

[NOTE TO THE READER: On the first Sunday following Mother’s Day each year, the Booher Cemetery (near the building of the Mill Creek Church of Christ) has a “Decoration Day,” at which time relatives of those who are buried in the memorial park gather to decorate the gravesites and fondly remember those who are interred in the cemetery. On Sunday afternoon, May 20, 2007, Blake was invited to present the main address to those assembled for that occasion. He spoke on, “A Memorial Forever.” On Sunday afternoon, May 18, 2008, Justin and Blake were invited by the cemetery’s Board of Directors to speak to those assembled on that occasion. Each boy presented a portion of the manuscript below, with Justin speaking first and Blake speaking second. Judging from the audience’s reaction, there is no doubt that Justin and Blake’s heartfelt remarks had a profound impact on those in attendance. While the boys’ presentation did not represent a sermon per se, we nevertheless felt that it deserved to be posted on our Website along with their other lessons. We believe you will enjoy, and profit from, what Justin and Blake had to say.]

## “I WILL GATHER YOU TO YOUR FATHERS...”

Presented by

**Justin Stuntz and Blake Brown**

In the Old Testament book of 2 Kings, there is a fascinating account of an extremely important event that occurred in the life of one of the best-known kings of Judah. Josiah was the young son of King Amon. When Amon died, Josiah was pronounced king—at the tender age of only eight years old. The Bible informs us, however, that Josiah “did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and...did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2). One of Josiah’s goals as king was to repair the temple of the Lord, which had fallen into a dreadful state of disrepair. The text of 2 Kings 22 tells us that King Josiah gave orders to Hilkiah, the high priest, to spend whatever money was necessary to hire workers to perform this task. Restoring the temple to its former glory would be a long, difficult, and expensive job—but King Josiah was determined to see that it was carried out successfully.

One day, however, something quite unexpected happened. As Hilkiah was overseeing the efforts to repair the temple, the workmen involved in the process stumbled across a book hidden amongst the temple’s ruins. But this was not just “any” book. As 2 Kings 22:8 explains, it was “**the Book of the Law**”—that is, it was the book containing the Law of Moses, **which had been lost for a long, long time!** Hilkiah realized the importance of this astounding discovery, and sent one of the temple scribes to King Josiah to inform him about what had happened. When the king heard the scribe reading out loud the words of the Law of Moses, he was both saddened and terrified.

We see the evidence of Josiah’s **sadness** in 2 Kings 22:11, where the text says, “When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes.” King Josiah—perhaps better than anyone else—realized the true significance of this incredible find. But he also knew that because God’s people had gone without the Law for such a long time, the Lord could not possibly be pleased with them. In 2 Kings 22:13 we see evidence of King Josiah’s **terror** when he exclaimed, “Great is the wrath of the Lord that has been aroused against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”

The king's fears turned out to be well founded—as he was about to learn the hard way! King Josiah sent Hilkiah the high priest to a prophetess by the name of Huldah, to ask her to speak to the Lord on the king's behalf. Huldah honored the king's request. Here is what the Lord had to say to her.

“Behold, I will bring calamity on this place and on its inhabitants...because the people 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 is aroused against this place, and it shall not be quenched.

“But as for the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of Me, you shall say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord God of Israel: “Because your heart was tender...and because you humbled yourself before the Lord...and because you tore your clothes and wept, I have heard you. Therefore, **I will gather you to your fathers**, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see the calamity that I will bring on this place”’” (2 Kings 22:16-19).

King Josiah was right—God was **not** happy that the people had cared so little for His law that they actually ended up losing it. And, as Josiah feared, God's wrath **was** aroused against the Israelites “because your fathers have not obeyed the words of this book.” Josiah, however, was not going to live long enough to see God's wrath carried out against the people of Judah.

When God said to the king, “I will gather you to your fathers,” that was the Lord's way of saying, “Josiah, you are going to die”—as is made clear from the statement that follows: “And you shall be gathered to your grave.” Throughout the Old Testament, phrases such as “gathered to his fathers,” “gathered to his people,” “about to be gathered to my people,” and “shall be gathered to his people” are frequently used to speak of those who had died or who were shortly about to die. Consider the following examples.

- In Genesis 25:8, the Bible says, “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, **and was gathered to his people.**”
- In Genesis 35:29 it is said of Isaac, Abraham's son, that he “breathed his last and died, **and was gathered to his people**, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.”
- In Genesis 49:29 Jacob said to his sons, “I am **about to be gathered to my people**; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.” Four verses later, in verse 33, we read, “And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, **and was gathered to his people.**”
- In Genesis 32:48-50 we read, “Then the Lord spoke to Moses that very same day, saying: ‘Go up Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho; view the land of Canaan, which I will give to the children of Israel as a possession; and die on the mountain which you ascend, **and be gathered to your people.**’”
- In Numbers 20:26-28 the text says, “Strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; for Aaron **shall be gathered to his people and die there.**” So Moses did as the Lord had commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. There, Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain.”

