

# **King Josiah: Leading During Tumultuous Times**

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## **Abstract**

Leadership during challenging times can be difficult, but the Bible is not silent when it comes to leadership principles. What this article seeks to do is view the leadership principles of a Godly king and find practical application today. King Josiah ruled during turbulent times, but he persevered in eliminating the immorality and idol worship in Judah while restoring pure worship of God. By observing Josiah's leadership principles, practical applications can be made for leadership in the modern context. The leadership principles displayed by Josiah included: fostering a personal relationship with God, listening to Godly wisdom, proclaiming the truth, acting on a God-given vision, modeling Godly wisdom, and practicing servant leadership.

*Keywords:* King Josiah, Leadership, Biblical leadership, Leadership principles

## **Introduction**

Very few would disagree with the statement that we are living in tumultuous times. COVID-19, supply-chain issues, inflation, war, economic uncertainty, immorality, and civil unrest seem to permeate news headlines. One might argue that we have been living in tumultuous, or unprecedented, times since

Genesis 3<sup>1</sup>, and King Solomon in all his wisdom penned that, “there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>2</sup> If this is true, then much can be learned by considering Biblical leaders who persevered during trials. Strong leadership during tumultuous times is vital for the survival of churches, organizations, communities, and governments. The Bible offers many valuable lessons for leaders who navigate difficult times. In fact, Christians are told to, “not lose heart<sup>3</sup>,” when facing difficulties, because of the hope given through Jesus Christ. One leader who faced extraordinary circumstances, not unlike the challenges today, was King Josiah.

Some historical context to King Josiah’s reign will shed light on the similarities between his kingdom and the prevailing culture today. Josiah was two generations removed from the last Godly king of Judah – Hezekiah. The two ungodly kings who reigned after Hezekiah were Manasseh and Amon. Manasseh was characterized as a king who, “did evil in the sight of the Lord<sup>4</sup>.” King Manasseh rebuilt the places of idol worship, raised up altars to Baal, worshipped heavenly bodies instead of the one true God, built altars to idols in the temple of the Lord, sacrificed his own sons to false gods, engaged in witchcraft, and consulted mediums<sup>5</sup>. II Chronicles 33:9 (*English Standard Bible*, 2001) states, “Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.” Unfortunately, King Amon was no better than Manasseh. He was characterized as doing, “evil in the sight of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done<sup>6</sup>.” There was massive moral and spiritual decay in Judah as Josiah took the throne due to the kings before him.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:1-19 chronicles the fall of man. All of God’s good creation was fractured by man’s sin, and the result was pain, toil, and death.

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:9b (*New King James Bible*, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> II Corinthians 4:1b (*English Standard Bible*, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I Kings 21:2 and II Chronicles 33:2.

<sup>5</sup> See II Kings 21:3-7 and II Chronicles 33:3-7.

<sup>6</sup> II Chronicles 33:22a (*New King James Bible*, 1997).

Olanisebe (2017) comments that Josiah inherited a kingdom full of violence, immorality, and ignorance of God's word. One could draw some similarities between the kingdom Josiah inherited and the world today. Much can be learned by current leaders through an evaluation of how Josiah led and changed the culture in Judah some 2,600 years ago<sup>7</sup>. This paper will consider King Josiah's actions Biblically, then draw leadership implications for the present context.

### **Leadership Principle 1 – Foster a Personal Relationship with God**

The first, and most important, leadership principle to be learned from King Josiah is the need to foster a personal relationship with God. The culture surrounding Josiah's inherited kingdom had abandoned the one true God. This started with the first king of the divided Kingdom of Israel – Jeroboam. Jeroboam instituted idol worship, and a false priesthood, in Israel to keep the people from traveling to the temple in Jerusalem<sup>8</sup>. Josiah was God's prophesied king who would destroy the false priesthood that Jeroboam created<sup>9</sup>.

