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THE MAN WHO WON A WAR WITHOUT FIGHTING

2 Chronicles 20:1-30

By

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OT Lessons on Prayer (7)

The Man Who Won a War Without Fighting
2 Chronicles 20:1-30

As many of you know, there has been some controversy in the church over the issue of "Calvinism." Some have asked me, "Why make a big deal out of a theological controversy that can't really be resolved and that has not much practical bearing on how we live?" That question reveals a misunderstanding of the issues at stake. The basic issue is, "How big is God, how small is man, and therefore, how much do we have to cast ourselves upon Him for grace and mercy, both in salvation and at every moment thereafter?"

Your theology on these crucial issues will affect not only your understanding of salvation, but also your understanding of how to deal with life's trials, which are both highly practical subjects! On our recent trip to Alaska, I read John Piper's excellent book, *The Hidden Smile of God* [Crossway Books], subtitled, "The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd." In the introduction, Piper brings up the views of the Arminian theologians who argue that God is not sovereign over the decisions that we make and that He does not even know what we will decide until we decide it (called "Open Theism"). Here is where that theology leads them with regard to suffering:

"God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil.... When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences." "When an individual inflicts pain on another individual, I do not think we can go looking for 'the purpose of God' in the event.... I know Christians frequently speak about 'the purpose of God' in the midst of a tragedy caused by someone else.... But this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking." (Piper, pp. 23-24, citing John

Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, and, Gregory Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*).

As Piper goes on to show, “For John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd, the loving purpose of God in pain was one of the most precious truths in the Bible and one of the most powerful experiences of their lives” (p. 25). As Bunyan, who spent over 12 years in jail for preaching, put it, “Suffering comes not by chance or by the will of man, but by the will and appointment of God” (*Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers*, in Piper, p. 30).

Whether our trials are of the crisis sort or whether they are the more steady, relentless pressures that just wear away our resistance, we’ve all got them. And, while most of us know that we should pray more and trust God more, for some reason, we don’t do it. I struggle with the question, “Why don’t I pray as I ought to pray?”

The answer, I think, is simple: I don’t pray as I ought because I’m self-reliant, which the Bible calls pride. My pride makes me think, erroneously, that I can handle things by myself, with a little help now and then from God. So, I rely mostly on myself and a little bit on God. I don’t really believe Christ’s words, “Without Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). So God graciously brings me trials to show me my great need so that I will look to my great God in prayer and trust Him to work on my behalf.

The story of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, provides us with helpful instruction on the subject of prayer and trusting God when we face severe trials. Jehoshaphat was basically a good king who sought to follow the Lord and bring God’s people back to Him (19:4-11). He ruled in the southern kingdom at the same time that the wicked Ahab ruled in the north.

But although he was a good king, Jehoshaphat had a character flaw: He made wrongful alliances with the godless Ahab. He went into battle with Ahab and almost lost his life. He arranged for his son to marry Ahab and Jezebel’s wicked daughter, Athaliah. She later slaughtered off all of the Davidic line except for the infant Joash, who was hidden from her murderous intent. Jehoshaphat also formed an ill-fated business alliance with Ahab’s son, Ahaziah. His motive in these alliances may have been good, to reunite the divided kingdom. But he was unwise and wrong.

One morning Jehoshaphat was shaken when his intelligence sources came running in with the horrifying news, “A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, out of Aram [or, better, Edom] and behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar (that is Engedi)” (20:1, 2). This enemy coalition was about 15 miles south of Jerusalem, on the western shore of the Dead Sea. Jehoshaphat’s life and his entire kingdom were on the brink of extinction! Talk about a reason to panic!

What would you do if you heard some threatening news that affected your future and maybe your life? This godly king did the right thing: He called a national prayer meeting and encouraged the people to trust God in the face of this overwhelming crisis. They did it, and literally won the war by prayer alone, without swinging a single sword! Their story teaches us that ...

Our great need should drive us to
prayer and faith in our great God.

