

Worship Wars

By Brad Allison on 5/28/2006

Scripture Reference *2 Chronicles*

King Jehoshaphat is best known in America for the slang phrase that uses his name. Someone asked me this week if the phrase “Jumping Jehoshaphat” has anything to do with the Bible’s account of his life. I could think of no Bible story that features the king in any activity resembling jumping. After googling the phrase, I discovered that it came into use in the middle of the 19th century as a mild oath, substituting the name of this king for one of God’s most common names in the OT, Jehovah. Undoubtedly, the “jumping” part was added just because of the cool sound resulting from the repetition of the initial “j”.

The story of Jehoshaphat contained in this chapter is perhaps not quite as well known as the slang using his name, but it is far more helpful to us. The help comes from seeing the change that occurs in this king as well as the entire nation of Judah between the beginning of the story and the end. The story begins with the alarming news that a vast army is marching toward them, and there is no doubt of their intentions. They want to kill and pillage in Jerusalem and all the surrounding areas. They are described as a “great multitude” (v. 2) and a “great horde” (v. 12). Jehoshaphat’s response is understandable: he is afraid (v. 3) and feels powerless and confused as to what he should do (v. 12).

By the end of the story, everything changes. The people are marching out to meet this invading horde, and they are singing psalms. Jehoshaphat even orders that the singers be placed on the front lines of the army. One commentator had this to say about this unusual position for musicians. “The modern historian may be tempted ‘to poke fun at Jehoshaphat in Chronicles for sending out the temple choir to meet an invading army; it is still funnier when the choir puts the foe to flight and causes great slaughter with a few well-directed psalms’” (Dillard, p. 158). This gives an entirely new meaning to the phrase worship wars. But notice a key point here. At the time they are worshipping and singing, things have gotten worse, not better. There is still a vast horde marching toward Jerusalem intending to kill and pillage. But some time has passed, and now the large army is even closer. So the story moves from fear, powerlessness and confusion to the joyful worship of God, even before the circumstances improve at all.

We need this same movement in our lives. We need it when we receive that 2:00 a.m. phone call telling us that a close friend or relative has just been taken to the hospital and it doesn’t look good, or when the doctor calls to say that they have some concerns and need to do more tests, or when you receive that layoff notice and don’t know how you are going to provide for yourself or your family. In all those things, it feels like you’ve just taken a punch to the stomach and you can’t catch your breath. I notice three factors that move them from panic to peace, from worry to worship. These three things can produce the same movement in our lives.

I. Prayer

When Jehoshaphat heard of this invading horde, his response was understandable—he was afraid. The next response after the fear is the important one. We read of Jehoshaphat that his immediate response to the fear was that “he set his face to seek the Lord” (v. 3), which is the author’s language for prayer. Prayer is not anyone’s instinctive response to fearful things. Depending on personality and other factors related to our gifts and life experiences, the natural responses are either fight or flight. To fight is to tally up all of our resources and come up with a plan to employ them in addressing the issue. If Jehoshaphat had employed the tactic, he would have immediately called upon his generals, armed his people and come up

with a battle plan to meet this enemy. Or if he had opted for flight instead of fight, he would have sent out a peace delegation to attempt to placate his enemy in some way. Passivity is a common “flight” response in our lives. We simply do nothing and hope that the problem will somehow go away. Like many things, there’s nothing wrong with either of these things in themselves. There is indeed a time to fight, and a time to flee. So while there’s nothing wrong with them *in* themselves, there’s everything wrong with them *by* themselves. When they are *by* themselves, they are just the strategies we employ when we believe that everything is up to us and we have no God to help us.

Notice that prayer is described here as a seeking of God. It is not just saying the right words or going through the appropriate motions. There is a relational side to praying. How do you know that you’ve prayed? There will be a sense of having met with God. Notice too that Jehoshaphat’s prayer quotes Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple, a passage we studied last week. Verse 9 is almost a direct quote from that prayer, following up on Solomon’s request that if disaster should strike and God’s people should pray to him at his house, then he would hear and answer. In what is perhaps the most well-known verse in the entire book of 2 Chronicles, God had promised that he would answer. After Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, God answered him and said, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (7:14).

