Jehoshaphat's Prayer
2 Chronicles 20:1-19

Over the summer we're looking at prayer and some of the great prayers in the Bible, and the place of prayer in the lives of some of the great characters of the Bible.

And today, we're looking at Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and his prayer in 2 Chronicles 20. But before we look at his prayer, think about him as a man. Because in the history of God's people, Jehoshaphat stands out as one of the few good kings. Was he perfect? No. But he was good.

Now, you probably haven't noticed, but the US is gearing up for another election, and France and the UK have just had one, and in election season our politicians set out competing visions for the future.

Well, Jehoshaphat, never had to stand for election on a manifesto. But like any leader, he almost certainly had a vision for what he hoped his country would experience under his rule. And at the end of the account we're looking at today, we're given a description of the state of the nation, and it's probably pretty close to what Jehoshaphat would have wished for. Verse 30, 'The realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet, for his God gave him rest all around.' In other words, there was peace and prosperity and security..

But of course, that didn't just matter for Jehoshaphat, or even just for the people he led, it mattered for the people who first read this account. You see, Chronicles was written sometime around 400BC, after the return from exile in Babylon. So as this account is being written, much of Judah and Jerusalem lay in ruins. And the people had no king and no army and threats lay on every side. So they were experiencing anything but peace and prosperity and security.

And so one reason the writer is telling them about this event is to help them answer the question, 'how can *we* find peace and security, that deep sense that all is well, when everything we might normally look to for that has been shaken to the core?'

And yet, it's not just Jehoshaphat, or the people post-exile, who need an answer to that question, is it? Whether for our nations or for ourselves, whether in the world of politics or our own friendships and families, careers and interests, how can we thrive, how can we know that all is well?

Because the truth is that life is not always like that. Instead, we can face challenges that can threaten the things we hold most dear.

So, we're going to look at three things: the problem, the prayer, and the answer.

The Problem
Look at v1: 'After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle.'

How would you describe what Jehoshaphat's facing? If you were an optimist you'd say, 'Hey tourism is up on the southern border!' If you were a pessimist you'd say, 'We are done for.' But what would a realist say? Well, that's the point isn't? Because in reality, it would be hard to be too pessimistic, because they really are up against it.

Verse 2, ‘Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, “A *great multitude* is coming against you from Edom.”’ So this is not a little raiding party of easily dispatched bandits. This is a full-scale invasion on the southern border, by an unholy trinity of Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites. And, v2, “Behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar” (that is, Engedi)’. Which means, the enemy is already half-way to Jerusalem, and that distance is getting shorter by the hour.

So this threat is real and it is bearing down on them. And Jehoshaphat’s response? Verse 3, ‘Jehoshaphat was afraid.’ Now, a few years back, I went paint-balling with a group of friends. And I have two abiding memories of that. One was being shot in the right buttock at point blank range by someone I thought was a friend. The other was the fear and terror of being shot at at all, and the realisation that, if I was scared paint-balling, I would have been totally useless in a real war.

But Jehoshaphat was no cowardly Englishman. He’s a seasoned soldier. And yet, when he hears of what’s coming his way he’s afraid. And with good reason. Because v13 gives us an idea of what’s at stake: ‘All Judah stood before the LORD, *with their little ones, their wives, and their children.’* So this is no game of paintball with the boys. If this invading army gets to Jerusalem it will rape and slavery and death and destruction. And the responsibility of that is pressing down on Jehoshaphat.

Now, I know that for some of you, with friends or family fighting in Ukraine, that is not a hypothetical situation, but for the rest of us, we’re unlikely to be facing something as dramatic as Jehoshaphat. But like him, you may face a situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed, or fearful, or hopeless, or that what you love most, or most desire for the future, is being threatened.

Because the truth is that battles and struggles and fights are a reality of life. And we don’t face the Moabites, Ammonites and Meunites, but we do face another unholy trinity, of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And each day you face a battle - a battle in your own heart against temptation and sin. Are you going to live for yourself, and think that the centre of the universe is you, and the meaning of life is what you own, or who you’re sleeping with? Or are you going to live for something higher than that? And how’s that battle going? And are there times when you feel overwhelmed or even defeated.

Or think of your closest relationships. And how sin and selfishness can ruin them. And sometimes you feel clueless and powerless to know what to do about it.

And if you’re married, think about your marriage. In our pre-marriage course we quote someone who said, ‘I used to think I was a great guy until I got married and then I realised I was a jerk.’ Because it’s not just your partner you’re struggling with, it's the sin in your own heart. And you can feel lost and impotent to change that.

