

JOSIAH
Spiritual Deafness
II Chronicles 34-35

I. Ray of Sunshine on the Eve of Destruction

A. Josiah's Family Tree

David's descendants offer a rather dismal picture of **generational slide**. Though the overall progression is downward, we have seen periodic bright spots, exceptions to the rule. Eight of the twenty kings of Judah were said to be "good." Josiah was one of the best. His family tree illustrates the principle that it is often the **fourth** generation that recaptures the spiritual passion of their founding fathers.

- Great-grandfather Hezekiah was one of Judah's greatest kings. He had a heart like David's (II Chron. 29:2).
- Grandfather Manasseh was the most evil king Judah ever had. He reigned for 55 years (II Chron. 33:1-20).
- Father Amon was evil, like his father (II Chron. 33:21-25).

Josiah, the son of Amon, illustrates how sometimes several generations perpetuate spiritual mediocrity (or worse!) until a generation arises that rejects the status quo and longs to recapture for the passionate **reality of God** that their ancestors once knew!

B. The Last Best Hope of Judah

Though few recognized it at the time, Josiah's ascendancy to the throne was God's **final offer** of hope to his people. For three centuries God had been giving his people the opportunity to repent and reform their ways so that their fate would be different from that of Israel (the northern kingdom). With Josiah, God gave his people one last and glorious opportunity to get it right.

*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. (II Kings 23:25).*

Alas, the revival Josiah led was short-lived, and when he died in 609 B.C. Judah's fate was sealed. Judgment was inevitable and irrevocable. In 586 BC, just 23 years after his death, the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and took God's people into exile.

II. Long Live the King!

Summary statement.

*Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem.² And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of **David** his father; and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. (II Chron. 34:1-2).*

Josiah's life can be divided into three parts according to his age.

A. Seeking God (age 16).

For in the eighth year of his reign (age 16), while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father... (II Chron. 34:3).

As a teenager, Josiah had a heart for God... and not just any God. He wanted "the God of David." No other god would do.

Again and again in studying these kings we have seen how vital it is to have a seeking heart. In Chronicles, it seems to be more important to seek God than to find him!

- *... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chron. 7:14).*
- *The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, ² and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. (II Chron. 15:1-3).*
- *Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴ And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. (II Chron. 20:3-4).*
- *Uzziah set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God, and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper. (II Chron. 26:5).*

Describe what a seeking heart looks like. What are its characteristics? How do you know if it is present? How do you know if it is absent?

- Hunger for God.
- Desire to pray.
- Desire to worship.
- Desire to spend time in God's Word.
- Passion.
- Humility.
- Burden to tell others about God.

B. Purging the Land (age 20).

...and in the twelfth year (age 20) he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images. ⁴ And they chopped down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and he cut down the incense altars that stood above them. And he broke in pieces the Asherim and the carved and the metal images, and he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. ⁵ He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. ⁶ And in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, ⁷ he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images

into powder and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem. (II Chron. 34:3-7). (See II Kings 23:4-20 for an even greater description of Josiah's purge.)

As a young man, Josiah transformed his "seeking heart" into national policy! He intuitively knew that if Judah was going to be restored to a right relationship with God, the first thing to do was to rid the land of idols. God will come and fill only what is **clean** and **empty**.

- He had to **rid** the land of bad things before God good fill it with good things....
- He had to **destroy** before he could build....
- He had to deal with **sin** before it was possible to walk in righteousness....
- He had to cut out **cancer** before health could be restored....
- He knew that **repentance** must precede revival.

C. **Restoring** True Worship (Age 26).

1. The Temple is **repaired**.

*⁸ Now in the eighteenth year of his reign (age 26), when he had cleansed the land and the house, he sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and Joah the son of Joahaz, the recorder, to **repair the house of the LORD** his God. ⁹ They came to Hilkiah the high priest and gave him the money that had been brought into the house of God, which the Levites, the keepers of the threshold, had collected from Manasseh and Ephraim and from all the remnant of Israel and from all Judah and Benjamin and from the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁰ And they gave it to the workmen who were working in the house of the LORD. And the workmen who were working in the house of the LORD gave it for repairing and restoring the house. ¹¹ They gave it to the carpenters and the builders to buy quarried stone, and timber for binders and beams for the buildings that the kings of Judah had let go to ruin. ¹² And the men did the work faithfully. (II Chron. 34:8-12).*

Now that the land had been purged of idols, Josiah began to do the most essential work of all: repairing the Temple and restoring it to its proper function. Proper worship is foundational in everything!

