

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

The Prayer of Manasseh, verse 11, NRSV Apocrypha.

¹¹ *And now I bend the knee of my heart,
imploring you for your kindness.*

How to Pray: “*I bend the knee of my heart*”.

1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles significantly overlap in the periods they cover. 1 Kings begins the last years of King David, and 2 Kings ends during the exile in Babylon. The Chronicles books overview the period from Adam up to the Davidic line, but the heart of the story begins with King David and then continues through the post-exilic period. We believe that the Kings books were written during the Babylonian exile and that the Chronicles books were written just after the end of the exile. The Kings books are more negative in focus, as they dwell on the reasons for God allowing the downfall of the Israelites and their exile to Babylon. The Chronicles books, on the other hand, speak of hope for the future, of restoration of the Israelites to their land in their relationship with God. We'll focus on 2 Chronicles, which begins with the construction of the First Temple, Solomon's Temple. We will jump to close to the end of 2 Chronicles and look at the sixth to the last king of Israel, Manasseh. He served a half century or so

before the exile to Babylon. Our story of King Manasseh occurs in Chapter 33. In a bit, we will also look at Second Kings, as it also tells of King Manasseh.

We're told that Manasseh began his reign at the age of twelve and that he served for 55 years, a record for Israelite kings. At the beginning, we read:

² He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. ³ For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had pulled down, and erected altars to the Baals, made sacred poles, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. ⁴ He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." ⁵ He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶ He made his son pass through fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom, practiced soothsaying and augury and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. ⁷ The carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to his son Solomon.

So, Manasseh began as a very young king and he ruled for a record amount of time - but as an evil king. His father, Hezekiah, had taken down pagan worship sites that had been set up by wayward Israelites who had become influenced by their pagan neighbors. This is a deliberate move by Manasseh to adopt pagan gods, specifically, Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility, who was supposed to bring rain and high yield crops to desert farmers. Baal was a widely worshipped god in the ancient world, and repeatedly, in the hearts of the Israelites, it challenged the supremacy of the true God. This passage also says that he sacrificed his own son to a pagan god. Manasseh wasn't satisfied with building pagan altars in the

outside world: he placed idols right in the Temple created by Solomon at the instruction of God. This is an aggressive way of convincing his people to convert to paganism: they walk into the Temple and discover that a new god has taken over. He did the People of God more harm than their pagan enemies whom God had previously condemned. We read:

⁹ Manasseh misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they did more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed before the people of Israel.

Next, we're told that God speaks to Manasseh, but Manasseh does not listen. So, God ramps things up: their current enemy is Assyria and God allows them to capture Manasseh, shackle him, and take him to Babylon. At the time Assyria was the most powerful nation in the area, and they used Babylon as an administrative center; moving the Israelite king there was a way of limiting his power. Then comes the most important verses in the story of Manasseh:

¹² While he was in distress he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. ¹³ He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty, heard his plea, and restored him again to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD indeed was God.

Manasseh finally listens to God. He prays to God, humbled and repentant. Note the words: "*Then Manasseh knew that the LORD indeed was God.*" We'll get back to this. Manasseh somehow gets back to Jerusalem. He undoes all the harm he

has done, restoring the Temple and commanding his people to worship God.

Manasseh dies and is buried with honor among his ancestors.

But it's not the biblical story of Manasseh that I wanted to focus on today. It's another piece of literature, something from the Apocrypha. Manasseh is a very brief book that is not considered scriptural. It is attributed to Manasseh and is supposedly the prayer referenced in 2 Chronicles, the prayer that he offers to God when he repents. But it's believed to have been written hundreds of years later, perhaps in the second century B.C. You can find it in the Apocrypha of the King James, the NRSV, the Common English Bible, and other translations. I am using the version from the NRSV, as it is I believe the best translation. I'd like to look at it as an example of prayer – and see what it teaches us about praying.

