

*“For 23yrs the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened” (Jer.25:2).*

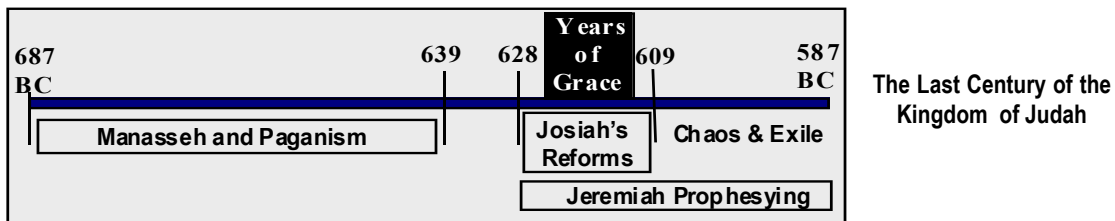
*“Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil” Isa. 26:10*

### The long “Years of Grace”

Hosea reveals once and for all the depth of the love of God for Israel, despite the fact that God had to judge that nation. A hundred years afterwards God’s love for Judah, Israel’s sister nation, became equally evident despite Judah’s rejection of God. A remarkable example of just how much God loved Judah is to be found in the 23 yrs that Jeremiah referred to in the text above. Those years can only be described as “years of grace”, because they were years in which God made a huge final effort to bring back Judah to himself before his ultimate judgement was released on it. The sheer patience and the depth of pleading with Judah to adopt a right path which characterised those years were profound expressions of genuine love in action. They constituted a huge offer of mercy and forgiveness.

Those 23 years were the brightest years in the last and darkest century of Judah’s existence. They followed 50 years of unrestrained paganism in which King Manasseh, along with his priests and court prophets, was responsible for encouraging every degenerate kind of behaviour. They were so vile that even before they had ended God’s had already pronounced that the nation would suffer severely and bitterly because of them. Yet, despite that word of judgement, God still visited the nation with a time of grace and gave it over twenty years to come to its senses.

This time of grace began after Manasseh died, and when Josiah took over the kingdom. Josiah was quite simply a great gift from God to Judah (God’s gifts are so frequently seen in godly people and leaders). He was energetic, resourceful and godly, utterly dedicated to the abolition of paganism. The grace of God did not end, however, with Josiah. Not only did God give the nation a godly ruler to provide a surge back to true moral religion; he also gave it an extremely powerful group of prophets, most notably Jeremiah, who faithfully spelt out the disaster that lay ahead and powerfully preached repentance. Josiah ruled for 30 yrs and actively reformed for some 20 yrs. Jeremiah spoke out to the nation during those same 20 yrs (and beyond). God’s grace to the nation was, therefore, manifest in powerful political and spiritual leadership which operated for two full decades, giving a great opportunity for it to change its ways. Tragically the time of grace was rejected, and less than 20 yrs after Josiah died Jerusalem was in ruins and Judah was in exile. Jeremiah summed up the rejection of those years of grace in the great cry of distress and warning: *“For 23yrs the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened”* (Jer.25:2). And even as Jeremiah recognized the rejection of the prophetic voice, he also knew that Josiah’s work was already being undone by his godless successor, Zedekiah.



### The Disaster of Godless Leadership

There could hardly have been a greater contrast between King Manasseh, under whose rule paganism flourished so rapidly for half a century, and the Yahweh-centred King Josiah, who did all he could to eradicate it. Manasseh deliberately turned his back on the godly outlook of his father Hezekiah, mistakenly assuming that it was because of Hezekiah’s adherence to Yahweh that the Assyrians had come to oppress Judah. (This is, of course, by no means the only time that influential and powerful rulers have seen godly religion as more of a source of trouble than of blessing.) Manasseh really wanted a religion that the surrounding nations would appreciate, not one which seemed to set Judah apart. It was also particularly important for Manasseh to have a good relation with Assyria the “superpower”, and that meant religion needed to be subservient to politics: it was politically wise to flow with the tide. So he deliberately embraced everything contrary to the godly heritage of the nation; *“He sacrificed his sons in the fire, practised sorcery, divination and witchcraft and consulted mediums and spiritists”* (2 Chron.33:6). He even infested the temple with pagan altars. In this way, whoever came to Jerusalem, no matter what brand of paganism they followed, they were sure of a welcome for their practices. His was a very acceptable stance to them, all embracing and “enlightened”. Prophets from God never ceased to warn him of the danger of what he was doing, but only when he found himself being taken by a hook in his nose as a prisoner to the King of Assyria did he show any repentance (2 Chron. 33:10ff). Though, to his credit, he actually lived his latter years as a worshipper of Yahweh, the nation did not follow his repentant example, persisting in their pagan ways, and when Manasseh died, his son, Amon, actively opened the door again to a flood of paganism for two further years before he was assassinated by the palace officials. Godless leadership had been utterly disastrous for the nation.