2. The Book is **(re)discovered**.

But the most significant event that occurred during the repairs on the Temple was not the repairs on the Temple! Rather, it was the discovery of "The Book." It is indeed ironic that the Book of God was lost in the Temple! The (re)discovery of the reality of **a speaking God**, changed everything!

¹⁴ While they were bringing out the money that had been brought into the house of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the LORD given through Moses. ¹⁵ Then Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD." And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan. ¹⁶

Shaphan brought the book to the king, and further reported to the king, "All that was committed to your servants they are doing. ¹⁷ They have emptied out the money that was found in the house of the LORD and have given it into the hand of the overseers and the workmen." ¹⁸ Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it before the king. (II Chron. 34:14-18).

What was this Book? Apparently, it was either a copy of the entire Pentateuch (five books of Moses) or perhaps a copy of some or all of **Deuteronomy** alone.

We can only guess why this book had been "lost." Perhaps it had been hidden in the Temple for safe-keeping during some of the persecutions of the ungodly kings. Perhaps it had been neglected for so long it had been forgotten. We just don't know. What we do know is this. The rediscovery of this long lost book of Moses created a **revolution** in Judah. (The rediscovery of God's Word always has this effect!).

3. Spiritual counsel is needed.

*¹⁹ And when the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his clothes. ²⁰ And the king commanded Hilkiah, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, Abdon the son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying, ²¹ "Go, **inquire of the LORD** for me and for those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that has been found. 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 this book." ²² So Hilkiah and those whom the king had sent went to **Huldah** the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tokhath, son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe (now she lived in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter) and spoke to her to that effect. (II Chron. 34:19-22).*

King Josiah understood what the book said. However, he didn't know what it meant? Was doom inevitable? Was there time to repent and reform? What should he do as the leader of his people?

To find answers to these questions, a delegation of leaders went to see Huldah the prophetess. ¹ Everyone seemed to instinctively know that she would know what to do! Apparently, she had such a close walk with God that all Jerusalem knew she was the one to talk with if it was a matter of discerning God's will.

*²³ And she said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, ²⁴ Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the curses that are written in the book that was read before the king of Judah." ²⁵ Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings 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 will not be quenched. ²⁶ But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him. Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, ²⁷ because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself **before God** when you*

¹ Josiah seeks counsel from a women. Why not seek out Jeremiah or Zephaniah who were also living at the time?

² For example, see Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26.

*heard his words against this place and its inhabitants, and you have humbled yourself **before me** and have torn your clothes and wept before me. I also have heard you, declares the LORD. ²⁸ Behold, 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 disaster that I will bring upon this place and its inhabitants.' " And they brought back word to the king. (II Chron. 34:23-28).*

4. The fruit of obedience.

There were basically two immediate results that followed when God's Word was rediscovered and put into practice.

a. The **covenant** with God is renewed.

Josiah read the "Book of the Covenant" to all the people in the courtyard of the Temple.

And the king stood in his place 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 perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book. ³² Then he made all who were present in Jerusalem and in Benjamin join in it. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers. (II Chron. 34:31-32).

b. The **Passover** is celebrated.

Reading from God's Word helped the people to understand that they had neglected the Passover... the annual celebration that reminded them of their redemption from slavery and their covenant relationship with God. II Chronicles 35:1-19 describes a Passover like none other that had ever been celebrated in Jerusalem. From his personal possessions, King Josiah offered 30,000 lambs and goats and 3,000 bulls. Others soon followed his lead so that many thousands of sacrifices were made that glorious day.

No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet. None of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah, and the priests and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ In the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah this Passover was kept. (II Chron. 35:18-19).

III. Revival and the Word.

The (re)discovery of God's Word was at the heart of the revival that occurred under the reign of good king Josiah.

A. Revival leads to the **Word** and the Word leads to **revival**.

Josiah was already well along in reforming the nation when the Book was discovered. Then the discovery of God's Word led to further and deeper reforms. So which comes first? Revival or Word? The chicken or the egg?

- B. When God's Word is neglected... spiritual life languishes.

There are many ways to neglect God's Word: laziness, neglect, higher criticism, academic scholasticism, skepticism, etc. But whatever the cause may be, the results of neglecting God's Word are always the same: spiritual death.

- C. Revival not based in God's Word is wild fire.

Don't confuse zeal and emotion with revival. There are numerous examples in the Bible of religious fervor for gods that are false and spiritual practices that are displeasing to God. Authentic revival is always based squarely in the Word of God and the great themes one encounters there: repentance, confession, faith, burden for the lost, etc.