Or think of parenting. Your child is born and you hold them in your arms and you marvel at this gift of life and it’s almost a moment of transcendence. But within months you are dealing with tantrums, and the naughty step, and screen time and slammed doors and purple hair dye. And your child is making choices you worry about and you fear for them. And you crawl into bed at the end of the day and pray, ‘God, what are we supposed to do?’

Or consider the world of politics and culture. Does it sometimes feel like what you value, or even your own kids, are under threat, but you feel powerless to do anything about that relentless onward march of stuff that's not just wrong but wicked?

And think of the final battle with death that we all have to fight one day. How are you going to win that one?

And as we think about these things, the question is: How does truth triumph? How do you come out victorious? When you feel overwhelmed or fearful, and you don't know what to do, how can you find peace and well-being, and real security, so that ultimately the good does win the day?

Well, that's exactly what Jehoshaphat needed to know as well.

The Prayer

In a recent article in the Sunday Times, Waldermar Januszczak, the British art critic, said: 'When it comes to unleashing lunatics, there is no mind altering substance as powerful as the Bible.' Well, maybe, but the Bible also gives us the resources to unleash hope when our circumstances seem hopeless.

You see, what are the options open to you when what you care about is being threatened and you feel powerless? You could just panic couldn't you? Because that's always helpful! Or you could create lots of drama and try and recruit others into the drama, telling them just how bad everything is. Or you could raise the volume and try and out-shout the enemy. You could resign yourself to your fate and say 'whatever will be will be'. Or you could dig deep, and plough on, hoping something better happens.

But look what Psalm 20 says to those who are up against it: 'Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.' (Psalm 20:7) In other words, when we feel powerless, the temptation is to look everywhere but to God for help, to the 21st century equivalent of chariots and horses. And depending on the issue, that might be the latest and loudest politician who promises to be the saviour of what we most value. It might be our financial resources, or someone else's wisdom. Or it may be as simple as raising our voices and shouting louder than our kids or our spouse.

Either way, something we love is being threatened and we're trusting something other than God to fix it.

But what does Jehoshaphat do? He's afraid, but he doesn't allow that fear to paralyse him in inactivity. Instead, he turns the enormity of what they're facing to prayer. Verse 3, 'Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and *set his face to seek the LORD*, and proclaimed a fast throughout Judah.'

And notice what happens as he does that. Verse 4, '*And Judah assembled* to seek help from the LORD; *from all the cities of Judah they came* to seek the LORD.' So as the king turns his fear to faith he becomes an example to those around him, and they join him. You see, the way you respond to crisis, to this political moment, or whatever you're facing now or in the future, has the ability to be an example to others. An example of mobilising the chariots and horses *or* of trusting God. And if you make it trusting God, then what follows tells us that great things can happen.

But before we look at what happens, did you notice where Jehoshaphat holds this prayer meeting? Verse 5, 'Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, *in the house of the LORD*.' In the temple, which as Jonathan told us last week, was to be the focus point of prayer in times of national need. And if ever there was a moment of need, it was now.

Now, in the city where I went to school there's a beautiful cathedral dating back a thousand years. And when I became a Christian I had zero church background, and so in my free periods at school I'd often walk over to the cathedral and just sit there and soak in the atmosphere and pray. And there's something about praying in a place where people have prayed for a thousand years. And yet, as Jonathan reminded us last week, you don't need a thousand year old cathedral or a temple built by Solomon, to pray. Jesus said of himself, that one greater than Solomon, one greater than the temple has come. And as you put your trust in Christ, you have a direct access to God - wherever you are - that Solomon and Jehoshaphat could only have dreamt of.

But as Jehoshaphat prays, look at the four things he does. Four things that each of us can do when we don't know what else we can do.

Firstly, he reminds God of who he - God - is. Verse 6, "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you."

Now a celebrity might say, 'Do you know who I am?' And someone who's religious might say the same to God: 'Don't you now how I've served you, I deserve you to do this for me.' But Jehoshaphat has no delusions of grandeur. He doesn't come reminding God that he, Jehoshaphat, is king. He comes, reminding God that he, God, is king. The ultimate king. The king over every king. Including these kings that are marching on Jerusalem.

Now, why remind God of that? I mean, what's with the questioning, 'Are you not God in heaven?' Is God forgetful? Are the years finally catching up with him such that he needs Jehoshaphat to remind him of his power? No. This is the boldness of one who knows who God is. It's like a friend getting in the face of a friend, saying 'I know you can do this. These invading armies only have power because you've given them power. So we're coming to you as the one with power over every power.

Secondly, he reminds God of the past and his past faithfulness. Verse 7, "Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?" In other words, 'this approaching army is out to rob us of the gift you gave your friend - and you are not the kind of God who abandons his friends!'

