

WHAT HILKIAH FOUND IN THE TEMPLE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

2 Chronicles 34:1-33

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Hilkiah said to the secretary Shaphan, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD," and Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan. (2 Chron. 34:15)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Sept. 15	Matt. 22:36-40	The Command to Love
T	Sept. 16	Rom. 2:9-16	Keep God's Laws and Do Good
W	Sept. 17	Deut. 30:1-10	Promised Restoration
Th	Sept. 18	Deut. 30:11-21	Choose Life
F	Sept. 19	Heb. 1:13-2:4	A Greater Message
Sa	Sept. 20	Matt. 13:44-52	Hidden Treasure

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

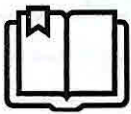
In this lesson, we move ahead to the reign of Hezekiah's great-grandson, Josiah. Sadly, the two kings who reigned between them (Manasseh and Amon) had not followed in Hezekiah's faithful ways, but new efforts would be made to bring the people back to God. Josiah focused on restoring the temple following the idolatrous practices of his father and grandfather, and he reorganized the Passover into a national celebration once again. With careful thought and planning, he was able to hold the Passover on the allotted day of the proper month, surpassing Hezekiah in this regard.

The religious reforms instituted by Josiah were related to the unexpected discovery in the temple of a book of the law, although Scripture is unclear as to how. According to 2 Kings 22-23, Josiah was moved to religious reform after the book was found. In 2 Chronicles, the reform efforts came first and led to finding the book. Workers were repairing and restoring the temple at Jerusalem when, during the renovation, the high priest Hilkiah found "the book of the law of the LORD given through Moses" (2 Chron. 34:14).

The text raises several questions. Just who was Hilkiah and what was his role? We do not know much except that he was from a priestly family and that he helped Josiah in both col-

lecting money to repair the temple and enacting necessary reforms. Some think he might be Jeremiah's father (Jer. 1:1–3) because the timeline fits. Others say this is unlikely given that the prophet's father is described as serving in Anathoth and not Jerusalem. Either way, this high priest oversaw a pivotal moment in Israel's history.

Gracious God, today we celebrate how a broken wall led to a life-changing discovery and a return to you. We also celebrate the countless times we have found your presence and your guidance waiting within the brokenness of our world and our lives. Help us to be people who truly worship you and seek to live rightly. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

2 Chronicles 34:15–22, 26–27

34:15 Hilki'ah said to the secretary Shaphan, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD," and Hilki'ah gave the book to Shaphan. ¹⁶Shaphan brought the book to the king and further reported to the king, "All that was committed to your servants they are doing. ¹⁷They have emptied out the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and have delivered it into the hand of the overseers and the workers." ¹⁸The secretary Shaphan informed the king, "The priest Hilki'ah has given me a book." Shaphan then read it aloud to the king.

¹⁹When the king heard the words of the law, he tore his clothes. ²⁰Then the king commanded Hilki'ah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, the secretary Shaphan, and the king's servant Asaiah, ²¹"Go, inquire of the LORD for me and for those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that has been found, for the wrath of the LORD that is poured out on us is great, because our ancestors did not keep the word of the LORD, to act in accordance with all that is written in this book."

²²So Hilki'ah and those whom the king had sent went to the prophet Huldah, the wife of Shallum son of Tokhath son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe (who lived in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter) and spoke to her to that effect. . . .

²⁶But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him: Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'Regarding the words that you have heard, ²⁷because your heart was penitent and you humbled yourself before God when

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

you heard his words against this place and its inhabitants, and you have humbled yourself before me and have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the LORD.”

A MOMENTOUS DISCOVERY

What was this book of the law? Many scholars speculate that it was portions of Deuteronomy or Exodus. Others suggest that it was some other ancient holiness code. If we take Josiah’s subsequent reforms as a clue to the book’s contents, then it seems likely that the text was some form of Deuteronomy. The changes made by Josiah fit the commandments given in Deuteronomy 15:19–18:22. The basic principles of the reform were: (1) foreign cults and all expressions of idolatry must be purged; (2) all public worship must be centered in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem; (3) pure cultic practice must find expression in the moral and ethical conduct of the king and people.

Where did the book come from? Was it deliberately placed where it would be discovered? Sure answers to these questions may never be known. Some think that during the dark days of Manasseh’s kingship, a group of dedicated prophets, working secretly perhaps, reviewed the ancient laws of the Mosaic covenant and pondered what sort of reforms could reestablish and revitalize Israel’s faith. Even if true, we cannot know if these prophets were the ones to hide the scroll.

The finding was significant enough that Josiah wanted to verify the book’s authenticity, seeking out one who could speak for God. Surprisingly, this was not Jeremiah, whose work had begun five years earlier and who knew the book of Deuteronomy. Nor was it Zephaniah, who worked at the same time. Rather, Josiah consulted Huldah the prophetess (2 Chron. 34:22–28).

Huldah is found here and in the parallel passage in 2 Kings 22:14–20. This wife of the keeper of the wardrobe in Jerusalem is introduced as a prophetess, and her words were taken to heart. There is no emphasis on her being female, leading us to conclude that it was not an uncommon phenomenon. (See Deborah’s role in Judg. 4:4 and Anna in Luke 2:36.)

