

# The Strength in Weakness

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, if I could ask you to turn to your Bibles, please, and to the second book of Chronicles. You'll find that on page 372. This is a one-off. This is not part of a series. We'll be returning to Jeremiah sometime later, but just let me say a word to put this chapter in context.

It's one of the great Bible stories, although probably not as well known as it ought to be. On the throne of Judah, there is one of the better kings, King Jehoshaphat. If you read chapter 19, you'll find he instituted an enormous program of reform, bringing back godliness into the nation's life. And that's what the this in our chapter refers to in 20 verse 1, after this, after the reforms of Josiah. So let's read then verses 1 to 30.

After this, the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Maunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, a great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea, and behold, they are in Hazaz and Tamar, that is, En Gedi. Then Jehoshaphat was afraid, and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord. From all the cities of Judah, they came to seek the Lord. And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, and said, O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham, your friend? And they have lived in it, and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before you, for your name is in this house, and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save. And now, behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy.

Behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horror that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

[ 2 : 55 ] Meanwhile, all Judah stood before the Lord with their little ones, their wives, and their children. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jehaziel, the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jial, son of Mataniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly. And he said, Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat, thus says the Lord to you, do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow, go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz.

You will find them at the end of the valley, east of the wilderness of Jeruel. 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. Do not be afraid. Do not be dismayed. Tomorrow, go out against them, and the Lord will be with you. Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshipping the Lord.

And the Levites of the Kohathites and the Korahites stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice. And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekua. And when they went out, Jehoshaphat's students said, 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. When he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire as they went before the army and say, Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever. And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. For the men of Ammon and Moab rose against the inhabitants of Mount Seir,

devoting them to destruction. When they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another. When Judah came to the watchtower of the wilderness, they looked towards the horde.

Behold, there were dead bodies lying on the ground. None had escaped. When Jehoshaphat and his people came to take their spoil, they found among them in great numbers goods, clothing, and precious things which they took for themselves until they could carry no more. They were three days in taking the spoil. It was so much. On the fourth day, they assembled in the valley of Bereka, for there they blessed the Lord. Therefore, the name of that place has been called the valley of Bereka to this day.

Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat at their head, returning to Jerusalem with joy. The Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies. They came to Jerusalem with harps and lyres and trumpets to the house of the Lord. And the fear of God came on all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet, for his God gave him rest all around. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts.

[ 6 : 26 ] I wonder if I could ask you please to turn once again to page 372, 2 Chronicles 20. And let's have a moment of prayer as we ask the Lord's help as we begin to look at this passage. Let's pray.

God our Father, I pray that you will take my human words in all their weakness and inadequacy, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. One of the characters in one of the Narnia stories, I can't remember which one, and I'm not going to guess because many of you would be only too happy to catch me out and see as Lewis, has gone through a period of great effort, great trouble and hard work.

and to his amazement and astonishment and dismay, he is given another task to do. And when he asks why, he is told, you must realize the only reward for doing a difficult task well is to be given another and more difficult one.

Surely King Jehoshaphat of Judah must have felt that at the beginning of our chapter. Look at the end of chapter 19.

[ 8 : 12 ] Deal courageously and may the Lord be with the upright. After this the Lord blessed Jehoshaphat. Everything went well, there were no more problems.

Unfortunately that's not what the text says at all, is it? After this the Moabites, Ammonites and with some of the Mayunites came against Jehoshaphat for battle and Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord.

Why? Why this sudden terrifying invasion? This vast horde after all that faithfulness? Now the Lord knows exactly what he's doing.

If you cast your eye over to verse 30, So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet for God gave him rest all around. Would it be nice if we had gone straight from the end of chapter 19 to that?

But if we had, we would have missed a hugely important story. And we would have been in danger of complacency and pride. When things go well, isn't the real danger complacency?

[ 9 : 16 ] Our own right arm has saved us. Because this is a story of God's grace and human response. And as we look at it, we'll see this pattern. God's story and our story which responds to it.