In 20:1-4 we see their great need; in 20:5-13, Jehoshaphat’s prayer reveals their great God; and in 20:14-30 we see their faith in their great God and the victory that He brought about.

1. Our great need should drive us to prayer (20:1-4).

That’s obvious to any believer, of course. But just because it’s obvious doesn’t make it automatic.

A. Our great need does not automatically drive us to prayer.

It’s easy to read this story and miss what a great thing it was for Jehoshaphat to call the nation to prayer over this crisis. It would have been very human to panic. When he heard the news of this army within his borders, we could understand if he yelled, “Call all my top generals! Get the army mobilized immediately! We don’t have a second to waste!” As soon as the troops were mustered, if there was time, he could have stopped for a quick word of prayer. But for Jehoshaphat to turn his attention to seek the Lord and to call the nation to prayer and fasting was not automatic.

Not only could Jehoshaphat have reacted with panic, he also could have felt angry toward God. The text states, “Now it came about *after this*” (20:1). After what? He had just instituted a number of reforms to bring the nation back to the Lord (19:4-11). It would

have been easy for Jehoshaphat to have said, "What's the deal, God? I tried to bring the nation back to You. I taught them to put away their idols and follow You because You're worthy to be trusted. And now we're facing annihilation at the hands of this pagan coalition! I don't deserve this kind of treatment!"

Many people feel that way when they've tried to follow God and then get hit with difficult trials. They complain, "God, this isn't fair! I was trying to follow You, but I get hit with trouble, while my pagan neighbor enjoys the good life!" So they get angry at God and feel sorry for themselves. But Jehoshaphat didn't do that. He did what was not automatic in a crisis: He prayed.

Another natural reaction would have been for Jehoshaphat to trust in his army. Chapter 17:12-19 tells about the organization and might of his forces. He was equipped for war. It would have been easy to think, "We're prepared for this. Call out the army! Let's go get them!" But Jehoshaphat, rather than trusting in his army, publicly admits his *lack of strength* and calls on God as his *only* help in this crisis.

He put prayer first. He realized that he could do some things *after* he had prayed, but he could not do anything worthwhile *before* he prayed. Prayer was his strongest weapon. So he resisted the temptation to panic, to get angry at God, or to trust his army. He recognized his great need, so he prayed.

You say, "That's what I want to do the next time a problem hits." Do you? Be careful before you glibly say that! To understand this story, we have to see that Jehoshaphat's call to prayer was a humiliating thing for him to do.

- B. Praying in the face of our great need requires humbling ourselves before God and others.

Jehoshaphat was the king of Judah. In the ancient Near East, kings were a proud bunch. They had an image to maintain. Leaders have to be tough and inspire confidence in their leadership. What kind of leader admits in front of his people, "I'm afraid, folks, because we're helpless against our enemy!" That's not good politics!

But that's what Jehoshaphat did. He admitted his fear, called a national prayer meeting, and then prayed in front of everyone about how weak he was (20:12). Surely, it would have been better

politically to pray in private, but then to get up in front of the people and say, "We've got a little problem, folks! But our side is strong. Our troops are going to wipe them out! Pray for us while we go out and defend our nation against these intruders."

But Jehoshaphat wasn't worried about politics or his public image. He knew that he was in deep trouble if God didn't answer, and so he openly admitted his weakness and called upon the Lord.

I have been reading *The Works of John Bunyan* [Baker]. He has an excellent treatise titled, *The Acceptable Sacrifice: The Excellency of a Broken Heart*. He is expounding on verses like Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." And, Psalm 34:18, "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit." He says, "Conversion is not the smooth, easy-going process some men seem to think.... It is wounding work, of course, this breaking of hearts, but without wounding there is no saving" (cited by Piper, p. 65).

This biblical theme, that we must humble ourselves before God, runs counter to the current wave of worldly teaching flooding the church, that you need to build your self-esteem. We should be more concerned about whether or not we have God's esteem. The Lord says (Isa. 66:2, NIV), "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." (See also, John Calvin on prayer, *Institutes* [Eerdmans], 3:20:8.)