So the first thing we need to do if we are move from fear and confusion to joyful worship is to pray with faith. I don’t know about you, but it is not my instinct to do so. As a matter of fact, this is often one of the first things I forget to do. Just this past week, I had the opportunity to speak to the God’s House Kindergarten families at their end of year programs. I asked the parents what their plan was for handling the increased risk in the lives of their children as they grew. In urging them to adopt the biblical method of handling risk, which is to take it to God in prayer, I told them about some of the risks we had encountered with our 23-year-old son, who is now serving as a missionary in Uganda. I mentioned that as a 16-year-old, he had six accidents and numerous speeding tickets. We had also just heard through an e-mail that he had been vacationing in Croatia last week and had been ticketed for speeding there. I suppose vacations are a great time to add another continent to the list of those where you’ve been ticketed. Furthermore, he had rented a car and received this ticket all on an expired Alabama driver’s license. After the service, a church member was talking to me about this and I said to her, “Yes, but there’s nothing we can do.” She quickly and appropriately reminded me of the lesson I had just taught minutes earlier but had now forgotten as she said to me, “Yes there is; we can pray.” How quickly and easily we forget to do just that. We can indeed pray, and it is not an idle exercise because God answers prayer.

II. Believing the Prophets

Early on the day of battle Jehoshaphat addressed the nation with these words. “Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed” (v. 20). As we’re going to see in our next point, the main point of this story is our need to trust God. That’s the way we move from fear to joyful worship in the face of even powerful enemies. This point is a prerequisite to the next one in that it answers the question of where you need to go to learn to trust God. You have to go to the words of the prophets and believe them. God had just sent to Judah a prophet named Jahaziel. His words are summarized in verse 17 – “You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.” They believed that word. Notice how in verse 20 he equates believing in God to believing his prophets. God doesn’t speak to us directly, but through prophets. We have the word of the prophets in our Bibles, and this is what we must believe.

In order to trust God, we need the word of God. It is fuel for our faith. Just like the human body needs regular supplies of food in order to work properly, our souls need regular supplies of the word of God in order to trust him. The word of God is like the manna for the children of Israel in that they needed fresh supplies of it each day. Remember that any manna left overnight would be inedible the next day. We can't live off yesterday's word from God; we need a fresh one today. And we take it in and benefit from it only as we believe it. It's not enough simply to know it; it must be mixed with faith. Jehoshaphat believed God's word, and his belief was evidenced by his actions. Putting the musicians on the front lines was a clear indication of this faith. God had said they would need only to stand and watch him fight. Since they would not need to fight, the choice of musicians on the front lines made perfect sense. They were here not to fight but to celebrate God's deliverance of them, and what better way to celebrate than to sing and make music! God's word must be believed if we are going to benefit from it.

III. Trusting God

Our passage helps us in a couple of ways in learning to trust God. First, one of the reasons we have difficulty in trusting God is that there is such a long period of time between when we trust God and when we see the outcome of such trust. So if you trust God in the area of your money, giving faithfully and generously as he commands, the good results of that often take years to be seen. So what the author of Chronicles does is to shorten that time and demonstrate immediately both the good results of trusting God and the damaging results of not trusting. All the commentators have noticed that this is one of the most prominent features of Chronicles. They call it "retribution theology," defined by Ray Dillard as "the author's apparent conviction that reward and punishment are not deferred, but rather follow immediately on the heels of the precipitating events" (p. 76). This perspective is clearly in evidence in this story. Jehoshaphat trusts God and immediately God gives the answer and blesses the nation with a great victory. It happens in the other direction too, so that when Judah's kings do not trust God, punishment comes immediately. So Rehoboam, the first king after Solomon, did evil and did not set his heart to seek the Lord (2 Chron. 12:14), with the result that Shishak the king of Egypt came against Jerusalem and took all the treasures from the temple. The retribution theology of Chronicles is intended to make one point very clearly: trusting God brings great benefit and the failure to trust him brings great harm.

