

When Musicians went to War

Over the past number of weeks we have looked at some of the “big stories” of the Old Testament like Jonah and the giant fish and Daniel in the Lions’ Den. This week I want to change the pattern just a tiny bit and focus on a story that, I think, should be a big story, but which is often overlooked, the story of Jehoshaphat at war with three enemies of Judah: Moab, Ammon and Edom.

The time period is relatively early in the history of the divided kingdom; Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Solomon died in about 931 B.C. and his son managed to alienate most of the tribes of Israel which divided the kingdom. The southern kingdom was the only one that had a legacy of any godly kings and Jehoshaphat was the fourth king of Judah and was one of those that the writer of Chronicles described as a man who did what was right in the eyes of God. He came to the throne in about 874 B.C. and reigned for 25 years. For most of that time, the king of Israel was Ahab, a man who worshiped idols and was described as the worst of the kings of Israel. (“There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh, urged on by Jezebel his wife.” 1 Kings 21:25)

We are told in 2 Chronicles 17 that the LORD was with Jehoshaphat because he didn’t worship idols. We are also told that he sent out his officials and some Levites to all the towns of Judah with copies of the Book of the Law, so that they could teach the people how to follow their God. The nation was at peace, was prosperous, had large stores of food and an army of 300,000 troops just in case. In chapter 18 we’re told of an unhealthy alliance that almost cost Jehoshaphat his life. He married off his first born son to the daughter of Ahab and then was invited by Israel’s king to go into battle with him against the king of Aram. That battle resulted in a near miss for Jehoshaphat and in Ahab’s death.

Now we come to 2 Chronicles 20 and the story I want to talk about today. The chapter begins with the alarming news that a vast army had assembled on the west bank of the Dead Sea near En-Gedi and was marching towards Jerusalem. Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites have united to go to battle against the nation of Judah.

What do you think Jehoshaphat’s first response would be to this news? (20:3,4)

Jehoshaphat was alarmed by this news and sought Yahweh for guidance. He also gave orders that everyone throughout Judah should observe a fast. So people from all the towns of Judah came to Jerusalem to seek the LORD.

First step. Not calling out the army. Not instituting a draft so all of Judah could be armed and ready for battle. Not any military strategy or call to shore up the defenses; just a call to heaven - “please guide us”. More on that in the verses that follow:

Jehoshaphat stood before the people of Judah and Jerusalem in front of the new courtyard at the Temple of Yahweh. He prayed, “O Yahweh, God of our ancestors, you alone are the God who is in heaven. You are ruler of all the

kingdoms of the earth. You are powerful and mighty; no one can stand against You! O our God, did You not drive out those who lived in this land when your people arrived? And did you not give this land forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? Your people settled here and built this Temple for You. They said, "Whenever we are faced with any calamity such as war, disease or famine, we can come to stand in Your presence before this Temple where Your name is honored. We can cry out to You to save us, and You will hear us and rescue us." And now, see what the armies of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir are doing. You would not let our ancestors invade those nations when Israel left Egypt, so they went around them and did not destroy them. Now see how they reward us! For they have come to throw us out of Your land, which You gave us as an inheritance. O, our God, won't You stop them? We are powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack us. We do not know what to do, but we are looking to You for help. (2 Chronicles 20:5-12)

The NIV translates that last verse: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You." Notice the perspective that Jehoshaphat has and how it shapes his prayer. First he sees that God alone is the mighty One; He has the power to move kingdoms and shape history. Then he reminds the LORD God of the history of the land, that God had given it to the descendants of His friend Abraham, that He had driven out the inhabitants of the land so that His people could settle there and that they had built this Temple as a place to worship God. And then the king quotes from the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the Temple when he asked Yahweh to come to His people's aid when they called to Him from the Temple in Jerusalem. More history: God did not allow the Israelites to attack these nations when they were coming into the land of Canaan, so they had to go around to the east and cross the Jordan River instead. Why? Because, way back, these people were relatives of Abraham's family. Mount Seir is where the Edomites settled and they were the children of Jacob's brother Esau. And both the Moabites and the Ammonites were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot. So this is family and now the relatives are coming to make war.

So Jehoshaphat's prayer is shaped by his view of God; that He is the ruler over nations, that He has moved in the history of His people and that He will continue to rescue them if they call on Him. So he calls on Him: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You." "We are looking to You for help."

And the people stand there - not just the army, not just the heads of families, but the entire nation; men and women and children, stand and wait for God to speak.

Suddenly, one of the men standing there is filled with the Spirit of God and speaks out the prophetic word that is the answer to their prayers:

This is what Yahweh says: Do not be afraid! Do not be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow, march out against them. You will find them coming up through the ascent of Ziz at the end of the valley that opens into the wilderness of Jeruel. But you will not even need to fight. Take your positions, then stand still and watch Yahweh's victory. He is

with you, O people of Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid or discouraged, Go out there tomorrow, for Yahweh is with you. (20:15-17)

A speech like that could cause a number of different reactions. Some might say, "That guy sounded a bit strange, didn't he. I wonder what to make of what he was saying." Someone else might be a bit more hopeful and say something like, "That sounded like it was from the LORD, not just a made up prophecy. But I do wonder how we should interpret it and what we should actually do about it. Should we take it literally and go to war without a military plan or should we expect that our God will want us to fight eventually and choose the spot that is easiest to defend?" There are lots of possibilities that involve a mixture of faith in God and wonderful human reasoning, the kind of logic that can derail confidence in God's word and His purpose. But the King of Judah is not derailed by good reasoning or practical issues like military strategy. He hears the prophetic word and acts on it with complete confidence. The first thing he does is bow with his face to the ground in worship. And while he and most of Judah is facedown, some Levites stand to praise the LORD with a great shout.