If we're self-sufficient and don't admit that we're needy, we rob God of His glory. But when we recognize our great need, we will humble ourselves and pray, not just by ourselves, but with other Christians who can bear our burdens with us.

Once our need drives us to God in prayer, we need to understand how to pray. Jehoshaphat's prayer gives us some important instruction in how to seek God in prayer.

2. Knowing our great God should direct our prayers (20:5-13).

There are two things to see here:

- A. In our prayers we should not only seek answers to our problems, but we should seek God Himself.

Note verse 3: "Jehoshaphat ... turned his attention [lit., "set his face," i.e., "determined"] to seek the Lord." Verse 4 states that the people not only sought help from the Lord, but also that they sought the Lord. This was nothing new for Jehoshaphat. He is described as a king who "sought the God of his father" (17:4). The Hebrew word "seek" means, literally, "to trample under foot," to beat a path to God because you frequent that way so often. It's significant that in Jehoshaphat's prayer, the first four verses (6-9) focus on God Himself; finally, in the last three verses (10-12) he gets around to mentioning the problem. But even in mentioning the problem, God is prominent.

I wonder, if we were facing imminent annihilation, would we be so God-centered? In a crisis, I usually pray, "God, get me out of here!" I want relief and I want it now! But in so praying we miss something crucial: In a crisis, we aren't supposed to run and get God off the shelf, like Aladdin's genie, rub Him the right way, get what we want, and then put Him back until the next crisis. Trials should cause us to seek God Himself, because He is what we need. God is our sufficiency, our very life. If we have God and cling to Him, then even if we aren't delivered from our crisis, we can go through it—even through the loss of children, possessions, and health, as Job went through—because, as is said here of Abraham (20:7), the living God is our friend.

This is at the heart of the current controversy over the role of psychology in the church. Is God Himself, His indwelling Spirit, and His Word (and the many provisions given in it, including Christ's body, the church) sufficient for a believer in the crises of life, or must we turn to the world's therapies and techniques to enable us to cope? Incredibly, many Christian psychologists say that God and His Word are not sufficient; we need psychotherapy!

But if we turn to the world for help, the world gets the glory. If we turn to God as our only refuge and strength, He gets the glory. Our trials should force us to lay hold of God in new ways that we would not have done if we had not been driven to cast ourselves completely on Him through prayer. We should come away, not just having presented our requests to God, but also knowing God better as our refuge and strength in times of trouble (Ps. 46:1).

- B. In our prayers we should seek God as revealed in His Word.

Jehoshaphat's prayer is steeped in Scripture. He starts by (20:6) reciting *God's attributes*: "You are the God of our fathers" (implying, "You took care of them.") "You are God in the heavens, the ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations" (including those threatening to wipe us out!). "You are so powerful and mighty that no one can stand against You." Why is he telling God all this? Certainly not for God's information! It was to rehearse in his own mind and in the people's minds the greatness of God, so they could trust in Him.

Next he recites *God's actions* (20:7): "You drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and You gave it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever." (Abraham is called God's friend here, in Isa. 41:8, and James 2:23.) He reminds God of His covenant to hear the prayers of His people when they cry to Him in their distress (almost a direct quote from the dedication of Solomon's temple, 2 Chron. 6:28-30).

Then Jehoshaphat mentions the problem which, he reminds God, stems from the fact that Israel had obeyed Him by not wiping out these very people who are now invading the land (20:10-11)! They are about to drive Israel out, not of *their* possession, but of *God's* possession. Finally, he calls attention to God's ability to deal with the problem, in contrast to Israel's inability (20:12).

That's a great prayer because it's saturated with Scripture. It focuses on God as He has revealed Himself in His Word! If we fill our prayers with the greatness of our problems, our faith will shrink. But if we fill our prayers with the greatness of our God and how He has worked down through history, our faith will grow. God delights to answer believing prayers where we put our finger on the promises and truth in His Word and ask Him to make it so in our case.

