



## Sermon Series

# Praying Our Way to Pentecost

### The Valley of Praise: Prayer in Desperate Times 2 Chronicles 20

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the printed word industry made a concerted effort to soften the crude language and swearing that had become prevalent in American culture. Authors began to incorporate “mild oaths” in their stories and reporting. Phrases like “Holy Moly,” “Gee Willikers,” and “Heavens to Betsy” became common substitutes for more coarse alternatives. A favorite expression to denote surprise in this era was “Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat!”

If you’re wondering what this literature lesson has to do with prayer, the passage we are reading today in 2 Chronicles features King Jehoshaphat, 4<sup>th</sup> king of Judah, circa 850 B.C.

Ironically, Jehoshaphat isn’t known for jumping at all, but instead for “standing still,” but more on that later. (20:17)

The context of this passage reveals that God’s people are divided. Unfaithful Israel under the leadership of wicked King Ahab and his wife Jezebel occupy the north and faithful Judah under the leadership of Jehoshaphat reside in the south.

Jehoshaphat’s reign appears to have been one of unusual religious activity with a pious spirit pervading every act of the king. Chapter 17:3-4, reveals that Jehoshaphat sought the favor of God in every act of his life. Jehoshaphat was convinced that his nation’s character was determined by its adherence to God’s directives, so he instituted a system of public instruction for the whole land, appointed a commission of princes, Levites, and priests to go from city to city and instruct the people. Their instruction was to be based on the one true foundation of sound morals and healthy religious life, “The book of the law of God.” (17:7-9) Jehoshaphat will be remembered as a good king of Judah, honoring God in his leadership.

Again, you might be wondering what a biography of King Jehoshaphat and the division of God’s people has to do with prayer. It’s a fair question.

Let’s begin with this: we don’t need to imitate the division and brutality of this era of God’s people. Thankfully, this dark history has changed. What hasn’t changed, however, is what this passage will teach us. We will learn where to turn in desperate times. Many of us agree that these are desperate times in our world. We are ravaged by sickness and division and a spirit of darkness seems to loom on the horizon. We need direction. We need deliverance. We need hope. But where do we turn? What can we do?

In this story we will witness Jehoshaphat's dilemma and learn to pray in our desperation as Jehoshaphat prayed emphasizing:

- The Character of God
- The Faithful Track Record of God
- Our Posture Toward God
- The Power of God

By the time we catch up with Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20, wicked King Ahab of Israel has been killed in battle, but there is still no rest for Judah.

“After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to wage war against Jehoshaphat.” (20:1)

Some people reported that a vast army was coming against Jehoshaphat. I'm not sure exactly what that meant, but the spirit of the warning seems dire to me. We can assume that Jehoshaphat felt the same way based on verse three.

“Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.” (20:3)

“The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.” (20:4)

The King is sufficiently alarmed that not only does he turn to prayer, but he proclaims a fast for the whole nation. As the people come together, they too seek the Lord as their king has modeled for them.

This story happened a long, long time ago. You might be tempted to resist reading it claiming that its outdated and irrelevant. However, before you dismiss this story too quickly, let's take note of a few things that are timeless. Let's examine King Jehoshaphat's actions and see what they might teach us.

Further, the purpose of this series of sermons is to call the USA/Canada Region of the Church of the Nazarene to a time of prayer. The world around is changing by the minute and at times we look around and wonder what direction to go. Thank God for the “Half Million Mobilization” emphasis that has prayer as it's primary activity.

I think the story of Judah and King Jehoshaphat has plenty to teach us if we have ears to hear it.

### **I. First, when the unthinkable is happening, Jehoshaphat resolved to pray.**

A “vast army” was a big deal in the ancient near east. These were brutal days of conquest and war. Wealth and power belonged to the strongest and the more one conquered the more power and wealth one possessed.

In the face of devastating news, Jehoshaphat didn't flinch, instead he went directly to prayer. What's more, he called his people to join him. Rather than the people splintering into divisions based on fear, the people came together and followed the faithful example of their king.

Perhaps this seems overly simplistic, but prayer gives the believer access to our faithful God. Imagine the power of that statement. Ordinary people like us have access to the solitary God of the universe whose power is unimaginable. The God who carved out the oceans and spangled the night, that same God hears us when we pray! What was true for Jehoshaphat, what the Bible consistently reveals, is still true for us today. When the unthinkable threatens, we, like King Jehoshaphat before us, must resolve to pray.

## **II. Second, Jehoshaphat's prayer took a distinctive shape.**

A. His prayer begins by reciting the character of God.

“Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. (v. 6)

He celebrates and praises God for who God is, but at the same time he strengthens his faith and that of his people.

B. Next, he continues by tracing God's faithful track record.

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? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name... (vv. 7-8)

Remembering the ways that God has delivered in the past is a powerful faith-building tool for desperate times. Our present circumstances are no surprise to God. God has seen it all and has faithfully walked with his people for all of time. Standing before the assembled nation, Jehoshaphat helped them remember the faithfulness of God as an encouragement in the face of difficulty.

C. Next, Jehoshaphat lays out his request.

If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.' (v.9)

The king recognizes that though God has blessed Judah and provided for them a position of relative safety for the time being, they are still utterly dependent upon God for their future. There is no posturing here. There is no false bravado to pull the wool over the eyes of the people. There isn't a shred of self-reliance here. Jehoshaphat cries out to God for help in the face of a desperate situation.