II Chronicles 34:3 (*New King James Bible*, 1997) mentions that while Josiah was, "in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David." Knowing that Josiah started his reign at the age of eight<sup>10</sup>, he would have been sixteen-years-old when he began fostering a personal relationship with God. At the hearing of what was possibly the Pentateuch, Josiah tore his clothing as he was cut to the heart with his sin, and the sin of Judah<sup>11</sup>. This action signified a deep personal relationship with the Lord. Josiah understood the depth of his sin, and the national sin, and he

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<sup>7</sup> Sweeny (2001) dates King Josiah's reign between 640-609 b.c.

<sup>8</sup> I Kings 12:26-29.

<sup>9</sup> I Kings 13:1-2.

<sup>10</sup> II Chronicles 34:1 and II Kings 22:1.

<sup>11</sup> II Kings 22:11 and II Chronicles 34:19.

knew that a holy God would punish this sin. Jerome & Uroko (2018) list several reasons for ancient Jews tearing their clothing, including deep repentance, mourning, and fear. Josiah took the word of God seriously, and in complete humiliation, fear, and sorrow, he tore his clothing to signify a broken heart before God.

## **Implications for Leadership Today**

Leaders today should follow the steps laid out by Jesus to foster a personal relationship with God. The Gospel of Mark recounts a time when Jesus was confronted by a scribe and was asked what is the most important commandment? Jesus' response was to, "love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30, *New King James Bible*, 1997). So how does one love God fully? This starts by repenting and believing the Gospel, according to Jesus<sup>12</sup>. Leaders then must grow in their knowledge of the scriptures. I John 2:3 (*English Standard Bible*, 2001) says, "and by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." The first, and preeminent, step of leadership should be to foster a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

## **Leadership Principle 2 – Listen to Godly Wisdom**

The Scriptures explain how Josiah listened carefully to God and God's word<sup>13</sup>. Josiah not only listened to the word of God, but he also listened to Godly advisors around him. Buzza (2019) mentions that Josiah was likely brought up under the Godly priest Hilkiah. As king, Josiah had the authority to reject or accept counsel given to him. Hilkiah found the Book of the Law in the temple and gave it to Josiah's scribe Shephan. When Shephan reported all that was happening in the temple, he brought out the Book of the Law and read it to Josiah. The

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<sup>12</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>13</sup> II Chronicles 34:19 and II Chronicles 34:31.

Godly counsel of Hilkiah and Shephan through the delivering of, and reading, the Book of the Law to the king was received by Josiah<sup>14</sup>.

Josiah not only listened to the priest and his trusted scribes, but he also listened to the Godly prophets of his day. God used the prophetess Huldah to declare His judgment on the kingdom to Josiah<sup>15</sup>. Zephaniah and Jeremiah were also prophets during the reign of Josiah. Zephaniah 1:1 (*New King James Bible*, 1997) says, “The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.” Notice Hezekiah in the line of Zephaniah. It is likely that the prophet was also related to King Josiah. Jeremiah 1:1-2 explains that Jeremiah’s father’s name was Hilkiah, and that Jeremiah began prophesying during the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign. It is probable that Jeremiah’s father Hilkiah was the same Hilkiah who found the Book of the Law and presented it to Josiah’s scribe (Kirksey, 2013). II Chronicles 35:25a (*English Standard Bible*, 2001) states that, “Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah,” when the king died. Josiah listened to the priest, scribes, and prophets of his day, and there was sadness among them when the Godly king passed away.

### **Implications for Leadership Today**

Good leaders listen, but listening is not enough. Good leaders listen to Godly wisdom and the right counsel. Rehoboam listened and seemed to have a good start to his kingdom as he sought counsel from Solomon’s advisors. The issue arose when Rehoboam, “rejected the advice which the elders had given him, and consulted with young men who had grown up with him” (I Kings 12:8, *New King James Bible*, 1997). Contrast Rehoboam with Josiah who sought the wisdom of the priest, scribes, and

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<sup>14</sup> See II Kings 22:8-11 and II Chronicles 34:14-19.

