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The Prayer of Manasseh *abridged from the Common English Bible.*

*Lord Almighty, God of our ancestors,
 ² you made heaven and earth
 with all their beauty.*

*No one can endure
 the brightness of your glory.
 No one can resist the fury
 of your threat against sinners.*

*⁶ But your promised mercies
are beyond measure and imagination,
⁷ ^a because you are the highest, Lord,
 kind, patient, and merciful,
 and you feel sorry over human troubles.*

*^b You, Lord, according to
your gentle grace,
 promised forgiveness to those
 who are sorry for their sins.*

*You offer me, the sinner,
the chance to change my heart and life,
^{9a} because my sins outnumbered
the grains of sand by the sea.*

*My sins are many, Lord; they are many.
^{9b} Now, Lord, I suffer justly.
 I deserve the troubles I encounter.*

*¹¹ But I bow down before you
 from deep within my heart.
 Forgive me, Lord, forgive me.*

*¹⁴ In me you'll show how kind you are.
 Although I'm not worthy,
 you'll save me according
 to your great mercy.*

*¹⁵ I will praise you continuously
all the days of my life.
The glory is yours
forever and always. Amen.*

To hide away.

There are some books of the Bible that are not considered official Scripture, official books of the Bible, or “canon” by various Christian sects. Sometimes these books, when they are not included as part of the official Bible, are included in the Bible as “apocrypha”. The term is from a Greek word *apokryptein*, meaning “things that are secret” or “to hide away”. The issue is the authenticity or the legitimacy of such a book. In other words, its supposed origin is in question. Apocryphal books are thought to be of dubious authenticity. There is one very short book that is included by some Protestant faiths as being apocryphal but is in the official canon of eastern Orthodox churches. There is good reason for this book to be considered of dubious authenticity: Manasseh is the supposed author of this prayer; he ruled as King of Judah, the southern part of Israel, which included Jerusalem, from about 698 to 642 B.C.; but almost certainly, this prayer was written somewhere between the century just before Jesus was born and the second century A.D. - several hundred years after Manasseh died. Before we look at this apocryphal prayer, I’d like to first talk about a girl who was part of group of kids I played with when I was little.

I grew up in Oxnard, in Ventura County, north of LA proper. It was near the ocean and back when I was a boy, there were still orange and lemon groves, berry, beans, and lettuce farms, and even a few avocado groves in the area. I believe that they have since all been replaced with cement and steel. On Saturdays and in the summer, we used to go to the edge of town and play in those last remnants of what had been a rural part of Ventura County. We would ride our bikes along the farm windbreaks; they were long lines of tall eucalyptus trees. There was a walnut orchard; the farmer said we could stop there any time and have walnuts; the only rule was that we had to eat all our walnuts on the spot. One of our favorite games was hide and seek. We would go very far to hide, using old barns, groves of trees, stacks of hay, irrigation ditches, and horse stalls to hide in. One of my favorite hiding places was avocado trees; they were short and easy to climb, with thick, dense leaves to hide among. I would often come home covered with the moss that grew thick on the avocado trees. One day, we were playing hide and seek. One of the kids, let's call her Lucy, wasn't found when the game ended. So, we sent out the call for everyone who was still hidden to reappear, but she didn't show. At first, we didn't panic: we often hid far away. After we had all spread out and searched the broader area, Lucy still wasn't found. A few of us remained on the edge of town and kept looking for Lucy. The rest of us rode our bikes to Lucy's home to tell her

mother that we couldn't find her. Soon, Lucy's mom was out there, too, looking for her. Dark came – and we still had not found her.

The Prayer of Manasseh is attributed to Manasseh. Although he almost certainly did not write it, the prayer is fitting with Manasseh's role in Scripture. As a reminder, there are two paired sets of books, the Kings and the Chronicles books, that cover almost the same period of time. There are a lot of similarities between these two sets of paired books. The Kings books were written around 550 B.C., during the Babylonian exile, and the Chronicles were written around 450 B.C., after the exile. These books cover the history from King Saul (David's father) through the exile in Babylon. Significantly, the Chronicles books clean up the reputation of the various kings of Israel. The Chronicles remove a lot of the bad stuff, such as the downside of the reign of Solomon. In the Kings books, we see that Solomon loses his way in the final years of his reign. But if you only read Chronicles, you would think that Solomon's time as king was a total success. This makes sense: Chronicles was written later, after the exile, when the Israelites were trying to re-establish themselves as God's Chosen People in the Promised Land. It is a period of renewal, not regret. King Manasseh appears in both 2nd Kings and 2nd Chronicles, but it is only in 2nd Chronicles where Manasseh seems to redeem himself. So, it makes sense that the Prayer of Manasseh is often included at the end of 2nd Chronicles.

