

**“And this Gospel
shall be preached...”**
Matthew 24:14

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

THE NOSTALGIA CHALLENGE FOR TODAY

By John Halford

Today the western world is on a nostalgia kick. It's strange that when a nation has its security threatened, when a people become anxious and worried and concerned, and the established order of things is challenged—that we revert to nostalgia. When there is hope, enthusiasm, you can push over anything, “leap tall buildings in a single bound,” there's no problem. Then we think modern. In the days of the great space race of the sixties America thought and bought modern.

Today people are buying old things, and at incredible prices. Old cans of soap powder, and old cans of fuel additive now sell for about twenty times as much empty as they did when they were full in 1930.

There's a sort of security in old things. There's the attitude of wanting to settle back into a good old comfortable armchair and go back to the days when “a dollar was a dollar.” And I think that is probably the reason why this country today is so wrapped up in nostalgia. It's a symbol that we have a premonition that something is wrong, that the security is in the past and not in the future, and maybe the way out is to return to a simpler life-style of another time and another age, another way of doing things.

Now let's consider the very ancient past. In some ways it's too remote for us to even think about. And so it's hard to believe, as we think back, that people

then were real; that people lived lives, had hopes, dreams and emotions, and were in many ways just like us. That's why I think it's astounding to realize that, in the sixth century B.C. in the Middle East, there was a nostalgia kick going on.

A nostalgia kick in the sixth century B.C.? Why, you say, what do you mean? That's even before nostalgia! But they had a nostalgia kick. They were worried.

The World of King Josiah

There was a time in the ancient Near East when the world as they knew it was falling apart. Empires that had held sway, the traditional superpowers, were no longer as powerful. They were losing ground—the Assyrian empire, other empires to the north, to the east, were beginning to crumble, and the old order of doing things was being challenged. So men had a premonition, a feeling of doom, a feeling of “Things are moving too fast, where are we going? I don't know what's going on—these new-fangled dances. It wasn't like this in the good old days of Hezekiah.”

And so, though it sounds incredible to us, even the Egyptians of the sixth century B.C., of the 26th Dynasty, had a nostalgia kick going for the days of the pyramids. “Wow! That's fifteen hundred years old. Wow. Look at that. Boy, the things they could do back then.”

So the pharaohs did all they could to get back to the culture of the days when Egypt was secure, when they could really build pyramids. And in Assyria and Babylon, Ashurbanipal was collecting old documents and having them copied and put in his library for nostalgia's sake.

Nebuchadnezzar did the same thing in Babylonia. Not because he had to, but it was because the security was being threatened and challenged. And people subconsciously do the same in whatever age—they just go back to the past.

Probably nowhere was the feeling of nostalgia, the feeling to get back because of worry about what the future held, as great as in Judah in the sixth century B.C. Judah had seen the Northern Kingdom of Israel go into captivity. Brothers who spoke their language and had their culture were no longer there to the north.

To give you a feeling of what it would be like, suppose Germany had conquered Canada in the First World War. Suppose they had deported everybody, and moved in Nigerians and Chinese. And slowly the English, Anglo-Saxon culture of Canada was becoming a thing of the past. The ruins of Ottawa; the English language no longer known, nor the French; the country totally inhabited by what we might consider barbarians.

And you knew that it came within a hair's breadth of happening to you, and that just about a generation ago, the Germans had come to the gates of Washington, and because the president was a righteous man God had intervened and had sent them back but they were right there on the border, just waiting. This was the situation of Judah then, at that time—just waiting.

Two kings had cooperated with the Assyrians: King Manasseh, who was the worst and ruled for 55 years; and when he died, his son Amon, who when he came to the throne, was just as bad. They had introduced Baalism, sex worship, and all kinds of abominations into a nation that was once the people of God. And the people, wanting the "good old days" again, put Amon's young son Josiah on the throne.

Josiah was just eight when he came to the throne, and because of his extreme youth, he needed the assistance of tutors, who fortunately were good men who tried to do things right. Consequently Josiah grew up with a knowledge of God,

and a desire to be righteous. Now let's pick up the story in II Chronicles 34.

The Lost and Found Book of the Law

One of the things a king of Israel was supposed to do before he could take over the throne was to write himself out by longhand a personal copy of the law—the five books of Moses—because that's one good way to really get to know it. But by the time young Josiah became king, there was no book of the law available. They'd lost the Book of Deuteronomy—perhaps the whole law of Moses. It was something they knew used to exist, but it was no longer available for the men who educated young Josiah to sit down with him and say, "Josiah, write this out so you will know it."

II Chronicles 34:1-3: "Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign [about 640 B.C.], and he reigned in Jerusalem one and thirty years [to 609 B.C., when he was killed]. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined neither to the right hand, nor to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young [he'd have been 16 years old], he began to seek after the God of David his father [as he matured he began to become a converted man]; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images."

If you want to know the religious state of Judah at this time, read the first four or five chapters of Jeremiah. The prophet Zephaniah may have had a big influence on young Josiah. And so Josiah began to be beastly to the prophets of Baal, the same as Elijah had done.

