In the Battle
2 Chronicles 20:1-23

Over the last couple of weeks we've been looking at how you can live during times of adversity. How in the storms of life you can know a fear that calms every fear. How in the wilderness of mental exhaustion you can know the Lord's tenderness and restoration.

But today, we're going to look at how you can respond when you're in a battle, when you feel under attack. And we're going to do that by looking at this event in the life of King Jehoshaphat that was read to us.

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

Now, when you read, 'After this…' you've got to ask, 'after what?' haven't you. And the answer is: after the chapter before, chapter 19, and the reforms Jehoshaphat made in Judah. How he'd turned the people back to God, and established justice and rooted out corruption.

And that presents a problem. Because the way many people think of God is that he is there to bless us, and especially when we do good things. And when we do good things, like taking a hard but right decision, or doing something good for others that costs us, we tend to think that God owes us. 'Hey God, I've done all of this for you, I've sacrificed my time, my money, maybe even my reputation, and this is what I get? This is how you reward me?'

Because look at the reward Jehoshaphat got for having honoured God and worked for the common good: An invasion by the nations on Judah's eastern border. And their intention is clear, v1 again, they 'came against Jehoshaphat for battle.' So, they haven't come to play a presidential round of golf. They mean war.

Now, if Jehoshaphat had provoked this, that might be different; but he hadn't. And neither had his predecessors. Listen to his prayer in v10-11: "Behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy - behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out."

So it's not just that Jehoshaphat and the people are being attacked, it's that this is unjust.

Now, you're not going to face military attack. Liechtenstein is not going to invade your back garden. But what might this look like for you? Well, maybe now, or in the future, you face criticism at work, and you examine yourself, and in all honesty you think it's undeserved, even unjust; it may even be because you've done what's right - but now your job is on the line. Or maybe you face hostility from family members because of your faith, or your values. Or maybe it's less about hostility and more about temptation. And in your group of friends, you're feeling the pressure to conform, to think, or behave, in certain ways. And there's a battle on. And in all of these situations, the adversity you're facing isn't just to do with the circumstances of life, it's opposition in very human form.

And yet, the New Testament peels this back a layer. The early Christians were facing real attacks from real human opponents, but Paul reminds them, and us, that these human enemies are not the real enemy. Rather, there are powers at work underneath. Ephesians 6:12, 'For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.'

So, just as we saw with Elijah, that God can send an angel, a divine messenger to encourage and comfort us and that messenger look very human. So you can face attacks from very human opposition, but the real enemy is underneath.

And in one of Jesus' most convicting sayings, he says, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt 5:44).

But how can you do all that? How can you not get cynical when you're unfairly attacked? How can you see the enemy for who he really are, and love those who oppose you? Well, the way Jehoshaphat handles this teaches us something of the power available to us in the battle.

The Power of Weakness

Jehoshaphat gets news of the invasion and in v3 we're told, 'Then Jehoshaphat was afraid.' So, just like the disciples in the storm, and Elijah hearing the threats of Jezebel, Jehoshaphat's reaction to this threat is fear. And that is totally understandable. He knows that he and his forces are totally outnumbered. The enemy is, v2, 'A great multitude.' And in v12 Jehoshaphat states in prayer what he was clearly painfully aware of, "We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do."

So, this is not just about being attacked. It's about being attacked with seemingly no way to defend yourself; you're outgunned, out argued, out-resourced. When it feels like you're nothing or your words seem inadequate compared to what's against you. Whether that's an appeals process at work, or the arguments your friends use, or the combined might of secular culture trying to conform you or your kids.

But if you notice, Jehoshaphat doesn't just feel powerless. He also feels at a loss - he doesn't know what to do. And maybe you know what that feels like. It's not just that you feel overwhelmed by the opposition you're facing, it's that you just can't see a way out.

And yet, what becomes clear is that this is exactly where God would have Jehoshaphat be. It's precisely in this position of total weakness and inability to save themselves, that victory will come. As Jahaziel the prophet says, v15-17, "Thus says the Lord to you, '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."

And time and again in Scripture this is the pattern, isn't it? A boy slays a giant, and a pebble defeats a sword. In Judges, people no one else would use, a woman, a left-handed man, a man from the most insignificant family of the most insignificant tribe, bring deliverance to the people. The Lord is always bringing victory out of weakness.

And the greatest victory, the greatest rescue of all comes when Christ left his place of supreme power and become the weakest thing imaginable, a baby in a feeding trough. And he was crucified

in weakness, but it was there, at the cross, that he secured the greatest triumph over our real enemies: sin and satan and death.