- D. God's Word is creative.

God created the universe out of nothing. He spoke it into existence: "Let there be light!" In like manner, God's Word is still powerful in its creative power in our lives, our families, our churches, our nation. But first, we have to become "nothing."

TABLE TALK

1. Josiah began to "seek God" when he was 16 years of age. How old were you when you began to seek God? When you look at the teenagers around you, how many are seeking God? As a church (as "mighty men") what can we do to help our teenagers develop a heart for God?
2. Look again at the characteristics of a "seeking heart" (page 2). Do they describe the condition of your own heart? Why or why not?
3. American evangelicals talk more about "finding" God than "seeking" him. Chronicles talks more about "seeking" God. Is this observation significant? Why or why not?
4. How do you respond to the role played by Hulda, the prophetess (a woman!)? Does this Bible story fit with your theology of women in ministry? How hard is it for a man to listen to God's voice through a woman? Why is this issue important?
5. Describe your current practice of spending time in God's Word. Is it possible to "lose" the Book in church? What happens when God's Word is neglected or lost? What can we do to (re)discover the Book?

IV. Josiah's fatal flaw.

A. What went wrong?

Like most of the other "good" kings of Judah, Josiah ended badly. He did not **finish strong**. If the outcome of a football game is determined only in the fourth quarter, then Josiah's final chapter leaves a big question mark over his life. Of all the good kings of Judah, Josiah's flaw is the most difficult to understand.

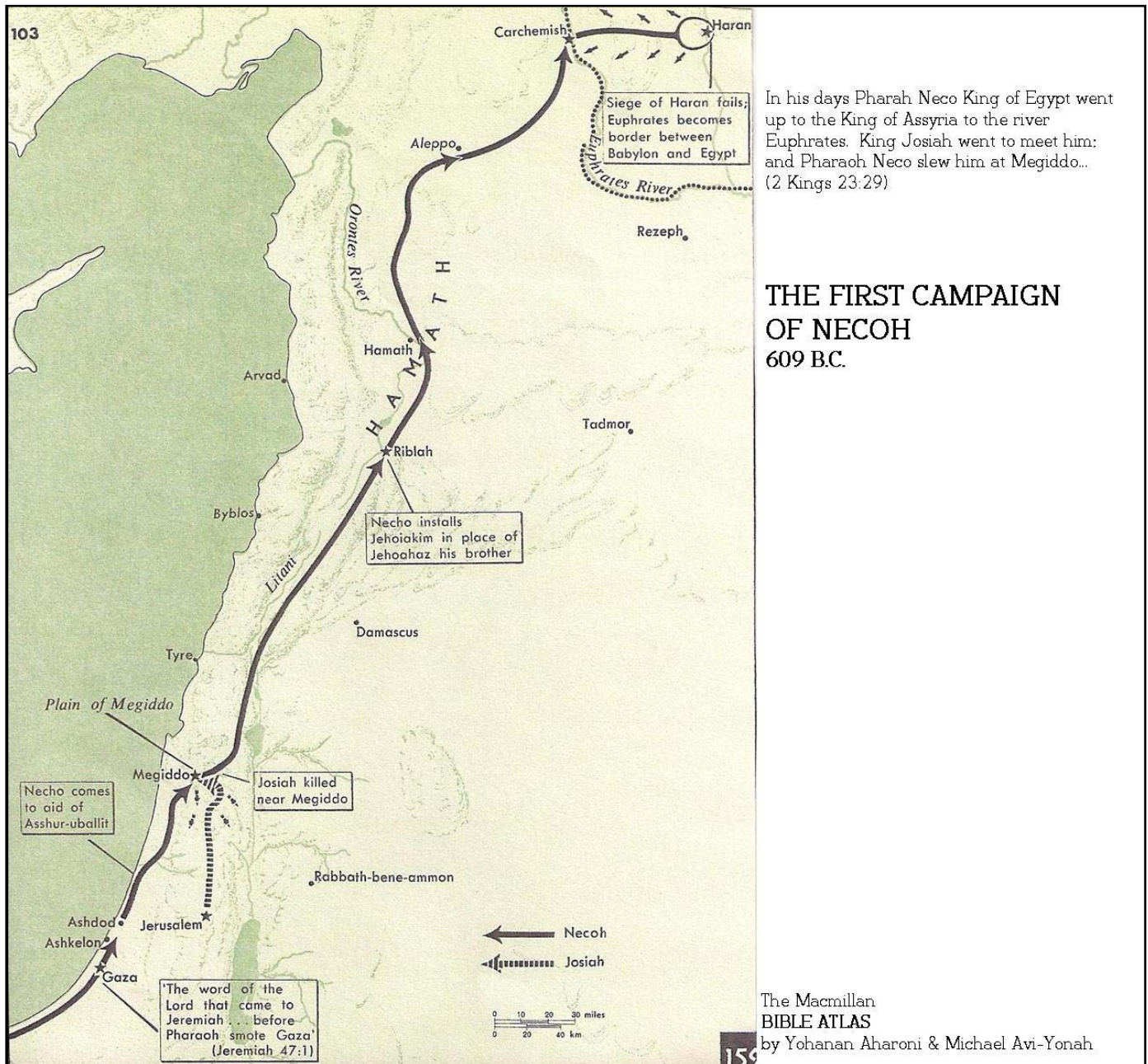
*²⁰ After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Neco king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out to meet him. ²¹ But Neco sent envoys to Josiah, saying, "What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war (Babylon). And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you." ²² Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He **did not listen** to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo. ³ ²³ And the archers shot King Josiah. And the king said to his servants, "Take me away, for I am badly wounded." ²⁴ So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. ²⁵ Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. (II Chron. 35:20-25).*