Verses 4-7: "And they brake down the altars of Baalim in his presence [he stood there and watched it]; and the images, that were on high above them, he cut down; and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images, he brake in pieces, and made dust of them, and strowed it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed unto them. And he burnt the bones of the priests [of Baal—apparently he executed both priests and worshipers, and not only removed but destroyed the pagan shrines so they could not be found] . . . throughout all the land of Israel [as well as in Judah, and] he returned to Jerusalem."

Then, verse 8, “in the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land and the house,” he set about to repair the temple, which had fallen into terrible disrepair. Perhaps the roof had fallen down, floors had rotted through, the walls needed redoing, etc. The Levites, the ministers of that day, brought together and dumped into the temple treasury the money they had collected (apparently they hadn’t been doing it before). They gave it to the workmen who were repairing the House of God, “to buy hewn stone and timber for couplings, and to floor the houses which the kings of Judah had destroyed” (verse 11).

And when they brought out the money that was brought into the house of the Lord—an exciting thing happened—“Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses” (verse 14). He was there rummaging around and counting doubloons, or whatever they were using, and he found an old scroll. Now pick up the story in the other account, in II Kings 22:8:

“And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.” When Shaphan read it, after he had blown the dust off it and very carefully peeled the thing apart, he must have said, “Wow, this is dynamite!”

Verse 10: “And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book [Look, while they were doing the work, they found this!], and Shaphan read it before the king.

Verse 11: “And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law. . . .” It was probably the book of Deuteronomy that they found in the scroll, and the king had never seen it before. Here was a man who’d spent 20 years trying to clean up the land, live according to the laws of God, make things right, and suddenly there was delivered to him a book, a “how-to-do-it” book that Moses had written before the children of Israel crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. (You can imagine Moses saying, “Okay, one more time. All line up. Now, you remember how God brought you out of Egypt and how He took you through the wilderness and how He opened the Red Sea?” and the people thinking, “Oh, not again, Moses, every time you get up you tell us that.” But Moses gave them the “second law,” the book of Deuteronomy,

in which he synthesizes, so to speak, puts together, codifies, clarifies, and puts in capsule form the law of God, the Ten Commandments, and the challenge that God gave a people He had chosen to be His own.)

Young Josiah, only in his 20s, perhaps heard it for the first time. “And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. . . .” (He tore his clothes. He said, “Oh, ghastly.”)

“And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king’s saying, Go ye, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written [in it] concerning us” (verses 11-13). (“This thing’s dynamite. We’re supposed to be a righteous nation and obeying God, and this book is telling us things we should do. And I didn’t even know about it. Dad never told me about it. And grandfather certainly didn’t. Old Manasseh, he was too busy sacrificing people.”)

And “Huldah the prophetess . . . said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me. Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read” (verse 17). (“About blessings for obedience, and cursings for disobedience, it’s going to happen”.)

“But to the king of Judah which sent you to inquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, as touching the words which thou hast heard; Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee. . . . Behold, therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again” (verses 18-20). (“Jo-

siah, you've been a decent guy. You've tried to do things right, and it's not going to happen until you die." That's why, when Josiah eventually did die, Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations.)

So Josiah was happy about that—sort of. “And the king went up into the house of the Lord, and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests and prophets, and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord” (23:2). He became a Deuteronomy buff. And anybody anywhere near the king was going to get the book of Deuteronomy. He was singleminded in his determination to do things right.

Weird, strange cults had arisen. Strange customs had come into the country. Zephaniah talks about weird costumes that people could go around wearing. Strange customs in music—alien to the culture and the worship of the true God—had become part of the culture. You can read in this chapter the things he did to the prophets of Baal, and the priests, and the homosexuals, and all the other practitioners of the weird worship that had been allowed to get into the country.

23:21: “And the king commanded all the people, saying, Keep the passover unto the Lord your God, as it is written in the book of this covenant.” And having seen what Josiah was wont to do with those who didn't obey God, most of the people were only too happy not to be ground to powder and strewn on the graves of their enemies.

‘Surely there was not holden such a passover from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah; but in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, wherein this passover was holden to the Lord in Jerusalem’ (verses 22-23).

Now back to II Chronicles 35:17-18: “And the children of Israel that were present kept the passover at that time, and the feast of unleavened bread seven days. And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

Josiah was zealous, enthusiastic to get back to the faith once delivered, because his goal was noth-

ing less than to rededicate his nation back to being the people that they were challenged to become by Moses on the other side of the Jordan. Moses was meaningful to them on this nostalgia kick. This was the genuine thing.

In Deuteronomy 4:5-9 we read: “I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither you go to possess it. Keep, therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

“For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?

“Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them to thy sons and thy sons' sons.”

A nostalgia kick? I think the story of Josiah has a lot of implication because Josiah, when he had read the book of Deuteronomy, after he had found that all those years of wanting to be righteous were just a beginning, recommitted himself to God and to God's ways.

Will we?

I Peter 2:9: “But ye [Christians] are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people [the same things that Moses said to the people of Israel before they crossed into the Promised Land, Peter is saying to us—spiritual Israel—today], that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

My Bible margin has “*virtues*”—“show forth the virtues”—show the characteristics of the people of God. We all have been called out to show the world what God is like. And one day they're going to say, “What people are so righteous, that have God so close to them? What people are like these people, who have such magnificent laws and such a way of life?”

That's the challenge that's been put before us.