King Manasseh is an idolatrous king who is loyal to the oppressive regime of the Assyrians. He pays them heavy tribute and supports their military operations. In return, the Assyrians give him special privileges. He defiles the Temple by putting an image of a pagan goddess there. He hangs around wizards and spiritual mediums. In the eyes of God, his deeds are so evil that his actions seal the fate of the Israelites and ensure the invasion of the Assyrians. This is the story we read in 2nd Kings. But in 2nd Chronicles, the more upbeat history of this period, Manasseh is not all evil. Manasseh strengthens the fortifications of Jerusalem. He gets rid of some of the more blatant pagan practices in Jerusalem. He has people turn back to sacrificing to God instead of to pagan gods. Then we read this: ¹⁸ *Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, and his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, behold, they are in the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel.* ¹⁹ *And his prayer, and how God was moved by his entreaty, and all his sin and his faithlessness, and the sites on which he built high places and set up the Asherim and the images, before he humbled himself, behold, they are written in the Chronicles of the Seers.* ²⁰ *So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his house.* This says that Manasseh offers a prayer to God, and that God is moved by it. It tells us that he turns away from his sin and his faithlessness, and then he humbles himself before God. Thus, he is welcomed back

among the ranks of the past kings of Israel. Keep in mind, though, that it is Chronicles that in general portrays the Israelite kings in a much more positive light than does Kings. Importantly, this book that Chronicles refers to, *Chronicles of the Seers*, which is supposed to contain the prayer of Manasseh, is lost. We don't have it. All we have in an apocryphal prayer that was almost certainly not written by Manasseh. Here is something edited from that prayer:

*Lord Almighty, God of our ancestors,
 ² you made heaven and earth
 with all their beauty.
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 the brightness of your glory.
No one can resist the fury
 of your threat against sinners.
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¹¹ But I bow down before you
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*Forgive me, Lord, forgive me.
14 In me you'll show how kind you are.
Although I'm not worthy,
you'll save me according
to your great mercy.
15 I will praise you continuously
all the days of my life.
The glory is yours
forever and always. Amen.*

Now, it's quite likely that the version of Manasseh's moral regeneration, as told in 2nd Chronicles, is overly optimistic. At a minimum, this prayer is simply someone else's idea, from the perspective of hundreds of years later, of what Manasseh might have said to God, assuming he did indeed regret his evil past, as is indicated in 2nd Chronicles. But the prayer itself is beautiful. Who cares who wrote it? God saw to it that it was passed down, that it survived. Anyone who feels that their life has gone in the wrong direction and wants God's unqualified forgiveness, might want to offer this prayer. Who cares if it is apocryphal, or "hidden away"? A deeply faithful person, who was either a Jew or a Christian – we don't know which - wrote it. Maybe it doesn't deserve to be in the canon, the official Bible, as it post-dates its supposed authorship by hundreds of years – but it deserves to be remembered.

What about Lucy, the kid who was playing hide and seek and then disappeared? We searched for her for a couple of hours. Other parents joined in. Then a nearby farmer drove her up to the group of us. Lucy had worked so hard at

making herself difficult to find that she got totally lost. She had been wandering around and finally sought help at a farmhouse. She was tearful and shaken, but she was okay. A responsible adult, someone who did what God wanted him to do, had taken care of her. Lucy's mother then led us in prayer acknowledging not just God's grace in Lucy being found safe, but also acknowledging the debt we owe God, given how imperfectly we behave in this life. Lucy's family was Eastern Orthodox – and her mother offered a piece of the Prayer of Manasseh. I admit I don't remember what part of it she said, but I do remember her showing it to me in her Orthodox Bible. Maybe she offered this part of the Prayer of Manasseh:

*God, no one can endure
the brightness of your glory.
No one can resist the fury
of your threat against sinners.
⁶ But your promised mercies
are beyond measure and imagination,
⁷ ^a because you are the highest, Lord,
kind, patient, and merciful,
and you feel sorry over human troubles.
Amen.*