First, though, I want to talk about the person who I think caused me to first hear the Prayer of Manasseh. While Jews do not accept the Prayer of Manasseh as scriptural, and neither do Roman Catholics or American Protestants, Eastern Orthodox churches do include it in their canon, their official Bible. It's not that they think it was written during Manasseh's reign, but rather that it represents what he is likely to have said, and as such is very deeply spiritual. I actually agree.

I grew up in Oxnard, north of L.A. 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; that 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 use 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, one of the kids, let's call her Lucy, wasn't found when the game ended. We sent out the call for everyone who was still hidden to reappear, but she didn't show. We didn't panic; we often hid far away. We spread out and searched; Lucy still wasn't found. A few of the kids rode their bikes to Lucy's home to tell her mother that we couldn't find her. Soon, Lucy's mom was looking for her. Darkness came – and we still had not found her.

Manasseh is also mentioned in 2 Kings; remember that the Kings books cover a similar period of history to the two Chronicles books. Also recall that the

Kings books are more negative, focusing heavily on the sins of the people and the reason for God to punish them, while the Chronicles books are more directed toward the restoration story, the willingness of God to forgive and restore. In 2 Kings, we see Manasseh as a man who is consistently evil, going beyond the promulgation of pagan practices. We read this in Chapter 21 of 2 Kings:

⁶He made his son pass through fire; he practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards.

More or less, this verse repeats something from our 2 Chronicles quote: he sacrifices his own son by burning him to death on a pagan altar. He also adopts a full pagan lifestyle by trying to see the future without God's help. We then read:

¹⁶Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he caused Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

Apparently, Manasseh's long reign is filled with bloodshed and chaos. He executes people who want to remain loyal to God and not adopt pagan practices. He is doing more than destroying his people's relationship with God: he is destroying them as a civilization, threatening their extinction as a nation.

The Prayer of Manasseh consists of 15 verses, but most of the verses are fairly long. It takes up one to two pages in a Bible. It can be broken into four sections. I'll give you a condensed version of each section. We'll learn the structure of a traditional Hebrew prayer of forgiveness. But we should note that

scholars believe that the oldest manuscripts are in Greek, and that it is not a true Hebrew prayer. Remember that we think it was written during a period – in the second century B.C. – when Greek influence in the Holy Land was at its height. Greek cultural influence also explains why the New Testament is written in Greek.

The first part of the prayer is often called a *Praise of God*. Before we confess and ask for restoration, we first show that we honor God. The following is abridged. It does damage the rhythm and smoothness of this prayer written as poetry. It begins with a typical acknowledgement of the history of the Chosen People and the fact that God is indeed the creator and master of all that exists:

- ¹ *O Lord Almighty,
God of our ancestors,
of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob*
² *you who made heaven and earth
with all their order;*

Still in our Praise section comes something important. Our pseudo-Manasseh is going to ask for forgiveness, so he starts out by reminding God that God himself is the God of mercy and forgiveness and has promised to forgive those who do truly repent. In fact, God invented all that exists, and thus he invented forgiveness:

- ⁶ *yet immeasurable and unsearchable
is your promised mercy,*
⁷ *for you are the Lord Most High,
of great compassion, long-suffering, and very merciful,
you have promised repentance and forgiveness*

*to those who have sinned against you,
you have appointed repentance for sinners,
so that they may be saved.*

Next comes something that over the centuries has been seen as quite controversial, and is often considered the reason, along with the prayer being written long after the fact, for many Christians to not see this as scriptural:

⁸ *Therefore you, O Lord, God of the righteous,
have not appointed repentance for the righteous,
for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against you,
but you have appointed repentance for me, who am a sinner.*

On one hand, you could read this as the author simply being humble, saying that compared to the forefathers of his people, he is a deeply sinful and lesser human. But it seems to say that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob never sinned at all. The problem is that Christian doctrine says that all people sin, with no exception.

Next comes the second section, often called the “*Confession*” or “*Lament*”.

