seems to be a guarantee to Josiah that he will not die in war, but rather in peace.

In chapter 35, however, we read of Josiah’s death. Beginning in verse 20 we read, **“After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Necho king of Egypt came up to fight against Carchemish by the Euphrates; and Josiah went out against him. But he sent messengers to him, saying, ‘What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I have not come against you this day, but against the house with which I have war; for God commanded me to make haste. Refrain from meddling with God, Who is with me, lest He destroy you.’**

“Nevertheless Josiah would not turn his face from him, but disguised himself so that he might fight with him, and did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God. So he came to fight in the Valley of Megiddo. And the archers shot King Josiah, and the king said to his servants, ‘Take me away, for I am severely wounded.’ His servants therefore took him out of that chariot and put him in the second chariot that he had, and they brought him to Jerusalem. So he died, and was buried in one of the tombs of his fathers. And all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah.”

This account would seem to clash directly with the promise of God in the previous chapter. Hadn’t God promised Josiah that he would “be gathered to your grave in peace”? Wasn’t this prophecy broken when Josiah was, in fact, gathered to his grave in a time of war? This fact would seem to be a direct contradiction with the prophecy God had made concerning Josiah, and would seem to call into question the infallibility of His Word. Could it be that we have at last found an unanswerable contradiction in Scripture?

There are several things we need to consider before making our final judgment. The first is that Josiah’s actions in attacking the King of Egypt were in direct disobedience to the Word of God. If you will notice again in verse 21, the King of Egypt claims, **“God commanded me to make haste. Refrain from meddling with God, Who is with me, lest He destroy you.”** King Necho actually claimed to have God’s approval and command to fight the war to which he was going. This may

seem unlikely to us who are used to thinking of Israel as the only godly nation at that time, but Necho's claim is verified by Scripture, which tells us in verse 22 that Josiah **"did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God."** Thus it would seem that God had indeed commanded Necho to do what he was doing. Necho tried to warn Josiah not to interfere with his God-given mission, but Josiah would not listen, no doubt not believing Necho's claim. This may seem understandable to us, as Necho was a king of a nation that did not know God as Israel did, and Josiah had no particular reason to believe that Necho's claim was anything more than a ruse. However, we have to remember that Josiah had ready access to prophets of the LORD in his land, and could easily have asked them to verify Necho's claim. Moreover, if that was too hard for him, Josiah could have inquired of the LORD himself by means of the Urim and Thummim. Yet Josiah did not do either of these things, choosing instead to rely upon his own intelligence and to take matters into his own hands in attempting to stop Necho.

Yet this, although it may have been a sin, would not seem to be enough to explain the failure of God's prophecy to Josiah. After all, even though Josiah sinned, this does not mean that God is excused from fulfilling His prophecy to him. I refuse to believe that our sin can thwart God's stated purpose in this way. We have great authority from God to choose right and wrong, but I do not believe that we have the authority to choose whether or not His prophecies will be fulfilled or not. The prophecies of God are not dependent upon our future actions unless it is specifically so stated.

Therefore we need to consider the matter further. Why did Josiah go up to attack the King of Egypt in the first place? Why would he risk his relatively tiny army in a totally unnecessary attack against the powerful King Necho? I believe that the answer is that Josiah believed that he would be invincible.

In many shoot-'em-up computer games of the day, there are power-ups known as "invincibility." These power-ups basically make the player of the game impossible to kill. Often upon getting such a power-up, a gamer will run around madly attacking his enemies, heedless of the bullets they may shoot him with or the swords they may slash him with. The reason is that, as long as he has the "invincibility" power-up, he cannot be hurt or killed, and he can act in whatever reckless manner he wishes. It would seem that Josiah considered the prophecy of God that he would "be gathered to your grave in peace" as a sort of invincibility power-up. He could start whatever war he wished and take whatever reckless chances in battle that he wanted to take because he knew that he could not be killed because God had promised him that he would die in peace. This attitude would explain Josiah's hot-headed action in attacking the King of Egypt. He believed that he could not lose, and that the prophecy of God promised him that he was indestructible in war. Therefore, like a maddened game player with an invincibility power-up, he charged recklessly into battle with the King of Egypt and met his bloody end.

But how can this be? Wasn't Josiah justified in assuming that he wouldn't die in war because God had promised him that he would die in peace? Wasn't the prophecy of God indeed a sort of "invincibility power-up" that should have kept him from dying in the manner in which he died? Why did the "invincibility power-up" not work for Josiah? Did God fall short in fulfilling His promise?

The answer, I believe, lies in the original prophecy given to Josiah. If we will look closely at the context of the promise made to Josiah that he would die in peace, we will see that it says, **"Surely I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes will not see all the calamity which I WILL BRING on this place and its inhabitants."** (II Chronicles 34:28a, emphasis mine). Thus we see that the calamity God promised Josiah that he would never see was specifically the calamity that God was going to bring upon Judah. It was not just any war that God promised Josiah that he would not see, but rather the war that God was going to bring upon Judah to punish it for all its sins.

Thus, God's promise to Josiah that he will be gathered to his grave in peace is seen to be in the context that he would not be gathered to his grave at the terrible time of war when God brings **"all the curses that are written in the book"** upon the sinful land of Judah. This was the war in

which Josiah would not be killed. It was not any war that he would not be killed in, but only that great war which was to destroy his nation. God had only promised him that he would protect him from the calamity that He was going to bring on Judah. He never promised him that He would protect him from a calamity that Josiah himself brought upon Judah, or that he would not die in a foolish war that he himself started unnecessarily, and in contradiction to God's command.