The key verse is verse 12. We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

So this sermon tonight I'm calling the strength of weakness. Because it is only in weakness that Jehoshaphat and the people discover the strength of God.

And there are three main movements in the story, which is a way of disguising my saying about three main points. But I think the natural movement of the story is threefold and the letter is P.

You're even going to get alliteration this evening. The first thing in the story in verses 2 to 13 is prayer. Jehoshaphat is attacked by a coalition from the south and the east.

[ 10 : 24 ] As you will know on the west, there is the Mediterranean Sea, which the Old Testament calls the Great Sea. So he's in real trouble. And in the north is Israel, which is hardly likely to help them out.

So he turns to the Lord. He takes it to the Lord in prayer, as we sang. Now, don't misunderstand this. There is a saying which many people like and think it sounds pious.

Prayer changes things. Prayer, in fact, changes nothing. Prayer puts us in touch with the God who changes things. See, if we say prayer changes things, we'll get into the idea that the longer we pray, the more emotion we put into our prayer, something will happen.

Remember in 1 Kings 18, when Elijah faced the prophets of Baal, they had an all-day prayer meeting, hammering at Baal's door all day long, with emotion and with fanaticism.

But nothing happened, because they were praying to the wrong God. They were not praying to the God who answered. And this is a remarkable prayer, this prayer of Jehoshaphat.

[11:30] It goes back some 100 years and echoes the great prayer that Solomon prayed in the temple as he dedicated the temple. You can read that in 2 Chronicles chapter 6.

You can also read it in 1 Kings 8. Never be afraid to use good prayers written by other people. I know some people don't like that.

They say it's stilted and formal, and it can be. After all, we do sing words that are written by other people. We don't, thankfully, make up our own hymns and songs when we come to worship together.

What's the difference when using the prayers of the divine society throughout the ages? And if you don't know it, I recommend to you the Book of Common Prayer, compiled by the great Archbishop Cranmer, the English reformer, the splendor and magnificence of that language, and the powerful way in which he evokes the presence of God, the majesty of God, and also the condescension of God.

So Jehoshaphat is using words which echo those of Solomon. Now let's look at the prayer then. And first of all, it starts with God. It doesn't start with the problem.

[12:42] Verse 6, O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You roll over all the kingdoms of the nations, and your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.

When I was young, I used to get impatient with the kind of prayers that began like this, O Lord God, who is and who does, and so on. And I used to get impatient to say, why not get on with the business of praying?

Except that this is the business of praying. Unless God is this God, unless he is the God who made heaven and earth and drove out the enemies, there's no point in praying.

That's why Baal's prophets achieved nothing because they were praying to a God who didn't exist. He is the creator. You rule over all your God in heaven.

And because he's in heaven, he is able to help those on earth. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.

[13:42] And then he goes back 400 years, the time of Joshua, verse 7. Did not you, our God, drive out the inhabitants of the land before your people Israel, and then back beyond that to Abraham?

The point that Jehoshaphat is making is he believes the God of his fathers is the same God as today, his today and our today. Let me coin a phrase, we are not Jehoshaphat, but we have Jehoshaphat's God.

I'm sure you could have, I'm sure you could all have echoed that. That would have been a good responsive prayer, wouldn't it? Anyway, Jehoshaphat believed he had Solomon's God, he had Abraham's God, he had the God of his fathers.

Because you see, these are not just historical details. These are realities about the kind of God that God is resound into the present.

You see, what Jehoshaphat does, he brings together the facts of the present with the facts he's learned about this God. You see, if we begin with the problem, we are going to be sunk even before we start.

[14:54] The problem is very real, very visible, very menacing. God is in heaven, he's invisible. We must begin with God and put the problems alongside him.

Because if we begin with the problems and put God alongside that, then we are, our faith is going to flag and falter. By the way, I'm not saying this because I exemplify someone who prays this way.

I'm very painfully conscious that often I don't pray this way and often I don't live this way. And that leads to panic. So it begins, the prayer begins with God.