Our great need should drive us to prayer; knowing our great God should direct our prayers. Finally,

3. Faith in our great God should follow our prayers (20:14-30).

As the people were gathered at the Temple in prayer, the Spirit of God came upon a prophet (20:14) who encouraged them not to fear and assured them that God would undertake for them in this battle without their fighting at all (20:15-17; not God's usual means!). When they heard this word through the prophet, everyone fell down and worshiped and then they stood up and sang loud praises (20:18-19).

By the way, we again see Jehoshaphat's humility here. If he had been proud, he would have said, "Wait a minute! I'm the king! I called this prayer meeting! Who does this prophet think he is to get a message from God? God has to give the message through me!" But he was humbly willing to submit to God's word through this other man.

Then, based on the prophet's word from God, the people got up the next morning and marched out to the battlefield, led by a choir singing praises, of all things (20:21)! That took some faith, to go into battle with your front line consisting of a choir! God caused the enemy armies to turn against each other, so that all Israel had to do was collect the spoil and celebrate the victory! Two thoughts:

A. Faith in God means being obedient to His Word.

The promise given through the prophet (20:15-17) was one thing; believing and acting on it was another. These singers were staking their very lives on the truthfulness of that word from God. They were doing a crazy thing—marching unarmed in front of the army, singing praises to God, against a powerful enemy that was armed to the teeth! As they went out on this seemingly crazy mission, Jehoshaphat encouraged the people by saying (20:20), "Put your trust in the Lord your God, and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets [i.e., His Word] and succeed." The evidence of their trust is seen in the fact that they kept marching!

This deliverance is a picture of our salvation. In salvation, we cannot do anything; God does it all: "Stand and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf" (20:17). Even faith is the gift of God, so that we cannot boast (Eph. 2:8-9). Yet at the same time, our faith that lays hold of God's salvation is not just intellectual assent, where we say, "I believe" but don't act on it. Saving faith is always obedient faith. Just as these singers' faith was demonstrated by

their marching out to battle, armed only with songs of praise, so genuine faith in Christ as Savior will be demonstrated in a life of joyful obedience to His Word. "Faith" that says, "I believe," but does not result in obedience, is not saving faith (1 John 2:3-4).

B. Faith in God is always rewarded by God.

He never fails those who trust Him and obey His Word. That is not to say that He delivers everyone who trusts Him from suffering or even death. There are many who have trusted God and lost their heads (Heb. 11:36-40)! But this earthly life isn't the final chapter. All who suffer loss for Jesus will be richly rewarded in heaven or God is a liar! Just as Israel was enriched literally by the spoils of victory, so we will always be enriched spiritually through our trials if we recognize our great need, pray to our great God, and trust in Him alone, not in the arm of the flesh.

Conclusion

Hudson Taylor, the great pioneer missionary to inland China in the last century, went through numerous, difficult trials. He lost his wife and at least one child in death. His own life was often in danger. He used to say, "It doesn't really matter how great the pressure is; it only matters *where the pressure lies*. See that it never comes *between* you and the Lord—then, the greater the pressure, the more it presses you to His breast" (*Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor [Moody Press], p. 152).

Corrie Ten Boom, author of *The Hiding Place* and survivor of the German concentration camps, used to have people come up to her and say, "Corrie, my, what a great faith you have!" She would smile and reply, "No, it's what a great God I have!"

We should join Jehoshaphat in rejecting all self-confidence and acknowledging, "O God, we're powerless and we don't know what to do, but our eyes are on You!" Our great need should drive us to prayer and faith in our great God.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we keep from growing bitter toward God when trials hit?
2. Agree/disagree: Pride (self-reliance) is the main thing that keeps us from prayer.
3. If we only pray to get what we want rather than to seek God Himself, what does it reveal about us?
4. How can we trust God when we feel that He has let us down about something in the past?

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