<sup>15</sup> II Kings 22:12-20 and II Chronicles 34:22-28

prophets who all followed God. James 1:19b (*New International Version*, 2011) states that, “everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” Good leaders listen to Godly wisdom.

### **Leadership Principle 3 – Proclaim the Truth**

After Josiah was cut to the heart by the Book of the Law, he was compelled to share Biblical truth with the people of Judah. He went to the temple in Jerusalem and, “read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the house of the Lord” (II Chronicles 34:30b, *New King James Bible*, 1997). Wessner (2018) labels Josiah as a prophet because he proclaimed to the people God’s covenant with Israel, and he instructed Judah to turn to God. Based on the pagan culture that was prevalent in Judah at the time, Josiah’s proclamation of the truth was neither convenient nor popular. His proclamation of the truth can be linked to his unwavering belief and obedience to the Torah (Wessner, 2018). Josiah loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, and might<sup>16</sup>; therefore, he was not overly concerned about popular opinion. His concern was for the Lord and proclaiming His truth.

### **Implications for Leadership Today**

Leaders must proclaim God’s truth in a world that is increasingly hostile toward Christians. This Christian hostility shows no signs of diminishing (Hostility, 2019; Erickson, 2018), so proclaiming the truth will be increasingly difficult. Jesus proclaimed the truth in a hostile environment because salvation and eternity hung in the balance. When He claimed, “and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32, *New King James Bible*, 1997), He spoke to Jews that they might know that He was God’s Son. He boldly proclaimed the Gospel to those who sought to kill Him<sup>17</sup>. While some sought to

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<sup>16</sup> II Kings 23:25

<sup>17</sup> See John 8:59.

kill Jesus, “many believed in Him” (John 8:30, *English Standard Bible*, 2001). Leaders today will face some opposition when they proclaim the truth of God<sup>18</sup>. The hope is that some will come to know Jesus through the proclamation of truth.

### **Leadership Principle 4 – Act on a God-given Vision**

After Josiah proclaimed the truth, he acted on the truth. The Book of the Law prescribed pure worship of the one true God. Judah had spent the 57 years prior to Josiah’s reign worshipping idols and building altars to false gods<sup>19</sup>. Hirsch & McLaughlin (n.d.) state that Josiah took personal responsibility for cleansing Judah from idolatry. Josiah’s actions that purged Judah from idolatry included: cleansing the temple of God, removing the priests of false gods and executing them, removing the temple prostitutes, destroying the alters to false gods, and eliminating the practice of sacrificing children to false gods<sup>20</sup>.

The Jewish Virtual Library (Josiah, n.d.) breaks King Josiah’s actions into three parts:

- In the eighth year of his reign, he began to seek the God of David.
- In the twelfth year of his reign, he started removing all false worship from the land.
- In the eighteenth year of his reign, he renewed the covenant with God and celebrated Passover.

Listen to the action verbs Josiah displayed: seek, remove, renew, and celebrate. God provided Josiah with the vision

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<sup>18</sup> II Timothy 3:12 (*English Standard Bible*, 2001) says, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

<sup>19</sup> Manasseh reigned 55 years in Judah, and his son Amon reigned 2 years in Judah. Both kings did evil in God’s sight and led the people into false worship. See II Kings 22.

<sup>20</sup> Josiah’s reforms are detailed in II Kings 23:4-20 and II Chronicles 34:33

through His word, His prophets, and Josiah's Godly counselors. It was not a man-made vision, but a God-inspired vision.

### **Implications for Leadership Today**

The most important part of acting on a God-given vision is to first pursue God's vision. This is not something that leaders develop on their own. It must be a God-given, God-inspired, vision that seeks to impact His kingdom. Jones (2011) offers some steps in developing a God-given vision that includes:

- Surrender one's whole life to God.
- Obediently pursue God's will.
- Seek God through prayer and fasting.
- Search the Scriptures.
- Follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Notice how this vision has nothing to do with a leader's own qualities, but everything to do with humbly seeking God.