### The Grace of a Godly Ruler

It was very different with Josiah. Coming to the throne when he was a mere eight years old, this grandson of Manasseh was diligently seeking the Lord by the time he was sixteen. He rapidly embarked on a purge of paganism as

thorough as his grandfather's promotion of it. It was a staggering change of direction in the family, and clearly a work of sovereign intervention by God. The new king was an incalculable gift of grace to the nation, a divine opportunity for the nation to come back to God, something for which the nation ought to have been profoundly grateful. Josiah scoured Judah tearing down every pagan altar and smashing every idol he could find (2 Chron. 34:3ff). He did what the kings of Israel were always intended to do, backing up the commandments that God had given to the nation with his royal authority. The king alone had the position and power to make the secular agenda a genuine spiritual and moral agenda. Even so, it was an act of tremendous courage for so young a king to face up to the widespread popularity of paganism and its entrenched priesthoods. When, ten years into his reform, and during the process of a major restoration of the Temple itself, the Book of the Law of Moses was found, the king realized just how far Judah had left the ways of God, and he ceremonially tore his clothes in shame and distress. That the Law of Moses had been "lost" for so long was an appalling measure of how far the paganism of those days had gone, and how much the basic knowledge of God's word had been obliterated in the national life. Such spiritual ignorance in Judah at one time would have been inconceivable. Deeply troubled by all this neglect, Josiah called a great public meeting with leaders, people, priests and Levites. He then solemnly renewed the Covenant to follow the Lord and the Book, and "*made all who were present in Israel serve the LORD their God*" (2 Chron. 34:33).

Josiah stands, therefore, as the epitome of the ideal ruler who legislates and enforces what is godly in the nation: the force of the law was used to remove shrines at which immorality and violent human sacrifice took place. His rule was a return to the boundaries of civilized behaviour after Manasseh's liberalized but degenerate policy of "anything goes". Josiah's was a reign which God honoured, and as long as he remained king, the judgements previously pronounced on the paganism of the nation under Manasseh were held back (2 Chron. 34:27-28). Indeed the nation actually gained respite, even some independence, from Assyrian domination. Godly rulers (in all walks of life) have always been critically important gifts to a society, and their godly exercise of whatever power and influence they have always benefits that society. It was tragic for Judah, therefore, when after 20 years of courageous work, Josiah was killed in battle against Egypt.

**Godly rulers have always been critically important gifts to any society**

### **The Grace of the Prophetic Gift.**

There is, however, a limit to what a godly ruler and godly legislation can achieve, no matter how thorough such legislation may be, for legislation may secure some degree of obedience but it does not necessarily change the hearts or desires of the people. For that a prophet was needed. God's gift, therefore, of Jeremiah (and Jeremiah's fellow prophets) was a crucial addition to Josiah. It was in resisting Jeremiah as well as Josiah that Judah's stubbornness reached its height of folly. When Jeremiah cried out that he had been speaking to the nation for 23 years and they had not listened, 20 of those years had coincided with the reign of Josiah. The nation that had had to accept Josiah's enforced reforms had evidently held out against Jeremiah's call to repentance.

Though only a youth, Jeremiah was true to his calling. His preaching was very strong and very sharp. He faced a nation that had gone over to paganism to a degree beyond anything it had ever embraced before and nothing less than a very stern message would effect any change. The atmosphere of his preaching was, therefore, heavy with judgement. No other warning note would be loud enough for the nation to hear. Such strong preaching was, of course, in itself an act of grace. Only if Judah realized that it really was in imminent danger of the most appalling judgement would there be any hope of a return to godly ways. This severe note was never to leave his prophesying. It was the only effective medicine, but proved too strong for most. It is still proving too strong in our own contemporary situation.

In Jeremiah's prophecies we hear God not just making hard threats, but also arguing a cogent case against Judah. First, he made it clear that Judah had done the unthinkable among the nations in changing its God: "*Has a nation ever changed its gods? But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols*" (2:11). Second, he spelt out the absurdity of idolatry (worshipping sticks and stones). Third, Judah had actually witnessed what God had done in destroying her faithless sister Israel for her idolatry, and yet was still persisting with her own idolatries (3:6-10). Nothing of this availed, however, despite the frequency of the message and the variety of its presentation. Neither legitimate threat or reasoning prevailed. What Isaiah uttered, over a century before Jeremiah, was devastatingly true: "*though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil*" Isa. 26:10

### **The Grace of Revival**

Some have described these 20 years as revival years. This is not an inaccurate description. It is highly likely there were people in Judah apart from the prophets who had longed for a return to godliness and prayed diligently for it. It seems equally likely that there would have been some response to Josiah's work and Jeremiah's preaching, and doubtless many turned to the ways of God with a genuine heart. Those years must have seemed to such people as being wonderfully fruitful and a great answer to prayer. For those who wanted it this really was a rich outpouring of grace, not only a refreshing but also something that would have enabled them to face the evil that was to come on the nation later. But, as with so many revivals, the nation as a whole simply turned its back on the opportunity God was affording. This meant that the revival became a forerunner to judgement, merely highlighting the rejection of the majority, and within 20 years of the rejection of the years of grace judgement had come. Revivals frequently do have this feature of being a great "grace opportunity" before a day of severe reckoning.

The love of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God were, therefore, abundantly displayed, all calling for a response of faith and righteousness in Judah. The tragedy of Judah was not that she suffered at the hands of a cruel, harsh judgemental God but that she deliberately refused the offer God so patiently made of peace and blessing. For the judgement she suffered she had no one to blame but herself. She knew God was holy but chose to ignore it.