A second way our passage helps us learn to trust God is by showing us the "go-for-broke" nature of trust. To trust in anyone means that you take the risk of counting on that person with no backup plan. Before you sit in a chair, you have to trust the chair. What that means in a practical way is that if the chair should fail you, you're going to end up on the floor. This story shows the same thing. They went to meet their enemy armed with psalms. If God had let them down, they would have confronted the front line soldiers of their enemies armed with stringed instruments, trumpets and drums. Swinging a trumpet at your enemy who is armed with sword and spear would not have great results. But God did not let them down. He did exactly what he said he would do. Before they made it to Judah's musicians, God set these invading soldiers against one another. Using the language of the holy war from the book of Joshua, we read that "the men of Ammon and Moab rose against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, devoting them to destruction, and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another" (v. 23).

What was Judah's alternative? They could not have trusted God, in which case they would come at their enemies armed with swords and spears. But in whom would they be trusting in that case? They would be trusting in themselves. The alternative to trusting in God is not trusting in no one, but rather trusting in oneself. Sometimes people will say, "I will trust

in God when all of my questions and objections are completely satisfied.” But that is not trusting in God; it is trusting in yourself. When you say to God, “God, I will trust you when you clear away all the uncertainty in my life,” what you’re saying is that you are really trusting yourself. But doing so doesn’t remove the uncertainty. How do you know you’re right? How do you know you’re right when you say that death means the simple end of existence, just like the mosquito you swatted last night? Have you ever been convinced of something in the past, but are later proved to be wrong? Trusting yourself doesn’t remove the uncertainty.

Illustration: I went to the doctor this week for the first time in quite a few years. I have had some rough places on my scalp for quite a while, and since my father has psoriasis there, I had self-diagnosed myself with that same condition and was treating it with over-the-counter creams. Wendy finally prevailed upon me to have it looked at by someone who actually knows what they’re talking about. So I went to see a dermatologist, who, after looking at it for about two seconds said, “That’s not psoriasis.” She said that I have a pre-cancerous condition that is easily treatable at this stage, but could be deadly if not treated in this stage. My self-diagnosis could have killed me. It can do the same for you in a far more serious way if you trust in yourself instead of in Jesus. Jesus’ diagnosis is that our problem is our sin, and he has the answer for that. You can trust yourself and your self-treatment for sin, by which you try to do some good things and defend your record. Or you can trust Jesus, who solves your problem in a far more radical way. But you have to trust someone, and whomever you trust, it’s a go-for-broke proposition.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with a couple of applications. First, what would trusting God look like in your life? It’s probably not going to be facing an army with musicians on the front lines. But what will it look like? One way that helps answer that question is to ask what’s going on in your life right now that produces in you the tendency to fight or flight? That’s an indication of where you need to trust God. It could be a sickness or a job struggle of some sort. Perhaps it’s in the area of your marriage or some other relationship. Maybe it’s the very common area of money, and something has happened that is causing panic. Some people respond to that by fighting, which in the case of money looks like an all out assault on either making more or spending less. Others respond by flight, which often looks like denial, saying, “It’ll be all right; it’s always worked out somehow in the past.” It is better to trust God, which takes the form of prayer, giving and honestly coming up with a plan. So what would it look like for you to trust God? Let me encourage you to do so. True and lasting blessing comes as we trust him.

Second, let me remind you that God is trustworthy. Just as he delivered Judah on this occasion, he will deliver us. All we need do is stand and see the salvation of God. When Jesus died on the cross, he was single-handedly defeating our enemies. Like Judah on this day of battle, we contribute nothing. All we do is rest in him. We do that in a significant way now as we take communion. The application as we take communion is to use the prayers on our insert to pray in a way that fits your current situation.