Huldah confirmed the scroll’s authenticity, which was both good and bad news. On one hand, they had legitimate Scripture to guide them. On the other, they could now see just how far astray they had gone.

Thus, when the words of Huldah were brought back to Josiah, he called the elders to join him in the temple. A great throng of leaders, priests, prophets, and common folk gathered as the king read the book of the covenant. Josiah made a new covenant with God, and the people joined in. A period of great religious reform followed.

 **Who are some important women who have helped guide you and your church?**

A RESTORED VISION

This newly found book contained the standards that had guided the tribal confederacy from their early days in Canaan. The emphasis was on the covenant made at Sinai, based on the marvelous saving acts of God. In response to these gracious deeds, it was the obligation of thankful people to serve their covenant Lord.


By sharing the contents of the scroll with the people, Josiah offered Judah's population a renewed vision. He gave them the opportunity to recapture that which they had lost: the hope, meaning, and true joy of being God's people. God's sovereignty and love were expressed in the words of the book of the law that Hilkiah found. Those words poured out over Israel like a flood, washing out idolatry and evil and establishing a renewed, invigorated community of faith. Those words brought about a great change.

Making changes in our lives sometimes requires the encouragement of others. Encouragement may come from hearing a preacher, reading a biography, or listening to a piece of music (or literature) or seeing art or dance). We often need to be inspired or given a new vision. With another person's affirmations and insight, we may be able to accomplish that which we never dreamed possible. Then we, in our turn, may inspire others. True evangelism is like this. We become so full of joy, excitement, and love for God that it overflows from us to those around us. It is contagious. This passage is about this kind of visionary influence; it is about getting out of ruts, reclaiming our dreams and purpose, and making necessary changes.

Periodically, people and institutions arrive at a point when reassessment becomes necessary for continued health and well-being. They need an honest consideration of the situation to enable them to enter more fully and more effectively into the

goals of their existence. This requires a thoughtful evaluation of the past, a clarified focus on the present, and a renewed vision for the future. Josiah personally experienced such a moment when he heard the words of the Lord read from the book, and we can only guess at the effect it had on Hilkiah and Huldah.

Of course, even with strong hope and the best of intentions, the most difficult challenge can be living with the consequences of past behavior. What Huldah seems to be telling Josiah is that turning over a new leaf is good, but it cannot undo the damage already caused. The seeds of destruction had been sown; even a thoroughgoing reformation could not prevent the consequences. Justice may be delayed, but a time of reckoning must come.

 **In what ways does Scripture guide your life? Has it ever led you to a course correction? If so, how?**


STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

We know that people sometimes lose their sense of meaning and purpose if they neglect practices or traditions that helped shape their identity. This story of how the book of the law helped leaders restore Israel's worshipful practices prompts us to consider what might trigger a change for us that would lead to more meaningful worship or spiritual practices.

When my own congregation was discussing their future and drafting a mission statement to reflect their hopes, one member shared information that he had received during a seminar. He had heard the life cycle of a typical church described in this way: Churches are born with a vision. They know what they are about and where they want to go. The enthusiasm and faith that initiated their life carries them forward into new territory; an organization is created to facilitate the dream. The organization establishes programs that enhance and support the original vision. Eventually, the original purpose becomes distorted by the very programs created to uphold it. The status quo (or the building itself) becomes more important than seeking God's ongoing call. This is a comfortable stage for those who have long been part of the organization. Unfortunately, the organization itself usually begins to decline at this point. The vision on which it was founded—and that spurred it to maturity—evaporates. Programs fizzle. Members begin to get bored or angry. They drift away. A church clinging to empty traditions dies.

Fortunately, the death of a vision does not always mean the death of the church. Churches can recapture their sense of mission, their commitment to God, and their joy in worship. “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*” was a motto of the Protestant Reformers: “The church reformed, always being reformed.” In other words, a church must constantly renew its vision. Periodically, the vision must be dusted off and held up and checked for needed repairs. The book of the law and Josiah’s reforms offered such a moment for Israel.

For us in the church today, if we keep the focus of our lives on Christ, then our lives have ultimate meaning. We are able to determine the direction of our lives with renewed confidence and courage because our vision is of truth. We will not lose sight of our priorities in the midst of life’s turmoil. We will not become lost in the valley of the shadow of death because our vision remains clearly before us guiding, shaping, and inspiring us.¹

 **How do you see the phrase “reformed, always being reformed” at work in your church? In your life?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.

1. The reign of good King Josiah is recounted in 2 Chronicles 34–35. See 2 Kings 22–23 for its parallel in Deuteronomistic history.
2. In the 2 Kings account, Josiah is moved to religious reform when a book of the law is discovered in the temple; in 2 Chronicles, reform happens first, leading to the discovery of the book. The Chronicler notes that Josiah is motivated by personal faith and piety at sixteen years old (34:3). Thus, he begins purging the land of idolatry at twenty years old (vv. 4–8).
3. Josiah covenants with God to follow the terms of the book that had been discovered, using covenantal language (“commandments,” “statute,” and “decrees”). He requires the people of Judah and the remnant in Israel to keep the covenant and worship God alone. Judah and Jerusalem’s devastation is delayed until 587 BCE.

1. Anna Case-Winters, “*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Our Misused Motto,*” *Presbyterians Today*, May, 2004, bit.ly/TPWEcclesiaRSR.