Who is God? He is the creator, he's the Lord of history, and they built a century for his name. Then he turns to the problem. And as I say, verse 12, we are powerless.

We have no strength. Isn't that true about our problems as well? The rising tide of unbelief, the ruthless repression of the last vestige of a Christian society.

[15:58] We are powerless. We can't turn back the tide of godlessness in this land. We cannot simply expect that things are going to happen simply because we want them to.

We are powerless. That's where we've got to begin, of course, isn't it? There is a grim parallel to this in chapter 26. King Uzziah, also one of the better kings of Judah, there's a chilling phrase in that chapter.

Uzziah was wonderfully helped until he became strong. You see, that is, you see, if this is the strength of weakness, that's the weakness of strength.

When we imagine we're doing well, when we imagine we can cope, we can do it, rather like my team, which is continually saying that, although they managed to do it yesterday, I'm glad to see. If we try in our own strength, we'll be led to disaster. We are powerless. That's why we need to pray, our eyes are on you.

[17:05] Let me see, this prayer is saturated with God. It is saturated with Scripture. It is saturated with the sense that although God is in heaven, he will work on earth the way he worked in the past.

Our eyes are on you. The prayer of weakness, which connects with the God of strength, the God of our fathers, the God who made heaven and earth.

So that's the first element in the story. Now, the second element is prophecy in verses 13 to 17. Jehoshaphat has spoken to God, and he's spoken to God in words taught by the Spirit.

Because after all, that's what we do when we pray prayers, which echo Scripture. These are words taught by the Spirit, not some kind of mystical, magical idea. The words, the Spirit himself is teaching Jehoshaphat what to say.

But now God speaks to Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat, and he speaks through this otherwise unknown figure, verse 14, Jehaziel. I suspect some of you have not thought about this, this guy all week.

[18:13] Jehaziel. But he was obviously somebody of significance because one of the ways in which the Bible shows somebody someone of significance is they have a large number of ancestors. And so it is here.

But the point surely is, it's not who speaks, but whether the Lord speaks through them. We need to remember this in our evangelical celebrity culture.

It's whether the person is speaking the word of God, not whether they are prestigious and famous and so on and have a great following. It's whether they are actually speaking the words of the Lord, whether in fact, verse 14, the Spirit of the Lord has come upon them and given them the words to say.

Now just as the prayer had two parts, the prophecy really has two sides to it. First of all, what God will do. And that's his message. Verse 15.

Do not be afraid. Do not be dismayed. For the battle is not yours, but the Lord's. Now Jehaziel is also drawing from early scripture.

[19:21] There's almost a direct echo of the words of Moses in Exodus 14. As the Israelites stood panic-struck at the Red Sea with Pharaohs pursuing armies and mountains on either side, Moses says, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.

Clearly, the prophet as the king is echoing the words of scripture. See, God's work is entirely his own. The people do have a place, but it's in the spectator's gallery.

We need to remember that. See, once again, this is specific to Jehoshaphat, but nevertheless, there's a general lesson here. God's work is God's work.

William Still once said, God has only one worker, the Holy Spirit. I think it would do us well to remember that because all our work, if it's not done in the Holy Spirit, is going to achieve nothing. We can train people. We can educate people. We can entertain people. Even. What we cannot do is we cannot convert people. We cannot cause them to grow in grace.

[20:32] Remember that when we're discouraged because our efforts seem to have so little result. Remember that, too, when the blessing comes. It is blessing. It is not achievement.

And I think, you know, it would save us from the two extremes. One of despondency and the other is pride. It is God's work and God does it in his way and it's only work done in the power of his spirit will last into eternity.

The first thing is what God will do. But the second thing is what we do. None of that means we sit around passively dreaming of the glory days of the past, of the time of the Covenanters, the Billy

Graham Crusades of the 1950s and any other parts of history which we find inspirational. And saying, oh, the Lord can do that again. Of course he can. But he doesn't guarantee he's going to do this at the time of any particular individual.

And notice exactly what the prophet said. Look first of all at verse 15. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Well, you'll notice exactly what the prophet is saying.