These verses come as a shock! After three decades of godly rule, suddenly, without warning, Josiah makes a foolish decision and things end badly. What happened? What went wrong? How do we explain such a tragic ending to such a good life? Understanding the cultural and historical context of this battle will help us to better understand some of the dynamics at work.

The year is 609 B.C. and Pharaoh Neco and his army were moving north in an effort to help the Assyrians in their struggle against the rising power of Babylon. The stakes were high in this conflict between Assyria and Babylon. The outcome of this struggle would determine who would be the reigning superpower of the Ancient Near East.⁴

³ Because of its strategic location, the "Plain of Megiddo" has been a place where armies have met and fought since the earliest times. The book of Revelation states that the final battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil will be waged here, at Mount Megiddo, or Armageddon (Rev. 16:16).

⁴ This question would be finally settled four years later (605 B.C.) at Carchemish, a city on the Euphrates River. Here Nebuchadnezzar II led the Babylonian forces to complete victory over the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies. This battle is one of the decisive battles of world history and marks the defeat of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of Babylon. Further, the defeat of the Egyptian army meant that Egypt would not again play a major role in Near Eastern affairs for many years to come.



King Josiah did not want the Egyptians helping the Assyrians and so marched out to stop them. The text does not explain Josiah's motivation. Perhaps he just didn't want them marching through his land. Perhaps he was desirous of Assyria's defeat and so opposed anyone who offered her help. Perhaps he was seeking to gain favor with Babylon. We can't be sure. But the result of his decision was disastrous. The army of Judah was defeated and Josiah was killed (in spite of his disguise). He was only 39 years of age! The revival and reforms he had inaugurated came to a screeching halt. The last, best hope of Judah was dead. Judgment and doom were now **inevitable**.

B. Three attempts to explain what happened.

Josiah's sudden death in an ill-conceived battle is difficult to "explain." The text focuses on the facts of his death and does little to interpret them. However, the following three observations enable us to make some sense out of the tragic situation.

1. He did not pause to inquire of the Lord.

There is no indication that Josiah prayed before mustering his troops and heading off into battle. This is remarkable and represents a dramatic change. Ever since he was 16 he had had a heart to seek God. He sought God's will in the Scriptures and from a woman prophetess. But now, at age 39, he does not inquire of the Lord and relies only on his own understanding. His flaw is seen not in what he did but in what he failed to do. Sometimes sins of omission can be as destructive as sins of commission.

Name some reasons that may have caused him to fail to seek the mind of the Lord on this important battle.

- Too busy.
- He assumed he knew what was the right thing to do.
- Politics. This was a smart move politically.
- Deep down he knew that God would be opposed to his plan and so rather than be told "no" he went ahead and did it anyway.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Prov. 3:5-6).

2. He naively assumed that God's promise made him immune to defeat.

Compare these two verses:

- God's promise to Josiah: *You shall be gathered to your grave in peace* (II Chron. 34:28).
- The reality of what happened: *And the archers shot King Josiah... and he died* (II Chron. 35:23-24).

