

Jehoshaphat's Prayer: Praying for Your Team to Win 2 Chronicles 20:1-30

Today we continue in our series on the "Great Prayers of the Bible." We have heard Abraham's daring prayer on the behalf of the people of Sodom. We have listened to Moses' intimate prayer with God as they met at the tent, face to face, as a man speaks with a friend. Today we come to the prayer of Jehoshaphat, a desperate prayer by the King of Judah to spare his nation from impending doom as neighboring states ally themselves against God's chosen people. It is a prayer for victory over foes. And so the question comes to mind, "When is it OK to pray for victory?" When you're at war, should you pray for victory over your enemy? And what about battles of lesser intensity? There doesn't seem to be a question about battling against demons that surround us. Of course, it's alright to pray for victory over addictions, health problems, mental illnesses, and our own personal sins? But what about victories that require defeat for someone else.? If 10 people are praying that God will give them a job that is available for only one person, should we pray that we get the job, the best man/woman get the job, or for the person who needs the job the most? What about divorce proceedings? Do you pray that you get custody of the kids or that you get a favorable settlement? What about all those chaplains for professional football teams? What are they praying about? Against injury? The joy of competition?

What can we learn about praying for victory from Jehoshaphat's prayer.? That's what we want to learn from this epic prayer.

My contention is that we are called to pray for victory in our Christian lives, and that the more Christian our lives become, the more we will pray for the right kinds of victories. God wants us to bring all our hearts' desires before his throne of grace. He cares about the little things and the big things. He cares about your soccer match and your battle with cancer. He wants to hear from you and he wants to speak to you. He wants to give you what you need to become like his son.

Context

Let's begin by looking at the context of Jehoshaphat's prayer. King Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah are on the brink of war. More precisely, the people of Judah are on the verge of being victimized and destroyed by neighboring countries. Chapter 20 of 2 Chronicles begins with the words, "*the sons of Moab and the sons of Ammon, together with some of the Meunites, came to make war against Jehoshaphat*" (20:1).

Three enemy nations on the other side of the Jordan River had combined their armies into one huge army and had invaded Judah. But the really sneaky thing they had done was that they had gone around the south end of the Dead Sea, through very desolate area, and had gotten all the way to En Gedi without being detected.

En Gedi was basically Jerusalem's back yard. In just two days of marching they could be in sight of Jerusalem. If you are a map person like I am, look at a map in the back of your Bible, and you can see their strategy. It worked, Jehoshaphat was caught flat-footed.

He didn't have time to prepare his army or call on his allies. He knew negotiation was impossible. These were bitter, jealous enemies. They wanted to destroy and enslave and they had the upper hand. That's the enemy Jehoshaphat was facing.

But who was Jehoshaphat? I know most of you came here today knowing or remembering little about Jehoshaphat. So let me remind you a little by backtracking to chapter 17, where we learn that subsequent to the death of his father, Asa, Jehoshaphat “reigned in his place” (17:1) as King of Judah. Jehoshaphat begins his reign in 872 B.C.—a time when God’s people were divided into two kingdoms, with Jehoshaphat reigning in Judah, and Ahab reigning in Israel.

You are likely well aware that over the course of Jewish history, Israel and Judah had some good kings and some bad kings. Jehoshaphat was basically a good king. 2 Chron 17:3-5 reads: “*the Lord was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the former ways of his father David . . . therefore the Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah gave presents to Jehoshaphat, and he had riches and honour in abundance. And his heart took delight in the ways of the Lord*” .

So *Jehoshaphat* was a faithful and godly king. Yet, this didn’t exempt Jehoshaphat from the threat of trouble. A vast army stood against Jehoshaphat; three nations conspired to work together to utterly destroy Judah. And Jehoshaphat was understandably afraid. Let’s see what he did in the face of his enemies and his own fear. His response can give us some guidance on how we should face powerful enemies in our lives.