Thus, whenever God decreed that a certain person was about to “be gathered to his people,” that person's death was imminent. In fact, in the entire history of the world, there have been only two men who have ever left this life without dying—Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and Enoch (Genesis 5:24).

In the historical account mentioned earlier in 2 Kings 22 about King Josiah, there are three truly important points that we must be careful not to miss.

First, Josiah was **determined** to do what was right. **He really wanted to obey God!** What a credit it is to this young king that the Bible records for posterity these words concerning him: “He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and...did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2). God has **always** wanted us to obey Him. And He has **always** promised to bless us if we will. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God said to the Israelites, “If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves, pray, seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Many centuries later, Jesus Christ Himself would say, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

**God places a high premium on obedience to His Word!** Right before God said to King Josiah “I will gather you to your fathers,” He also said, “You have humbled yourself before the Lord.” When King Josiah breathed his last breath, he was able to do so without fear because he had obeyed God. As the psalmist said in Psalm 23:4, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” I wonder: Could the people who inhabit the graves in this cemetery—before God “gathered them to their fathers”—make that statement? Could it be said of them, as it was of Josiah, “You have humbled yourself before the Lord”? I hope so.

Second, we learn from the account of King Josiah that calamity **will** befall those who do not obey God. The Lord’s words to Josiah were clear: “Behold, I will bring calamity on this place and on its inhabitants because the people have forsaken Me.... My wrath is aroused against this place, and it shall not be quenched” (2 Kings 22:16-17). As Genesis 2:16-17 makes clear, from the moment of man’s creation, God sought to teach him how to make correct choices that would keep him in a covenant relationship with his Creator. In fact, Moses once told the Israelites on God’s behalf: “If you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people” (Exodus 19:5). But, as we all know, God’s people did not always obey His voice. As 1 Kings 8:46 informs us, “There is no one who does not sin.” Romans 6:23 informs us of the spiritual result of humankind’s sin when it says, “The wages of sin is death.” Yes, calamity—both physical and spiritual—truly **does** befall those who refuse to obey God. And that is just as true in our day and age as it was in King Josiah’s. As God said in Malachi 3:6, “I am the Lord, and I do not change.” The Lord told the prophet Isaiah, “The word that goes forth from My mouth shall not return to Me void, but will accomplish what I please” (Isaiah 55:11). Whatever God’s Word says will happen, **will** happen! We would do well to remember that, wouldn’t we?

Third, the story of King Josiah teaches us that death is the lot of **all** humans. Unless the Lord returns first, every human now alive will one day die. As the writer of the book of Hebrews put it, “It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). And when we do die, we—just like those people who inhabit the graves we see around us today—will “be gathered unto our fathers.”

In James 4:14 the writer asked, “What is your life? It is a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away?” Oh how true. As Job put it, “Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1). Do you think that any of the people who inhabit the graves in this cemetery ever thought that **their** lives would end when they did? I seriously doubt it. Yet here they lie—as undeniable proof that each and every one of us will one day succumb to death and “be gathered to our fathers.”

Notice, however, that the writer of the book of Hebrews said of Adam and Eve’s son Abel that “he, being dead, still speaks” (Hebrews 11:4). I cannot help but wonder: What message are the people in the graves in this cemetery “still speaking” to us today? In Luke 16, Jesus told His disciples about two men who died. One was a poor beggar named Lazarus who had nothing in this life, but who had obeyed God and therefore ended up in Paradise. The other fellow was a rich man who had not lived as he should have, and, as a result, found himself in torment in the afterlife. The rich man begged God, “Please send Lazarus to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—so that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.” But what was the rich man told in response? Luke 16:29 records Heaven’s response: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”

We today, however, do not have **just** “Moses and the prophets.” Rather, we have something that is **even more powerful**. We have the inspired Word of God right at our fingertips—in our own mother tongue. The apostle Paul wrote, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This is why James 1:21 speaks of “the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” The people of King Josiah’s day actually **lost** God’s Word! What a terrible tragedy it would be if we “lost” God’s Word in our day and age—by refusing to read it and obey it!

Thus, I would like to repeat the question I asked a moment ago: What message are the people in the graves in this cemetery “still speaking” to us today? Would those people—people who “have been gathered to their fathers”—want any of **us** to incur God’s wrath because we “have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us” (2 Kings 22:13)?

We all know the answer to that question, don’t we? As I close, then, I would like to encourage each of us to ponder the message of 2 Kings 22—the passage with which Blake and I began this presentation this afternoon. Are **we**—like King Josiah of the Old Testament—“obeying the words of this book,” the Bible? The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 14:12, “‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.” **That** certainly is something for us to think about, isn’t it—before **we**, like those who lie here before us in these graves, are “gathered to our fathers”?