And then, the next morning, as the army of Judah starts on its way to meet the invaders, the king says:

"Listen to me, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! Believe in Yahweh your God and you will be able to stand firm. Believe in His prophets, and you will succeed."

After consulting the leaders of the people, the king appointed singers to walk ahead of the army, singing to the LORD and praising Him for His holy splendor.

This is what they sang:

'Give thanks to the LORD

His faithful love endures forever!' (20:20,21)

I don't need to tell you that this is a very unusual military strategy - to put your worship team out in front of the people who are carrying weapons.

Let's take a quick look at three words that are used to describe what the worship leaders did. The first is in verse 21 where Jehoshaphat appointed singers to walk ahead of the army, singing to Yahweh and praising Him for His holy splendor. The word that is translated "praise" is the word "halal" which roughly means to "boast" about how great God is. The second word is "yadah", "Yadah to the LORD for His love endures forever. This word signifies raising hands in praise of God, lifting Him up with the gesture of exaltation. The third word for praise is "tehillah" and it appears at the beginning of verse 22: "As they began to sing and praise". This is a word that points ahead to the results of praise, the honor that God receives and the glory that is given His Name. These come through shouts of praise and great declarations of His fame and glory. So, the whole scene is one of jubilant celebration of the greatness of God, complete with shouting with arms raised, declaring the wonder of who He is, giving full attention to His worthiness.

And then, this:

At the moment they began to sing and 'tehillah' the LORD caused the armies of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir to start fighting among themselves. The armies of Moab and Ammon turned against their allies from Mount Seir and killed every one of them. After they had finished off the army of Seir, they turned on each other. (20:22,23)

I'll spare you the rest of the description, except to say that there was no enemy left to fight against Judah and so the people gathered up the plunder that had been left behind -- it took three days -- and then they acknowledged God in two distinct ways:

1. After three days of gathering up the plunder, the people of Judah spent the fourth day giving praise to God. The place where they gathered to worship became known as the Valley of Beracah; literally, the Valley of Praise.
2. Then, the whole crew returned joyfully to Jerusalem where they went straight to the temple, carrying their musical instruments, ready to continue in their praise to God for delivering from the power and evil intentions of their enemies.

Last week we ended the story of David and Goliath by saying that God does impossible things. And that's a summary statement for the Old Testament stories we have been looking at. There's no way a man survives a night in a den of lions, or three men survive a blazing furnace, or a reluctant prophet lives in the belly of a giant fish, or that people shout and six-foot thick walls come crashing down, or that singers overcome an army of thousands of violent men. These things don't happen, not without the God who does impossible things. So listen to this fairly new song - it's called "Impossible Things" and includes these lines:

*One word and the walls start falling
One word and the blind will see
One word and the sinner's forgiven
'Cause You do impossible things*

SONG: Impossible Things (stop at 4:16)

One of the central lessons from this story is the call to believe in the God who does impossible things. Put yourself in the position of Jehoshaphat when he hears the report that the armies of three nations are coming to destroy his country. Then reflect on the steps that he took to respond to this crisis: he called the people to fast, then he led them in prayer, calling on the "ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth" to save them, then he waited. You never get the sense that Jehoshaphat was impatient, panicking because of the movement of enemy troops within his borders. Instead he takes time to pray, to wait patiently for an answer and then to talk things over with the leaders of the people. Only after all those steps does he appoint singers to walk ahead of the army, leading them into battle with loud singing and shouts of praise. I think that if that was my strategy, I'd want to take some time and get some input before launching my "army".

Let's look at some of the other lessons from the story of Jehoshaphat and the worshiping warriors.

1. "Believe in Yahweh your God and you will be able to stand firm. Believe in His prophets, and you will succeed." That was the king's call to his people right before they marched out to battle that morning. It was a call to faith, a call to believe in something they couldn't see, but that they knew from studying their history - their God was mighty and able to save them from disaster. He had done so in the past, His prophets were telling them He would do so again this day, and their king was telling them to believe, to hold this faith. Things in life don't work out exactly as we had planned or exactly as we would like. But, in the midst of our confusion and doubt and all the unanswered questions, we, too, are called to believe in the God who has saved us, who has come to our aid in the past, who has promised to never leave us or forsake us.
2. The second application is that we should expect God to speak into our lives, to give us the direction we need when facing challenges and then, we need to act on what He tells us to do. If we don't expect God to direct our lives, we won't be listening for the answers to our prayers - most likely, we'll be too busy figuring out solutions on our own. The silent waiting in the story of King Jehoshaphat is a lesson for us that we all need - don't be in a panic to take action, but pray and wait for God's direction and then, act on that.
3. The third application is right at the heart of this story, and yet we can easily overlook it. The activity that the people of Judah entered into was praise. That's one of the core purposes for our existence; to praise our God while the rest of the world ignores Him or hates Him. We will declare that He is good, that He is worthy, that He is loving and kind. Praise is powerful in defeating the enemies of doubt and fear and guilt and rebellious thoughts in our own minds. Praise should be a "go-to" whenever we feel ourselves sinking in our faith.
4. So, we are encouraged by this story to believe in God and His saving power, to expect Him to speak into our lives in response to our prayers and to praise Him in all circumstances. One more thing: this story tells us that we can boldly ask God for impossible things. The king knew that they were facing an impossible challenge from the combined forces of Edom, Moab and Ammon, he knew he had nowhere else to turn for help, and he was willing to say, "We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on You." In other words, "the ball is in Your court, Lord." Jesus told us to seek and keep on seeking, to ask and keep on asking, to knock and to keep on knocking ... and God would act on our behalf. So, let's ask Him for impossible things and let's live with expectancy that He will answer.