I. When faced with a powerful enemy we should worship God.

The first thing Jehoshaphat did in the face of his enemies was to proclaim a fast and inquire of the Lord. He called his people to corporate prayer. People from every town in Judah came together to fast, inquire of the Lord, and worship God. They came to the temple and Jehoshaphat led them in corporate prayer to Almighty God. Men, women, and children heard him spill out his heart to God. His prayer became the prayer of the people.

After hearing this prayer, Jahaziel, son of a whole bunch of people, brought a word from the Lord. He told the king and the people not to be discouraged or afraid, because the Lord would fight this battle for them. We have that great line in verse 15 that would be a good one to underline and meditate on if you’re one of those underliners: “*Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.*” When Jehoshaphat heard this he, and all Judah with him, bowed down to worship God. The Kohathites and Korathites stood up to praise the Lord with a loud voice. A look back into Chronicles reveals this was choir of Judah, those put in charge of the service of song around the ark of the covenant. In other words, the choir started singing! Three armies are 2 days away from your capital and the choir is the first line of defense!

Some people sort of think I’m crazy or irresponsible or something like that because I’m willing to travel on snow to worship with God’s people. I’ve come to believe that there are greater enemies to the church than snow on the ground and one of the powerful forces we have to defeat these enemies is corporate worship saturated with singing.

Mary Schlosser who was an ambassador for Christ in China for many years used to say, “I sing the Doxology and dismiss the devil.” Amy Carmichael, the Protestant missionary to India who founded an orphanage and served it without any furlough for 55 years wrote, “I believe truly that Satan cannot endure it and so slips out of the room—more or less—when there is a true song.”

Martin Luther gives his testimony like this:

Music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching . . . Music drives away the Devil and makes people gay . . . Next after

theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor. I would not change what little I know of music for something great. Experience proves that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart. We know that to the devil music is distasteful and insufferable. My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, which has so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues. (*Here I Stand*, p. 266)

It 's no wonder that Satan hates the songs of God's people. He does his best to keep a church from being a singing church. And he does his best to keep you from being a singing person.

I don't think these testimonies from Mary Slosser and Amy Carmichael and Martin Luther and William Law are pious platitudes. I think that they are strictly and terribly true. Satan cannot endure the spiritual songs of the saints. You can fight him with song.

I know many of you listen to K-Love or put spiritual songs or Christian hymns in the CD player as you travel down the road. That is a form of prayer also. It's a blow to the devil. Whether you are singing a hymn in the shower, singing a praise song in the back yard while you're raking leaves, or singing with God's people at a funeral, wedding, or worship service, you are girding your loins against your enemies. You are supplying your soul with vitamins and minerals to overcome weakness, worry, and defeat. Sing to the Lord a new song or an old song, and watch your enemies retreat in response.

II. When faced with a powerful enemy we need to recognize our powerlessness.

When Jehoshaphat learned about the approaching enemy he was afraid. In his prayer at the temple in the midst of the people of Judah he reminded God of past promises, especially the promise of land. In verse 7 he prayed, "*O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?*" He retold the strategy of the people of Israel to gather at the temple if tragedy ever struck. They would gather at the house of God to worship and pray. They would cry out in distress to God. But now an enemy had snuck up on them. The Moabites had been spared the sword in an act of mercy, but now these enemies had rallied other enemies to come and destroy Judah. Notice how Jehoshaphat prayed in v. 12: "*O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.*"

Did you notice that? We have no power. We don't know what to do. Have you ever been at that place in your life? Powerlessness? Cluelessness?

Sometimes we need to come to that place where we confess to God our powerlessness. We have tried to defeat our enemies with ingenuity, money, education, and efficiency. Omar Bradley the victorious 4 star general in the American army during WWII said, "The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Our is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants." Especially in the west, with our culture of achievement, there is little room for the admission of powerlessness. And yet, it is only when we recognize and confess our powerlessness against our enemies do we make room for God's power to break loose.