Again, I have chopped this up to make it shorter. Notice that Manasseh uses hyperbole, as Jewish authors often do, to emphasize the gravity of his sins:

⁹ *For the sins I have committed are more in number than the sand of the sea;
my transgressions are multiplied, O Lord, they are multiplied!
I am not worthy to look up and see the height of heaven
because of the multitude of my iniquities.*

¹⁰ *I am weighted down with many an iron fetter,
so that I am rejected because of my sins,
I have provoked your wrath
and have done what is evil in your sight,*

Now comes the third section, typically called the “*Petition*” or “*Supplication for Pardon.*” As I read this, pay attention to the very first line:

¹¹ *And now I bend the knee of my heart,
implore you for your kindness.*

¹³ *I earnestly implore you,
forgive me, O Lord, forgive me!
Do not destroy me with my transgressions!
Do not be angry with me forever or store up evil for me;
do not condemn me to the depths of the earth.
For you, O Lord, are the God of those who repent,*

Notice we begin with “*now I bend the knee of my heart*”. This is one reason why the Prayer is popular among some Christians, specifically, Eastern Orthodox Christians. A key component of the author’s belief that he will be forgiven, despite the depravity of his sins, is that he is, in his heart, kneeling before God. In other words, he doesn’t need to buy forgiveness with any specific acts, other than making it clear that he now accepts God as his God. This is reminiscent of what we read in 2 Chronicles, where it is said: “*Then Manasseh knew that the LORD indeed was God.*” He then acknowledges that God could choose to simply destroy him, condemn him. He ends, though, by reminding God once again that God is “*the God of those who repent*”.

The fourth and final section is a return to the first theme, that of Praise. It’s a way of making it clear that he, King Manasseh, will never return to his old, sinful

state, that he will always remain true to God for the rest of his life. He ends with “Amen”, meaning “so be it”. His return to faith is something unchangeable:

*for, unworthy as I am, you will save me according to your great mercy,
¹⁵ and I will praise you continually all the days of my life.
and yours is the glory forever. Amen.*

If you want something that is biblical, something that is in the canon of official Protestant and Roman Catholic Bibles and yet feels a lot like the Prayer of Manasseh, try Psalm 51. It is written from the perspective of King David, a famous leader who was also a very sinful man. We don't believe he personally wrote this Psalm, but in it, our author praises God and expresses his complete spiritual transformation.

We searched for Lucy for perhaps an hour total. 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 finally sought help at a farmhouse. She was fine. Lucy's mother, an Eastern Orthodox Christian, didn't just take Lucy and go home. She first offered up a prayer, with all of us standing in a curve in front of her, watching. I honestly don't remember what prayer she offered, but I do remember being told later that it was something that Christians in the west did not have in their Bible, but that Christians in the east did have in their official Bible. I do remember that it had nothing to do, seemingly,

with thanking God for finding Lucy. It was a prayer of contrition, of asking God for forgiveness. Many years later, when I read the Prayer of Manasseh, it reminded me very much of what Lucy's mother had offered.

What's important, I believe, is that Lucy's mother didn't thank God, didn't ask God to protect Lucy in the future, didn't ask for anything – other than forgiveness. At the conclusion of a scary event, she thought only of her relationship with God and how it could be improved. She offered up her belief in God, her praise of God, her admission of being imperfect, and her desire to be a better human from here on out. I think this is how we should all pray. Rather than telling God what we want, rather than whining about what scares us, we should simply be humble, contrary to what our society teaches us, and express our full, unwavering belief in God - also unlike what our society expects from us. Rather than seeing prayer as a vehicle for asking God to rescue us from time to time, we should use prayer in a continuous fashion to maintain our connection with God. We don't have to confess to the grave sins committed by Manasseh, but we should always keep in mind that as long as we live on this planet, we can use the time to make ourselves more like Christ. And if we aren't good at verbalizing our feelings to God, we can do what Lucy's mother did and make use of an elegant, poetic prayer like that of Manasseh or Psalm 51.