[ 21 : 53 ] I'm so glad he didn't say don't feel afraid. Don't feel dismayed. We know already that Jehoshaphat was terrified. See, if you say to somebody don't feel afraid, if you say you ought to be this and you ought to be that, all you're going to do is to put an even more crushing bird curtain of disappointment and discouragement on those who are already discouraged.

What the prophet is saying is, I know you're afraid, go ahead and do what is right. Not that you have to feel bold, but that you act boldly.

I think that's what he's saying. The old hymn says, some will hate you, some will love you, some will flatter, some will slight. Cease from man and look above you, trust in God and do the right.

Not do you feel like doing it, but the attitude that says, remember what we are powerless, but our eyes are on you.

The danger would have been if their eyes had been on this vast army. And that's so often what happens in problems and that we fix our eyes on the vast problem, we're utterly paralyzed.

[ 23 : 08 ] the prophet says, don't be afraid, for the battle is not yours, but God's. And then action. Go out against them.

You notice, because the Lord is going to fight the battle, that doesn't mean they sit and do nothing. Verse 16, tomorrow, go down against them. And he tells where they're going to be and so on.

Then verse 17, you will not need to fight, stand firm, hold your position, see the salvation of the Lord. Now, it is the Lord's work. It is the Spirit's work.

But he graciously allows us to take part in it. And I think that is the most wonderful thing of all.

Remember, I often think about, when I think about this, I think about some of the signs in John's Gospel.

We cannot change water into wine, but we can fill the water jars us. We cannot raise Lazarus from the grave, but we can roll away the stone.

[ 24 : 11 ] In other words, we continue with the work that the Lord gives us, knowing that we have no strength, knowing that this is the Lord's work, and yet, realizing he has given us this little part to play.

And that applies to prayer as well, doesn't it? It's often said, why pray if God already plans? Well, you might as well say, why do anything if God already plans? If you pray to the Lord that he'll give you success in an interview, it doesn't mean you don't have to go to the interview.

And I think this is so important. God's work and our work. As Dick Lucas often says, we know the Spirit is at work because God's people are working.

Not that God's people are working instead of the Spirit or trying frantically to bring the Spirit, but the living Spirit is causing God's people to work and do the things that we can do.

We'll say, roll away the stones, the stones of unbelief, the stones of hindrance. We can't change the water of mere existence into the wine of transformed living, but we can present the glorious gospel of the gospel banquet.

[ 25 : 22 ] So we have prayer. Prayer. Prayer. Secondly, we have prophecy. And finally, verses 18 to 13, we have praise.

The story ends on an upbeat note with praise and thanksgiving. And once again, the same pattern emerges. First of all, praise for who God is.

Look at verse 21. When you're taking counsel of the people, you're pointing to those who were sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, went before the army and say, give thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love endures forever.

And we sang a version of that psalm at the beginning. This great 136th psalm, which repeats as a chorus, his steadfast love, his heseth, this great Hebrew word, God's covenant love, committed to his people by promises that he will not and cannot break.

his love, his steadfast love, endures forever. I don't know if any of you have read any of the novels of Charles Williams, friend of C.S. Lewis, or with a number of very interesting novels, really about spiritual battles and so on.

[ 26 : 41 ] In his, in one of his novels called The War in Heaven, he shows a Christian minister who was particularly under attack by the powers of darkness. Rather like Job, his story becomes a drama where all the forces of good and evil surge around him and threaten to overwhelm him.

And as he is on his knees praying to the Lord to lift the darkness, if he sees in the vision the hosts of heaven and hears the words of this psalm, let them give thanks whom the Lord redeemed.

A great voice sang and the room filled with light for his mercy endures forever and all around him it sang again and again for his mercy endures forever.

This is a reminder of the real nature of the spiritual battle, isn't it? It's what Paul says, we are not wrestling against flesh and blood. Now of course we are wrestling against flesh and blood in a sense, mortal enemies, human circumstances, all these things.