How are we to understand these two realities? Can God make a promise that doesn't come true? Can human freedom thwart the purpose of God? Some interpreters work hard to explain that Josiah really did die "in peace" because he died in Jerusalem, not on the field of battle. Others try to find creative ways to reconcile the promise of a peaceful death with the reality of a violent one. How are we to understand this?

One way to resolve the dilemma is to recognize that at least some of God's promises are indeed conditional. God will do his part only if we do our part. Josiah went into a battle that God never intended him to fight. He was outside the will of God when he went out to stop the Egyptian army. Such a situation brings dire consequences... always. Perhaps Josiah naively trusted the promise from God that he would go to his grave in peace. Maybe he thought this was a guarantee of safety and success. Alas.

Beware of **cheap grace** and an **easy believism** that uses slogans and formulas rather than the hard facts of a daily relationship of obedience with God. Never assume that a promise of God gives you a **license** to live as you want.

3. He was **spiritually deaf**.

Josiah was unable (or perhaps unwilling!) to listen to a message from God that was being delivered through a pagan king. But when he rejected **the messenger**, he lost his ability to hear **the message**.

*²¹ But he (Neco) sent envoys to Josiah, saying, "What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war."⁵ And **God** has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing **God**, who is **with me**, lest he destroy you."²² Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the **mouth of God**, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo. (II Chron. 35:21-22).*

Josiah apparently felt Pharaoh was lying and was only **pretending** to speak for God. Indeed, the messengers of Sennacherib king of Assyria had tried this trick years earlier when they claimed to be attacking Jerusalem because the Lord God told them to do so (II Kings 18:25). But here it is different. Strange as it may seem, the text clearly indicates that indeed God was speaking through Pharaoh Neco!

All of his life Josiah had listened for the voice of God. He heard God speak through the Book discovered in the Temple. He even heard God speak through a woman prophetess. But hearing God's voice through the mouth of a pagan Egyptian was just too much!

God is not **proud**. He will speak through almost anyone if he gets the chance. On other occasions in Scripture he chose to reveal his will and speak his truth through very unorthodox messengers!

- a. **Cyrus**, king of Persia. This pagan king gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon and rebuild the Temple. God dares to call him his "shepherd" (Isa. 44:28) and even his "messiah" (Isa. 45:1).
- b. **Nebuchadnezzar**, king of Babylon. On several occasions, God calls this pagan king his "servant" (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10).
- c. **The Magi**. Wise men from the east, following a star (!) announce in Jerusalem that the king of the Jews has been born. They have come to worship him (Matt. 2:1-12). Strange that no one accompanied these messengers when they went to welcome the newborn king.
- d. Balaam's **donkey**. Perhaps the most surprising preacher in all of Scripture is Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28-30)!

⁵ Pharaoh Neco's struggle was with Babylon, not Judah. He is begging Josiah not to meddle in someone else's conflict. Mind your own business! Proverbs 26:17 makes the point forcefully: *Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.*

Beware: We cannot reject the messenger and retain the message. The two go together. The posture of **humility** that is required to receive the messenger (a pagan king, a woman, a book) is the same posture that is required to receive the message God has for us.

C. God Speaks.

The God we worship is a God who speaks! He does not leave us alone to try to figure things out for ourselves but delights to reveal himself and his purposes for our lives. In the Scriptures we learn that God speaks through numerous media.

1. Through **creation**.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4).

2. Through our **conscience**.

¹⁴ *For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.*
¹⁵ *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16).*

3. Occasionally through **unorthodox sources**.

Donkeys, pagan kings, eastern star-gazers....

4. Through the **Scriptures**.

It is no accident that the Bible is called "The Word of God." God speaks to us through the pages of Scripture. This is his primary voice to men. Here his Word is authoritative, clear, and **infallible**.

5. Through **Jesus**.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.. (John 1:14).

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrews 1:1-2).

TABLE TALK

1. How do you account for Josiah's tragic demise? Do you agree with the study here? Or do you have other explanations for what happened?
2. What are the primary ways you use to help discern God's will in a given situation? Have you ever made a decision and then afterward regretted that you did not first "inquire of the Lord"? What happened?
3. Describe a time in your life when you missed a message God had for you because you didn't like the messenger (a nagging wife, a preacher with poor grammar, a Bible-thumping neighbor, a liberal democrat, a teen-ager with a guitar, etc.).
4. Do you believe the promises of God are conditional? Or unconditional? Why is this question important? What is at stake in how we answer?
5. Through which medium do you best hear God's voice? How can you be certain that what you are hearing is the voice of God and not just your own imagination?