You see, the gospel is all about our weakness, our not being able to save ourselves, our not being able to love our enemies, and us standing back and watching God do what we could never do. It's all about the battle being the Lord's.

It's why the Lord teaches Paul the lesson he does in 2 Corinthians 12:9: 'but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."' And learning that lesson meant that Paul could immediately say, 'for the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.' (12:10)

You see, real victories, God-glorifying victories, do not come by you and me being strong, or supremely competent, but by being weak. As Paul writes in Ephesians 6, by 'Be[ing] strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.'

The question is, how do you do that? How does your weakness, your being outnumbered, out-manouvered, or out-argued become the ground for God's power to be displayed?

The Power of Prayer and Praise

And Jehoshaphat may be militarily weak, but he does the one thing he can do. Verse 3, 'Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord.'

So Jehoshaphat's afraid, but he doesn't waste that fear. It propels him to seek God.

Now, one of the interesting things about crises is that they don't build moral or spiritual muscle - at least not to start with. What they do is bring to the surface what's already there.

Last week, Su was cycling to work, and a truck stopped suddenly in front of her. She slammed on her breaks and went right over the handlebars and hit the road. But she came out of it remarkably unscathed. And the reason she said was that she just instinctively did a judo roll. All those years of practice on the mat in a sweaty gym produced a reflex reaction when she needed it.

But that's the point, isn't it. Reflex reactions require hours of practice. Why can the pianist play his scales without even thinking? Why can the sportsman catch a ball with a microsecond reaction time? Because he's spent years practicing.

In Daniel 6, Daniel gets word that he will be arrested and executed if he prays to anyone but the king. What's his reflex reaction to that threat? He goes home, and prays! Why? Because that's what he always did. And what he always did becomes his reflex in the time of crisis. It's why, when Jehoshaphat prays in v12, "we do not know what to do…' he adds, '… *but* our eyes are on you."

So, if at the moment you're *not* under attack, and you don't feel under pressure, are you cultivating your inner life? So that when the pressure does come, and it will, you're ready, and those habits of prayer have been formed. And did you notice how Jehoshaphat calls the nation to prayer? It's a reminder that you can't lead people where you haven't gone yourself. And Jehoshaphat can call the nation to prayer, because he prays. So, not just for your own sake, but for the good of those you

lead, or have some spiritual influence over, whether that's in your family, or home group, or friends or work, develop the habit of prayer so that when others need that, it's already there.

But it's not just the fact that Jehoshaphat prays that's impressive, it's what he prays. Because he does 4 things. Firstly, as we've seen, he acknowledges the reality of the situation. He doesn't duck how bad things are: the enemy is a great horde. Secondly, he confesses his and his people's inability.

And yet, he doesn't leave it there. If he did his prayer would be nothing more than a pity party. Instead, thirdly, he prays the character of God. 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." And, the next day, when he appoints a choir to lead the people out to battle, he has them go before the army, singing, v21, "Give thanks to the Lord, *for his steadfast love endures forever*."

Can you see what he's doing? He's taking how bad the threat is, and how weak he is, and bringing them both into the light of who God is. His character, his power, his sovereignty, his love, his faithfulness. Because that's what real prayer is. It's aligning ourselves and the threats we face, with God. And it's in prayer, and worship - as we declare the greatness and faithfulness of God, that our enemies, take their right size, as God takes his. Do you remember how in the old cartoons, there would be this shadow on the wall of this huge scary monster? But then someone turns the lights on, and it's just this tiny little mouse. God-exalting prayer and worship does that. It turns the light on in your soul and it shrinks your enemy to his right size.

But Jehoshaphat doesn't just pray the character of God. Fourthly, he prays the promises of God. 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?" Now, what's he saying? He's saying, God, you promised this land to us.

Now, a promise made is only as good as the person who makes it, isn't it? Someone can offer you the world, their undying love, a new job, a fresh opportunity, but if their character is faulty, those promises don't mean much, because you can't trust them. But when God, the God of *hesed*, steadfast, never ending love, the God who is absolutely sovereign, makes a promise, you can take that promise all the way to the bank.

And in his prayer Jehoshaphat asks two questions. Verse 6, "Are you not God in heaven?" - that's to do with God's character. Verse 7, "Did you not… give [this land] forever to the descendants of Abraham?" And that's to do with his promises. And the answer to both is 'yes'.

And the New Testament tells us that all of God's promises are 'yes and amen' in Christ. And that he is the image of the invisible God, that if you want to know what the character of God looks like, look at Jesus. And that means that, just like Jehoshaphat, you can pray God's promises of his protection and his presence, and trust his character to deliver.

But, that doesn't mean you'll necessarily be vindicated in this life. What it does mean, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4, that in the middle of your fiery trial you can know joy, because you know that you're sharing in Christ's suffering and, like him, your vindication lies up ahead.