What does this mean for us in our battle with enemies? It means something scary, let me tell you. When we face our enemies, we need to recognize our powerlessness to defeat them on our own. We need to confess to God we are powerless, that we need God, that we need the resources he provides to help us defeat our foes. The world has recently

witnessed the collapse of what many people consider the top athlete of the decade, perhaps more than a decade. Tiger Woods has been the archetype figure of power, concentration, mental fortitude, and physical resilience. He has become a billionaire because of his athletic exploits on the golf course and his charisma to sell products from cars to sports drinks. Hordes of people wanted to be like him, and young golfers dreamed of becoming the next Tiger. And now, he is standing in front of a camera to tell us of his weakness, selfishness, and his need for counselors, family, friends, and his religion to rescue him. I don't personally believe his chosen religion has the capacity to rescue him, but the point is that even the strongest eventually come to the point where they must confess powerlessness. And so must we. When we face enemies that are spiritual, emotional, personal, even financial, it's best to come to God empty, and asking him to fill us up.

There's one other lesson we learn from how Jehoshaphat defeated his enemies.

III. When faced with a powerful enemy, we must discern what is our role and what is God's role.

Some people use this text as an example of passive Christianity. We read verse 15, "The battle is not yours, but God's" and then again we read about how the Lord created confusion among the enemies. The Moabites and the Ammonites turned on the men of Mount Seir and destroyed them, and when they slaughtered them, they turned on one another. When the people of Judah showed up all they saw was a battlefield littered with dead soldiers. It took them 3 days to collect the booty. We read this and the application seems to be "let the Lord fight your battles." But the Lord did have Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah do some things. They were called to march toward the enemy at a particular location. And they were told to stand up against the enemy and watch the Lord fight their battle. They weren't supposed to stay home and watch ACC basketball on the television all afternoon.

And that's the challenge of praying to defeat our enemies. There are varying degrees of action and effort we are to expend. In some OT battles, the Israelites were called to go fight and kill on the battlefield. Sometimes they were to march around a city and blow their horns. Other times they were to march and pray. And so the challenge for us is to know how to pray and how to discover what God wants us to do. We can't have some blanket pray policy that covers every enemy. We've got to move to a progressively mature and deeper prayer life to know how to defeat our enemies, and, maybe just as importantly, knowing which enemies are worth fighting.

Stages of Prayer

Philip Yancey, in his book on Prayer identifies 3 stages of maturity in our prayer lives. I know this is somewhat arbitrary, but it is helpful to think about.

The first stage is a **simple childlike request** for something I desire. Children see something they want and they ask their parents for it. When my girls were young they wanted Barbie Dolls. When they got older they wanted cell phones. The thing about children asking for things is that they are rarely shy. They see what they want and ask for it. Yancey calls this the first stage, but it shouldn't necessarily be viewed as simply immature in a bad way.

Didn't Jesus teach us to come to him in child-like trust? He used the analogy that if a child asks a father for a fish, the father won't give him a snake. Isn't God more loving and wiser than any earthly father? There are many examples of people asking Jesus straight up for a victory over a disease faced by a family member. One Roman centurion knew Jesus could heal his son and asked him to do it. Yancey writes that most of the spectacular answers to prayers he knows about come from young Christians who "don't know any better" than to pray for exactly what they want. Martin Luther said we should first open wide our aprons and boldly ask what we want to receive.

The second stage of prayer, according to Yancey, involves a **kind of meditation**, what he calls keeping company with God. Many serious praying Christians suggest that we should progress beyond prayer requests and instead make meditation our primary goal. When we keep company with God, God has a way of transforming our wants and requests into something he wants. For example, when I was younger I might pray that God would help me win a tennis match. Of course, I knew to follow that request with the assurance that I would give all the glory to God. That's how a lot of us camouflage our egocentric tendencies in religious language. As I became older, and hopefully more mature, I would ask God to do my best on the court and honor him in the way I played, win or lose. I believe that prayer was more in line with the kingdom of God than the earlier one.

