

# “A PRAYER FOR ANXIOUS TIMES”

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2 Chronicles 20:1-12

It was probably an ordinary day. Breakfast with the royal family. Consultations with royal advisors. Audiences in the royal court. Ambassadors bearing tributes from other lands. The dedication of a finished new outer courtyard to the Jerusalem temple.

But suddenly King Jehoshaphat’s advisors pull him aside: Messengers have arrived with news from the borderland. “A vast horde is coming against you,” they sputter, trying to catch their breath. The news is grim: A coalition of Judah’s worst enemies—Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites—has landed in force at Engedi, on Judah’s side of the Dead Sea, a mere 15 hours’ march from Jerusalem.

We read that “Jehoshaphat was afraid.”

This is no hard story for most of us to enter into, for we have been there. Day by day, our lives go along their customary course. And then, in a sudden moment, one of life’s messengers breaks in with news that darkens our perspective if not our lives.

“The World Trade Center has been attacked,” comes the bulletin.

“You have a tumor,” says the doctor.

“You’ve been laid off,” says the pink slip.

“You’ve lost half your retirement,” says the bank report.

“We could not save her,” says the paramedic.

Sudden and alarming, the news comes. And we quite normally respond like King Jehoshaphat: with alarm.

And when the initial shock wears off a bit, what do we do then? I’ll tell you what I typically do. “The best defense is a good offense,” I say. Time to mobilize. Time to organize. Time to take stock of resources and meet the challenge head on!

I’m not alone in this tendency. I think it characterizes us as Americans. We are “can do!” people. Tackle the challenge people. “Yes, we can,” people. We’re not victims; not fatalists. We take charge of our destiny. Nothing wrong with that! It has made our history.

Jehoshaphat was a “can-do” sort of guy too, as we’ll see in a moment. But I want you to note carefully the utterly surprising and unorthodox way Jehoshaphat took charge of the crisis in this instance.

Not “Jehoshaphat stirred his courage to buck up to the challenge.”

Not “Jehoshaphat called together his military advisors in the Situation Room.”

Not “Jehoshaphat issued a nationwide call to arms.”

Not any of the things we would have expected a dynamic leader to do.

No, it says, “Jehoshaphat set himself—literally, “set his face,” made up his mind, set his course—to seek the Lord.”

Instead of a call to war, he issued a call to worship.

The people of Judah quickly gathered to the capitol from all over Judah. At Solomon’s temple they gathered—men, women and children all. There, in the place of worship they gathered, waiting for the counsel of their king.

Jehoshaphat stood before the multitude. What would he say? What would he purpose to meet the crisis? What would be his rallying cry? The crowd grew silent. Jehoshaphat spoke. And what did he say? He said, “Let us pray.”

His prayer is a masterpiece. It begins with an affirmation of God’s *power*. “Are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand is power and might.”

Then he recounts God's *providence*. "Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of *your friend* (I like that: *your friend!*) Abraham?"

Then he lays claim to God's *promise*; the promise God made to King Solomon generations before at the temple's dedication: "If disaster comes upon us, we will stand before you in this house and cry to you in our distress and you will hear and save."

When my daughter was about 13, I promised her that I would be there to cheer her on at one of her tournament softball games. An important church meeting was called for the same night. What should I do, I pondered? I talked it over with my daughter. She responded with three words that I remember to this day: "Dad, you promised." There was no more to discuss. I went to my daughter's game. So Jehoshaphat prays, "God, you promised."

Then Jehoshaphat lays out the situation: "Now God, I want you to look over here at this pickle we're in!" and he describes it.

Some of us are old enough to remember Art Linkletter's "Kids say the darndest things." He also had a book of the *Prayers Children Pray*. Here's what one kid wrote: "Dear God, if you're up there, you'd better do something quick!" That was the substance of Jehoshaphat's prayer.

Finally Jehoshaphat gets to the heart of his prayer: Not a call on God to bless his efforts; not a plea for God to empower his campaign or to give wisdom to his strategy, or to grant triumph to his armies, as typifies so many prayers of national emergency.

He stands before the people and prays one of the most courageous prayers in all the Bible. "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

"Courageous?" someone says. "Sounds like the prayer of the weak to me; the appeal of the pathetic politician who cannot handle affairs and so turns in feeble dependence upon the Deity.

We might expect this kind of prayer from a priest or prophet or pastor. But from a head of state? A commander in chief? One to whom the people look for leadership? To get up in front of his whole nation and pray this pray was either a laughable act of foolishness or a singular act of courage.

What if George Bush had stood with his bull horn atop the rubble of the World Trade Center and prayed, "We are powerless against this threat. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." He sure wouldn't have scored 90% approval ratings.

What if Barack Obama had campaigned around the country with Jehoshaphat's appeal over the nation's financial crisis instead of blazing placards, "Yes, we can." He sure wouldn't have gotten elected.

Now I'm not criticizing them. I'm all for leadership and strategies and rallying cries! I'm simply trying to characterize the kind of courage it took for Jehoshaphat to make this kind of prayer at the rallying event of his entire nation, at the very moment their enemies were marching swiftly to their demise.