But ultimately the battle is the great battle that began in Genesis 3 when the prophecy was made by the Lord God that the descent of the woman would crush the head of the serpent and the serpent is tremendously active.

[ 27 : 59 ] And although this is a literal story of something that happened in ancient Judah, this is also a story of how the devil continually attacks the people of God, the work of God, the progress.

So, praise for who God is. And you'll notice that praise is given before the rescue happens. The great army is still in front of them.

The hosts of Moabite, Ammon, and Mount Seir are still there. And yet, Jehoshaphat and his people praise Yahweh, the God whose steadfast love endures forever.

Now, once again, let's not misunderstand this. That does not mean, and this must not be taken to mean, that every time we are in a situation where there are vast armies of problems and so on, that they will simply disappear like morning mist.

This is ultimately an eschatological passage, and we know what eschatological means. You told them all about it, Edward, some time ago. It's a passage about the future, what's going to happen when the Lord returns.

[ 29 : 17 ] But I think the important thing to remember is this, that even in this world, I'm sure that many of us here look back on wonderful examples of answered prayer.

Wonderful times when we were simply at our wits' end and the Lord answered. But these are not the final answer, because as long as we are in the world, we are going to face the vast armies.

As long as we are in the world, we are going to face conflict and trouble. And as long as we are in the world, we need to pray, we need to listen to the word of God, and it's in this world we need to pray.

So that's the first thing. It's because of who God is that we are able to praise. One of the Psalms talks about the sacrifice of praise. And that's the kind of praise we give when we don't feel like it. That's why it's so important we don't always sing songs that are about feelings. Feelings matter. Of course they matter. That's why I'm never happy with the old Easter hymn, you ask me how I know he lives.

[ 30 : 21 ] He lives within my heart. I need to hope and pray he does live within your heart, the heart of everyone here. But when my heart is grieving, wintry, and in pain, I want something better than he lives within my heart.

I want to know the objective fact. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. I want to trust in the Lord whose steadfast love endures forever.

That's why you must begin with God. The second element is in verses 28 to 30, which is returns to the situation, prays for renewed peace.

Verse, once again, not invariably in this world, but even here, as I say, times when we praise God for his goodness as he's answered prayer.

But notice especially, verse 30, God gave him rest all around. Now, if you read on in the story, you know well, this is not going to last. But nevertheless, these victories, these answers when they come, are, if you like, trailers of the kingdom.

[ 31 : 29 ] They point us to the time when perfect rest, shalom, perfect peace, the earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

And that's what ultimately this story is saying. God gave him rest. Not, not we won a great victory, but God gave him rest. And as I say, this is a particularly dramatic example of people seeing God at work.

Prayer, prophecy, and praise, these after all are the ingredients of our Christian living, aren't they? So important to us now as then. As we finish, let me just make two points.

first of all, we have no strength. Don't become great in our own eyes because that will lead to disaster.

Remember, Uzziah wonderfully helped until he became strong. Weakness, when it's acknowledged, opens the door for God's grace and God's power.

[ 32 : 36 ] And secondly, this God is our God. God whether he answers specific prayers in this world or not, he is going to answer every genuine prayer.

He is going to give us rest. He is going to bring us safely beyond all the troubles, beyond all the battles, beyond all the enemies and to a place where in the new creation there will be true rest, the Sabbath rest anticipated at the very beginning of the Bible.

Brothers and sisters, trust this passage will encourage us. Keep on praying, keep on listening to the Word of God, keep on praising. Amen.

Let's pray. Father, we have no strength but our eyes are on you.

When we try to deal with problems in our own strength, we make a mess and we end up worse than we were before. But we know that because of your grace and your goodness, that in the end all will be well and all manner of things will be well.

[ 34 : 01 ] And we praise your name for this. Amen. So we're going to sing now as our closing hymn, the hymn on the screen, through the love of God our Saviour, all will be well.

Greetings . Thank you again and your name.

And you have received stars over your heart, in nature, body and re whose stench is between us.

And so it is our Alleluia