Once the leader has received the God-giving vision, they must act on it. James 1:22 (*New International Version*, 2011) says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." Good leaders act on vision much like Josiah sought, removed, renewed, and celebrated.

### **Leadership Principle 5 – Model Godly Leadership for Others**

Josiah lived a life that modeled Godly leadership to others. It started with his personal relationship with God. He set the example that he expected Judah to follow. Josiah was characterized by a humble heart that was ready to do the will of the Lord. II Kings 22:11 (*New King James Bible*, 1997) says, "Now it happened when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, that he tore his clothes." Anyone who was around the king at that time would have witnessed his humility and anguish as he tore his royal clothing. Josiah then gathered the people together in Jerusalem and read the Book of the Law to



them. After reading aloud for all the people to hear, Josiah made a covenant with God in front of the assembly to follow the Lord and keep His commandments, testimonies, and statutes with all his being<sup>21</sup>. This was not a private covenant, but a public display that modeled to Judah pure worship of God. Further, Josiah went on to reinstitute the Passover celebration, which had not been kept for two generations. The Bible is clear that Josiah was an active participant in the Passover celebration<sup>22</sup>, and it happened out of the overflow of his heart. Josiah set the example of humble worship of God for all to see. Being king people had to obey his commands, but he wanted to set an example for Judah to follow. Josiah lived out his faith in God for all of Judah to witness.

### **Implications for Leadership Today**

Good leaders are to model Godly leadership for others. The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of modeling for others. In I Corinthians 11:1 (*New King James Bible*, 1997) Paul says, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” Again, in I Corinthians 4:16 (*English Standard Bible*, 2001) Paul said, “I urge you, then, be imitators of me<sup>23</sup>.” Leaders are to set an example in their own lives as they reflect Jesus to those around them. II Corinthians 3:18a (*English Standard Bible*, 2001) declares, “and we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Godly leaders reflect the One they follow, so others might embrace Christ. Good leaders model Godly leadership so that some of their followers might find salvation through Jesus Christ<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> See II Kings 23:3 and II Chronicles 34:29-31.

<sup>22</sup> See II Kings 23:21 and II Chronicles 35:1-7.

<sup>23</sup> I Corinthians 4:17 points the reader back to Christ as Paul wanted readers to imitate him, because he modeled Jesus.

<sup>24</sup> Paul explains how he related to different groups that he might win them with the Gospel in I Corinthians 9:20-22.

## **Leadership Principle 6 – Practice Servant Leadership**

King Josiah offered a wonderful model of servant leadership as he initiated the Passover celebration. God gave Josiah the vision to reinstitute this celebration<sup>25</sup>, and Josiah acted on the God-given vision. II Chronicles 35:7 (*New King James Bible*, 1997) says, “Then Josiah gave the lay people lambs and young goats from the flock, all for Passover offerings for all who were present, to the number of thirty thousand, as well as three thousand cattle; these were from the king’s possession.” The king instituted the Passover for the people, but he gave them the necessary sacrifice from his own flocks. Josiah served the people of Judah by giving them over thirty-three thousand animals for sacrifice. To put this into perspective, the last Passover celebration that occurred was with Josiah’s great-grandfather Hezekiah<sup>26</sup>. Josiah’s sacrifice during the Passover was more than double what Hezekiah sacrificed, and Josiah gave from his own flocks (II Chronicles 35, n.d.). Josiah practiced servant leadership, and Judah responded by faithfully following their leader. II Kings 23:3b (*New King James Bible*, 1997) mentions how, “all the people of Judah took a stand for the covenant.” Judah followed their servant leader.