D. Finally, the king prays with humility.

“For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us...” (20:12)

In essence he prays, “God, we cannot do this alone!”

And then, King Jehoshaphat utters the words that are the basis of all prayer.

“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” (20:12)

In this moment the king captures the very heart of our utter reliance on God. The circumstances of life are often overwhelming. We quickly exhaust our human resources and find ourselves at our wits end. We cast about for another option or a better plan but come up empty. What do we do in such dire circumstances?

We learn to pray like Jehoshaphat. “Lord, we don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” When the king prays like this, the people follow suit.

“All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord.” (20:13)

I love this part of the scene. I can see fathers holding the hands of their little ones, moms with babies in their arms. I can envision teens and young adults whose futures hang in the balance. All of them assembled, desperate for deliverance, praying along with their leader, and waiting for God’s answer.

There is so much here to imitate. Families can recover the power of praying together. Churches can revive the practice of prayer meetings. When we realize that the solution to what ails the culture isn’t found in our ingenuity, we can recover the desperation of Jehoshaphat and come together crying out to our faithful God.

As New Testament Christians, I also can’t resist noting that these moments of waiting in Judah seem like a foreshadowing to another time when God’s people are asked to wait before God. Upon Jesus’ ascension into heaven after his resurrection, he instructed his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, though I’m sure they wanted to escape the potential for their own crucifixions. Instead, Jesus asked them to wait, and the gift of the Holy Spirit was given on the Day of Pentecost.

I have to wonder if those disciples had King Jehoshaphat and Judah in the backs of their minds as Jesus instructed them to wait, for here, in 2 Chronicles, the period of waiting before the Lord is rewarded with the gift of the Spirit.

This isn’t exactly an Old Testament Pentecost, but don’t miss that the Spirit of the Lord came in a powerful way to a man named Jahaziel who began to prophesy. God found a way to communicate his message. Here it is:

“Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.” (20:15)

And the message gets even better for Jehoshaphat and Judah.

“You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you...Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.” (20:17)

### **III. When Jehoshaphat prayed**

- Celebrating the character of God
- Retelling God’s faithful track record
- Making a specific request
- And demonstrating humility

God’s Spirit came and pointed the way forward!

It was a long time ago. Does God still work like that? I believe God does!

When we acknowledge who God is in prayer, we are offering the highest praise. Retelling God’s mighty acts across the ages and in our lives restores our trust in God. In light of who God is and what God has done, we can with faith offer our request always coupled with the humility of Jehoshaphat, “We don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

When we pray like this, we can depend on God to send his Holy Spirit to help us. God is faithful to hear and answer our Jehoshaphat prayers and show us the way forward.

This is our call in these days. We have set aside these weeks to seek God’s direction for the church in the United States and Canada, and if we approach God like good King Jehoshaphat of Judah, God will answer by sending his Spirit and God’s Spirit will help us find the way forward.

I believe the absolute reliance on God’s Spirit and direction is what saves Judah in this story. And I believe that it will be the church’s willingness to seek and obey the Spirit of God that will provide the direction we need for our ministry in the days and weeks ahead.

### **IV. Radical obedience was the response to God’s Spirit**

King Jehoshaphat responded to the outpouring of God’s Spirit through Jehaziel with worship.

“Jehoshaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the Lord.” (20:18)

Worship is without question an appropriate response to the work of the Spirit. How essential to give God praise for his faithfulness in response to our prayers. But Jehoshaphat's obedience doesn't end in prayer.

The next morning Jehoshaphat had a radical strategy for battle. Rather than armor bearers or swordsmen leading the way, Jehoshaphat appointed the choir and worship team to lead the nation to battle. Imagine how that would go over today with our choirs and worship teams! This is an unconventional idea to say the least, but one the people readily followed.

“As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.” (20:22)

To be more precise, God caused the armies to fight against each other! All their strategies came to nothing and instead they undermined and destroyed one another. Jehoshaphat didn't need to do any “Jumping” at all. He only needed to “stand firm and see the deliverance of the Lord,” just as the Spirit had said. So great was the plunder for God's people that it took Judah three days to cart it all off.

It all sounds crazy, right? Things like this don't happen, do they? Maybe they don't happen because we spend far too much time relying on our own creativity and strength. Perhaps God has other plans, but we never see them because we don't have the desperation of Jehoshaphat.

What might happen if the Church began to pray celebrating the character of God, rehearsing his faithful track record, and laying out our requests with humility? Is it possible that God might move today as God moved then?

We will never know if we don't pray. We will never see God undercut the forces of darkness in our culture unless we pray. We will never experience deliverance without prayer that moves the very heart of God.

As we journey toward the Day of Pentecost, let's pray together for God's Spirit to fall upon his people and show us the way forward once again.

### **Conclusion:**

Most of the time we associate mountaintops with victory and valleys with defeat, but after this astonishing victory, Jehoshaphat had a new name for the valley where this epic showdown took place; *The Valley of Berakah*. When translated, *Berakah* means “praise.”

The power of God transformed a valley of certain death and destruction into a valley of praise!

May our Jehoshaphat prayers followed by radical obedience do the same for the Church of the Nazarene in USA/Canada.