It might help to understand what kind of man this King Jehoshaphat was. Chapter 17, just a couple of chapters before this morning's reading, paints the picture.

Verse 2: He placed forces in all the fortified cities of Judah, and set garrisons throughout the land of Judah ...

Verse 3: The LORD was with Jehoshaphat ...

Verse 5: All Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor.

Verse 6: His heart was courageous in the ways of the LORD.

Verse 10: The fear of the LORD fell on all the kingdoms of the lands around Judah, and they did not make war against Jehoshaphat. He built fortresses and storage cities in Judah. He carried out great works in the cities of Judah. He had soldiers, mighty warriors, in Jerusalem.

In the rest of chapter 17, it lays out just how many generals and troops were under Jehoshaphat's command: 1.2 million, which seems an unlikely number. There probably weren't that many inhabitants in the Judah of that day. The point the author is making is this: Here was an extraordinarily powerful, as well as godly, king with whom no one dared trifle.

So why would a man who commanded such powers stand before the people and pray, "We are powerless?" Why would a strategist of such political and economic and military vision stand and pray, "We don't know what to do"?

Did he lose his nerve? Give in to terror? Take leave of his leadership?

The text makes the answer clear. Pay careful attention to it: **Jehoshaphat knew when it was time to pitch his own wit and power at a problem and when it was time to place his trust in the wisdom and power of God.** This is the heart of wisdom as we respond to life's many challenges: Knowing when to act and when to pray; when to mobilize our powers and when to seek God's.

I cannot help but think of Abraham Lincoln at the height of the War Between the States. In 1863, when he was in command of an army that had swelled to the most powerful on earth, he issued the proclamation of a Day of National Prayer. We do well, 150 years later, to pay attention to the words of that proclamation:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."

What Lincoln knew and Jehoshaphat knew, we the most powerful nation on earth do well to remember: that

- no matter how immense our resources,
- no matter how vast our wealth,
- no matter how strong our resolve,
- no matter how wise our technology, how powerful our military, how far reaching our intelligence,

the time comes when all our resources fall far short of the crisis. Blessed is the person, the nation, the church that, when that time comes, has the **courage** to trust the God who is powerful when we are powerless, the God who knows the way when we have lost the way, the God who rules the world even when the world has seemed to go awry.

"We are powerless against this threat," prayed Jehoshaphat. "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." This is not a prayer of despair. It is the most powerful prayer on earth. Some of you know from personal experience the hidden power in the prayer of powerlessness. For it was at the end of *our* tether that many of us found God. It was at the place of our powerlessness that we discovered the Power greater than ourselves. It was when we had no more plans to put into motion that we prayed, "Our eyes are on you. Show us the way."

Back when I was in seminary, my wife and I used to go for special occasions to a place in Stillwater Minnesota called *The Lowell Inn*. This was high style, particularly on a seminary student budget. The food was good: especially the Walleye Pike. But here's what I remember most about the place after all these years. The wait-staff had eyes so trained to the tables that as soon as you took two sips out of your water glass, they were there to fill it. As soon as you got breadcrumbs on the linen, they were there with one of those sterling scrapers to clear the crumbs

off. As soon as you were done with a plate, sometimes before you were done with your plate, they were there to take it away.

“To you I lift up my eyes,” prayed the psalmist, “O you enthroned in the heavens! As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God until he has mercy on us.” This was Jehoshaphat’s prayer.

When we finally come to the realization that it is not our power but God’s power, not our solution but God’s solution, not our strategy but God’s strategy that must win the day; *then* our attentiveness becomes trained not on what we are doing but on what God is doing.

And it is just there that we find God. There in the place of powerlessness. God was always there but we were too distracted to notice while we were busy trusting ourselves.

Another of my favorite psalms is Psalm 107. I have appealed to it many a time at my tether’s end. The whole psalm is summarized, I think, by its verses 27 and 28:

“...at their wits’ end, they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and God brought them out of their distress.”

We never know when the crisis will suddenly come that bends us far beyond the limits of our endurance; we never know when the quandary will suddenly brew up that baffles our best-laid-plans and leaves us at wits’ end. But when it happens, remember. Remember that Jesus Christ turns Good Fridays to Easter Sundays. Remember that God turns deserts to springs, dry bones into new life, our worst extremities into heaven’s opportunities. Remember that Jesus Christ hangs out *at Wits’ End Corner*.

Are you standing at "Wit's End Corner"  
Friend with troubled brow?  
Are you thinking of what is before you,  
And all you are bearing now?  
Does all the world weigh upon you,  
With you in the battle alone?  
Remember-at "Wit's End Corner"  
Is just where God's power is shown.

Are you standing at "Wit's End Corner"?  
Your work before you spread,  
A mountain of tasks unfinished,  
And pressing on heart and head,  
Longing for strength to do it,  
Stretching out trembling hands?  
Remember--at "Wit's End Corner"  
The Burden-bearer stands.

Are you standing at "Wit's End Corner"?  
Then you're just in the very spot  
To learn the wondrous resources  
Of the God who fails not:  
No doubt to a brighter pathway  
Your footsteps can soon be moved,  
It's only at "Wit's End Corner"  
That the "God who is able" is proved.

By Antoinette Wilson