### **Implications for Leadership Today**

“A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of the people and the communities to which they belong” (Greenleaf, 1970). King Josiah knew that the well-being of the people was tied to their complete devotion to God. Possibly the best model of servant leadership Biblically comes from Jesus washing the disciples’ feet<sup>27</sup>. The mediator of Creation<sup>28</sup> humbled Himself to the point of washing feet. As He modeled this servant leadership, Jesus said, “For I have given you an

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<sup>25</sup> II Chronicles 35:1 and II Kings 23:21.

<sup>26</sup> See II Chronicles 30:24.

<sup>27</sup> See John 13:1-17.

<sup>28</sup> See Colossians 1:15-17.

example, that you should also do just as I have done to you” (John 13:15, *English Standard Bible*, 2001). Leaders are to do as Jesus did and humble themselves for the well-being of their followers. Jesus took it a step further by humbling Himself to the point of death becoming the pathway of salvation for all who believe<sup>29</sup>. Leaders should focus on the well-being of the people and communities in which they belong, and the spiritual well-being of the followers and communities should be of paramount importance.

## Conclusion

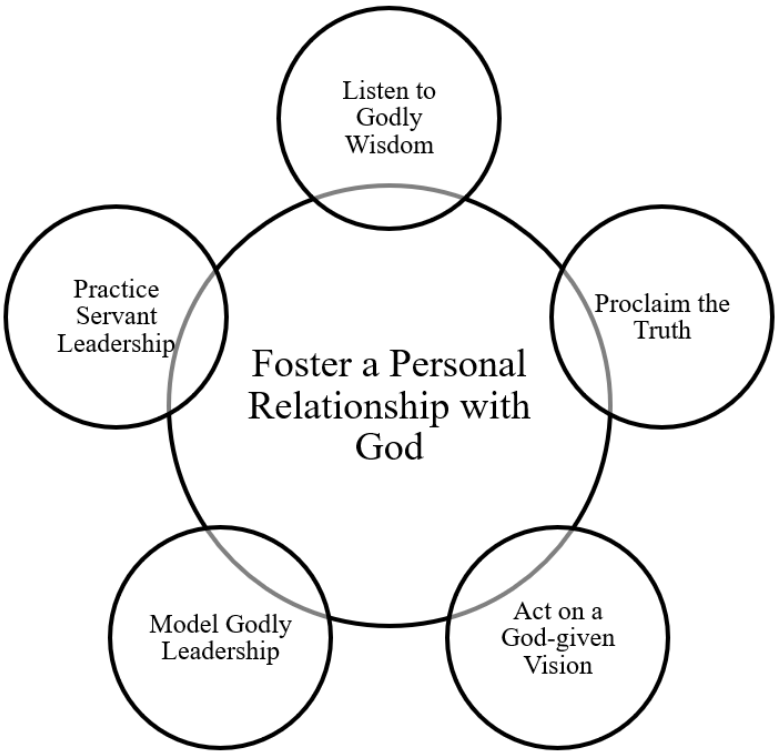
Josiah offers a Biblical model of leadership during tumultuous times. The Bible presents the spiritual successes of his Godly leadership. While the scriptures are silent on his effectiveness as a national leader, history shows how he made Judah independent of other nations and expanded its territory (Wilson, 1892). Several leadership principles were displayed by Josiah that have relevance for leaders today who are dealing with tumultuous times. They include:

- Fostering a personal relationship with God
- Listening to Godly wisdom
- Proclaiming the truth
- Acting on a God-given vision
- Modeling Godly leadership for others
- Practicing servant leadership

Figure 1 displays the importance of the first leadership principle, fostering a personal relationship with God, in the development of the other five leadership principles. Leaders who follow the principles lived out by King Josiah might find success in this world, but more importantly, they will point followers to, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6, *English Standard Bible*, 2001).

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<sup>29</sup> See Philippians 2:7-8.



***Figure 1. Six Leadership Principles Displayed by King Josiah***

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