Therefore, God's prophecy did come true. Josiah died in a time when God's dealings with Israel were peaceful, and He had not yet brought the calamity He had promised upon them. Josiah did die in war, but it was his own war, not God's, and therefore was not covered by the prophecy. There was no "invincibility power-up" promised to Josiah in this war, and thus he was susceptible to the violent death that he died.

But did Josiah know what he was doing? Did he realize that he was interpreting God's message incorrectly? I do not believe that he did. I believe that he thought he was perfectly right in interpreting the promise of God in this way. I believe from reading this account that he was certain as he went into the battle that he would not be killed for God would not allow it. Yet he was killed, and his family and nation were brought to disaster because of it. He was mistaken in his interpretation of God's promise, and he died believing in his mistaken interpretation.

Yet shouldn't some leniency have been given Josiah? Shouldn't God, since Josiah was sincerely wrong, have cut him some slack and made sure that he didn't die in this war he was fighting? Shouldn't he have been bailed out and not made to suffer the extreme consequences of his mistake? Apparently God didn't think so. God takes His Word very seriously, and Josiah's disregard of the words of God through Pharaoh were enough to make him deserving of his fate. Honest mistakes are apparently not enough to get one an "invincibility power-up," or any other help from God.

The sad thing is that many people today treat the Word of God the same way that Josiah did. Finding some promise of God that they believe may apply to their situation and that they can "cash in on," they risk it all on this promise.

One example I can think of is a promise taken by certain missionaries. Mission work is a most difficult task, and I have nothing but respect for those who leave their home country and all that is familiar to them to go to a foreign field to serve the Lord. Yet I have heard of some missionaries of the past who have gone to the field with little or no preparations, taking nothing with them and making no plans for what to do when they get there. These missionaries have gone out under what they believe is God's promise to them in Matthew 10:9-10, which states, "**Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your moneybelts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food.**" Believing these verses to be a promise to them of God's provision, these missionaries go out without preparation for their journey and taking nothing with them, believing that God will provide for them along the way.

Yet those who go to the mission field in this way have not studied their Bibles very well. For in Luke 22:35-36 we read, "**And He said to them, 'When I sent you without money bag, sack, and sandals, did you lack anything?' So they said, 'Nothing.' Then He said to them, 'But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a sack; and he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one.'**" This command of Christ's was rescinded by Him shortly after He had given it. Any missionary who bases his actions on this promise is using the Word of God incorrectly. Similarly to Josiah, they are believing that they have a "get-out-of-planning-free" power-up, but they are incorrect just as Josiah was. And just like in the case of Josiah, many of these missionaries who go to the field neglecting preparations are forced to suffer the consequences of their rash actions. God does not bail them out just because of the sacrifice they are making or because they sincerely believe they are doing His will. In fact, they are actually ignoring His words in Luke 22 just as Josiah ignored God's words through Necho. Thus, they deserve (unfortunately) the disaster that they often get.

This is just one sad example of how people of our day misuse the promises of God in the manner of Josiah. Promises made to the Israelites concerning tithing are often misappropriated. Promises of blessings for obedience are cited eagerly by those who wish to experience them. Indeed, many are the promises of blessing that are twisted to bring benefit to the believers of today. It is no marvel, however, that promises of curses and punishments are not thus appropriated, but are often ignored and left alone. We all wish to find our “power-ups” in the Bible, and often the Bible interpretations that we use to justify them are sadly lacking. Like Josiah, we see what we want to see, and recklessly hope in words misused. Like Josiah, we too will suffer a sad fate if we put our trust in misapplied promises.

Just remember who Josiah was, and what God thought of him. II Kings 23:25 tells us of Josiah, **“Now 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 after him did any arise like him.”** So Josiah was the best, the most godly, king that Judah had ever had. Surely, if God would have protected anyone from the consequences of misinterpreting His words, it would have been Josiah. Yet God didn’t protect him from his mistake, and he died because of it. So do we imagine that God would any more bail us out from a similar mistake? I do not believe so.

Many seek to appropriate promises to themselves. There is a teaching out there that says that all you have to do to get God to fulfill a promise for you is to name the promise and claim it for yourself, and that God will then have to fulfill it for you. This is called “name it and claim it” theology. Well, Josiah named it and claimed it, and he died for doing so. We would do better to take a more humble place before God, and not try to force Him into fulfilling promises that we have only made the briefest of efforts to attempt to understand. Otherwise, like Josiah, we might find ourselves in very deep trouble.

Therefore, in conclusion, the story of Josiah is not a contradiction. God did not contradict His Word when taken in the proper context. However, Josiah had misapplied God’s word, and he paid the severest possible consequences for his mistake. We should take solemn warning from Josiah’s error. Although it may seem attractive to find in every promise in the Bible some unbelievable blessing for ourselves, a careless use of God’s Word can result in disastrous consequences. We need to humbly pray and seek the Lord’s will before making any reckless move on a promise in the Bible. Moreover, we need to understand the concepts of interpretation, right division, and attention to context before we ever interpret a promise as applying to ourselves or our situation. The consequences if we do not, as in the case of Josiah, may be more than we can bear.

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