You see, did you see the effect their praying, and the word of God through Jahaziel, has on them? Verses 18: 'Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshipping the Lord.'

For them, it's as if the battle's already won, isn't it? Not a shot has been fired; the enemy is still marching towards Jerusalem; Jehoshaphat has no more men or weapons than he had before, and yet, for them, this is as good as done!

Why? Because through prayer, and through praise they have seen God for who he is, and the enemy for what it is - already defeated. And that confidence is based on God's character and his word. Listen to Jehoshaphat on the morning he's going to lead the people out to face the enemy, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe in his prophets, and you will succeed." (2 Chron 20:20).

Now, they still have to open the gates of Jerusalem and head for the field of battle, they still have to confront the enemy, but they do so as worshippers, as those who exalt a greater power, not as combatants. And v22 tells us that it was 'when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush' and their enemies turn on themselves. As Ezra reminded the citizens of Jerusalem years later, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." (Neh 8:10)

So… when you feel under attack, and there are all these reasons to lose hope, practice the power of prayer and praise. In Ephesians 6 Paul tells us that when the day of evil comes, when the enemy is marching on you, take up the shield of faith - trust the character and the promises of God; take up the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, and pray in the Spirit. They're the very same weapons Jehoshaphat uses. Weapons that exalt God, humble us, and cut the real enemy down to their real size.

But there's a third power at work here.

The Power of Fellowship

Jehoshaphat takes the lead here, but this is no solo effort, is it? Look at v13: 'Meanwhile all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives and their children.' So this wasn't the ancient equivalent the March of a Million Men. This was *all* Judah. Men, women and children. And if the mention of women and children underlines their vulnerability, because this is who will suffer if the enemy takes the city, it also underlines their strength, because this is a people who have come together in prayer.

And when you're in a battle you need others. Now, they may not be able to do anything more for you than pray, but that's enough. And if with Elijah we saw then when you're under pressure there can be this tendency to withdraw, here we see the power of not doing that. The power of the united fellowship of the Lord's people in prayer.

And among those people, the Lord raises up someone to bring his word of encouragement: v14, 'And the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel.' Now, when you're in a battle, the world will tell you, 'this is the time to show your metal, so look inside yourself, draw on your inner resources.' When what you really need is someone like Jahaziel to remind you 'this battle is the Lord's; trust him.' And you'll only find that kind of word among the Lord's people.

But did you notice where all this drama happens? Verse 5, ‘And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord.’ So all this is playing out in the temple.

In Psalm 73, the psalmist is struggling with how the wicked always seem to win, how he has stayed faithful to God but has nothing to show for it, while those who haven’t are enjoying the good life. And he’s fighting envy and self-pity. Until, v17, ‘I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.’ You see, it’s in the temple, in the place of God’s presence and in the place of sacrifice that he sees reality clearly.

And Jesus came and said of himself, ‘One greater than the temple is here.’ Because he’s the ultimate dwelling place of God; because he’s the ultimate sacrifice. The one who loves us so much that he gave his life for us when we were his enemies. Who, when we let the truth or that sink in, fills our hearts with love for our enemies. And who promises that when we gather in two’s and three’s, he will presence himself among us.

So, when you’re in the battle, gather. Get other Christians around you, and have them pray with you and for you, and let them remind you: Christ died for you, this is his battle, you’re safe in his hands.

But lastly, and briefly, one more power.

The Power of Standing Firm
Jehoshaphat could have just caved, couldn’t he? And wisdom is knowing what hills to die on. But here God’s word through Jahaziel is clear: Verse 17: “Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf.”

And in Ephesians 6 Paul says the same to us: ‘Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore.’ (Eph 6:13-14).

In the 4th century, the church was in serious danger of falling under the influence of the heretic Arius. But Athanasius, a young pastor, not yet 30, stood his ground, and famously said, *Athanasius contra mundum*. If the whole world is against Athanasius, then Athanasius is against the world. In other words, it doesn’t matter what everyone else is saying, in the day of evil you just have to stand your ground.

When Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms, contending for the gospel, he said, “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me.”

And for Luther and Athanasius this was their Jehoshaphat moment. But in taking it, they were walking in the footsteps of Christ, who knelt alone in the garden, and stood alone at his trial, and died alone and forsaken at the cross. But it was there, in Christ’s obedience, in his standing his ground, that the doors of salvation power were opened for us, for us who cannot save ourselves.

So, if the day comes when you have to take your stand, do it. Whether that’s for truth, or justice, or the honour of God’s name. It might just be then that God works his miracle against all the odds.