Plus, he tells God of the promises he made to Solomon, that if his people stood in this temple and prayed in times of trouble he would hear. Well, here we are, in the temple, in a time of trouble, so God, you have to hear.

And then, the people coming up against us are the very people you would not let Israel invade when they left Egypt, and yet, v11, "behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit." So this crisis isn't just dangerous, it's unjust, it's wrong, and you're a God of limitless justice, so, v12, "O our God, will you not execute judgment on them?"

Thirdly, Jehoshaphat is crystal clear about the reality of their situation. Verse 12, “For we are powerless against this great horde… [And] We do not know what to do.”

So there’s zero pretence. There’s no putting a brave face on it. There’s no ‘fake it ’til you make it’. Their situation really is this bad: we are powerless, and they are powerful, and we cannot save ourselves. In fact, we don’t even know what we should do.

Which is only partially true, because they do what we can all do when we’re up against it.

Fourthly, they fix their gaze on God. Verse 12, “But our eyes are on you.”

Maybe it’s some sinful habit that you’re stuck in that you feel powerless to break; maybe it’s some issue at work or at home, or in your relationships, and you’re at the end of yourself and *you* don’t know what to do. Maybe you feel a growing anxiety as you watch what’s going on in the world. Well, Jehoshaphat also sets us an example: ‘God, we don’t have the power to change this, but you do. And in Christ you have promised that you are working everything for God for those who love you and are called according to your purpose. So I'm asking you to do just that. And you tell me to leave vengeance and justice in your hands, so I’m also choosing to do just that. And instead, in this moment, my eyes are on you.’

Ok, but if that’s how Jehoshaphat prays, how does God respond?

The Answer

And the answer comes through another. Verse 14-15, ‘And the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jehaziel the son of Zechariah…and he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you…”

And when you feel powerless, be attentive to the Lord speaking to you through another. And be open to the Lord prompting you to be that person to someone else who feels overwhelmed - to encourage them from God’s word, and speak his promises into their lives.

But above all, be open to hearing that encouragement or correction from God's word itself.

Last weekend, we were talking with Naomi and Lukas, our daughter and son-in-law, about what God’s been teaching them recently. And they told us how they’d been feeling wrung out and just that little bit grumpy at always being in church, serving away, while their friends either skipped church, or never went, and were generally living their best lives now. And they told us how in their morning devotions they’d read Psalm 73 together. And it’s a psalm about why you shouldn’t be grumpy when everyone else seems to be living their best life now and you’re just trying to be faithful! And then, the next day in their home group, the passage for discussion was Psalm 73. And then they were listening to a podcast, and what came up? Psalm 73. And at that point they decided that maybe the Lord was trying to tell them something. That when they were feeling week, he could be their strength.

So be attentive to the Lord speaking to you, and especially when you are struggling, either with your attitude or with knowing what to do.

But then look what he says to Jehoshaphat and the people. Verses 15-17, “Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s… You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf… Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.”

Now, without God, Jehoshaphat, and you and I, have every reason to fear. We have reason to fear at the state of the world, we have reason to fear for our friends and our families. We have reason to fear for the state of our hearts and our ability to resist the sin that can seem overwhelmingly attractive. And we have reason to fear death.

But we’re not without God. And because he is for us we do not need to be afraid, or dismayed, because ultimately the battle is not ours but his.

You see, if you know the story, you’ll know that the next day, the people go out to the field of battle singing - v21 “Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever.” And as they do, the enemy turns on itself and they start killing each other, so that by the time Jehoshaphat and the people get there, there’s no enemy left to face. There’s just their spoil to take home.

Now you might hear that and think, ‘Great for Jehoshaphat, but what about me? How does that help me find peace and security when I’m up against it, or what I love is being threatened, or I’m at the end of myself?'

Well, Jehoshaphat is told, the battle is not yours but God’s, so stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf. And how does that salvation come? Not through military might, but through the weakness and foolishness of song.

And how does our victory over the enemies of the world, the flesh, and the devil come? Well listen to Mary, as she sings in the Magnificat, “He who is mighty has done great things for me… He has shown strength with his arm… he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:48-52). And how has he done that? Through the weakness and seeming foolishness of a baby being formed in Mary’s womb.

And how does Christ triumph over sin and satan? Through the weakness and foolishness of the cross, where he is mocked for being unable to save himself, when all along it’s us he’s saving. And at his resurrection, our last and greatest enemy, death, is defeated. As Paul writes, ‘Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ (1 Cor 15:57).

Now, we live between two ages, between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ of Christ’s kingdom. And we won’t see everything made right, or every threat neutralised, until the day Christ returns and *does* make everything right. But until that Day, like Jehoshaphat, we can sing, because we know that full and final victory is assured.

So, stand firm, hold your position and see the salvation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.