Jesus prayed "Thy will be done" at the end of his struggle with God in Gethsemane, as a resolution to all that had gone before, including a clear request for another way out. I'm with Yancey who believes that "Thy will be done" should come at the end of our prayers, not at the beginning. Isn't this the way it was for Jesus. If Jesus had started out praying "Thy will be done" he could've foregone asking his father for the cup of suffering to be removed. He wouldn't have expressed his genuine feelings. If all we do is pray, "God, may your will be done" we are very likely to stifle and suppress all our desires. Better to pray like Moses who pushed the envelope until God pushed back and said "No" than simply start out, "Whatever you want God." That's a fine sentiment, but it denies the relational nature of our prayer life.

Have you ever been in a relationship when you're so frustrated or resigned to not getting what you want that you say verbally or nonverbally, "Whatever!" "Whatever you want to do is fine." You may want to stay home, but you go out, without making your desires known. Or you may want to take dance lessons instead of piano lessons, but you've learned there's no negotiation with your parent about this. So you stay quiet. Or a senior adult may want to remain living at home, but feels powerless in the presence of her children, so she says, "I'll do whatever ya'll think is best." This may keep the peace, but it doesn't sustain a genuine relationship. A genuine relationship communicates honestly and says, "I want to stay home. I would rather take dance lessons. I don't want to move out of my home," even if that request is denied.

So the final stage of prayer, or the most mature stage is the "**thy will be done**" submission that Jesus reached after his long night of struggle. We do this, like Jesus, by honestly laying out our desires to God and then asking God to mold our desires so that they are his desires for us. Many times we don't know what God's will is for us. Jesus knew at some point that the cross was God's will for him. But we may not yet know what God's will is, so we will pray, "Lord, I want this job. Let me get this job, if it is your will." This is not a lack of faith. It's a lack of knowledge. We believe God's will is best for us, but we're not sure what that will is. That's why we pray. We're not praying just so God will give us the

job. We're praying that God will show us if this job is his will for us. My beloved 19th century Danish friend Soren Kierkegaard put it this way: "The true relation in pray is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears what God's will is."

Let's go back to the man looking for a new job, which may be quite a few of you. God wants us to continue to pray for discernment about this job, not because God wants us to nag him about it, or that we can somehow beg him to do what we want him to do. We certainly might have an effect on him. But the main thing we need to do is pray so we can know God's will, so we can know if the job is right. The goal in prayer is not to manipulate God for our purposes, but for us to be molded by God. Remember the song:

Have thine own way Lord, Have thine own way
Thou art the potter, I am the clay
Mold me and make me after thy will
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Conclusion

Are we to pray for victory over our enemies? Yes. Are we to pray that our basketball team beats the other basketball team? Well, certainly God wants to know the desires of our hearts, so that's OK. But as we grow and become more mature in our walk with the Lord, we will notice (I hope) that our prayers are becoming more and more like the prayers of Jesus. And the enemies we want to defeat are the ones that God wants to defeat in partnership with us. Instead of defeating the Tarheels or the Wolfpack, God is intent on defeating slave traffickers in Thailand, drug pushers in Miami, and slumlords in Detroit. When we move with Jesus toward the cross our prayers become much more "other-oriented." Instead of our victories, we're seeking God's victories, even if that puts us on the losing team. Abraham Lincoln prayed, "I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

Mature prayer leads us to become more intent on seeking God's will for our lives to be used for his purposes. And this may mean we need to defeat some enemies that are holding us back. We may need to defeat the enemy of a jealous spirit, a loose and frivolous tongue, a wandering and unfocused mind, an addiction to alcohol, drugs, or French fries. We pray, to receive our battle instructions. It's not easy. Jahaziel, or some other prophet, isn't always around to make the instructions so clear and plain. So we sit on our couch, go to our closet, walk in the woods, look up at the sky and say, "Here I am Lord. What do you want me to do?" And we act on the best discernment we have. And if we're not sure, we simply say, "Lord, I'm not sure this is the right way to defeat this enemy, but it's the best I know how at this time. Feel free to stop me if I'm going the wrong path."

And the Lord will show up. In his time. At the mountain pass of his choosing. When we are helpless like Jehoshaphat. So trust in the Lord. Lean not on your own understanding. And he will give you victory over the foes he is ready to defeat. Amen.