

Worship: Seeking God in Distress

Kenwood Baptist Church

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TEXT: 2 Chronicles 20:1-19



"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You." Have you ever been in the situation in your life when you were at a loss as to what to do, what direction to take, a major decision, a situation that you long to change, but you had no power to change it, an adversary coming against you? It could come through the next cubicle; it could come through a professor; it could come through a family member, and you don't know what to do. King Jehoshaphat in our text that we just heard read this morning says this on behalf of all of us: *"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You."* That is why we need God's Word. Some of you may have been tempted, when you heard the Scripture read, to think: "Wow, I came here this morning, and here we are in 2 Chronicles. Does this have anything to do with me? Let me just say it has everything to do with you. It has everything to do with you because God's Word gives to us, in a concise form, His kindness and wisdom. It reveals to us what it's like to be in covenant relationship with the living God. The Bible is the shortest of the sacred books. It is short compared with other religious literature, that of world religions. In the Scripture, we are invited to see what it is like to be in relationship with God, and this prayer, *"We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on You,"* that question, that petition, that declaration, is resolved in a glorious way that teaches all of us how to live. Most of us are familiar with being in distress, and the Scripture this morning teaches us how to seek God in the midst of that distress.

We are in the middle of this series on worship and looking to God to teach us how to walk in His ways. The apostle Paul, reflecting on the narratives of Scripture, the Scripture that he knew, said this in 1 Corinthians 10:11:

“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”

He is referring to stories of the Old Testament. The end of the ages has come. Sometimes people ask me: “What do you think about the end times?” I say: “You know, the first 2000 years of the end times been have been fantastic!” Jesus’ coming, the death and resurrection of Jesus, turned the ages, and we are the people that stand on the other side of the empty tomb. We are people who stand in relationship to God, and we have this back story, if you will, that teaches us what it is like to be in a relationship with God. So, these narratives teach us much, and this morning, we look at the example, the experience, of Jehoshaphat, king in Israel, and his experience of walking with God, his experience of facing a major moment, a moment of grave distress in his life and what happens as a result. Keep your Bible open. The narrative of Jehoshaphat's life and experience with God is in 2 Chronicles 17-20. We are going to touch briefly on those and then look closely into the major moment in 2 Chronicles 20.

We read of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17, that the Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he walked in the earlier ways of his father David. He did not seek the Baals. The Baals are the gods of the nations—Baal, in particular, the god who promises power, pleasure, and prestige apart from serving God. That’s a short, concise, definition of idolatry, and it's true in ancient Israel, and it's true for us. When you look around, you live this life, and anyone or anything that promises you power, pleasure, or prestige without God is an idol. Anything that's offering these things to you apart from serving the living God is idolatrous, and we read of Jehoshaphat that he did not seek these things, but he walked in the ways of his father David. I want us to notice a few things about King Jehoshaphat that are preludes to this big storm. This is the first of them. ***Seek God before the storm, so that turning to Him is a well-developed habit.*** It is when the crisis breaks in your life and you have never turned to God, that this is going to feel unnatural and awkward. But, if you seek God before the storm and you seek Him daily in your life, turning to Him is a well-developed habit. Jehoshaphat sought God before the storm. We read in 2 Chronicles 17:7-8:

“In the third year of his reign he sent his officials, Ben-hail, Obadiah, Zechariah, Nethanel, and Micaiah, to teach in the cities of Judah; and with them the Levites. . . .”

He sent out these people to teach in the cities of Judah, and we read that they taught the people having the Book of the Law of the Lord. They had the Word of God, and so Jehoshaphat basically has a discipleship plan for the nation. He sends these people out. They are like mobile Sunday School teachers or small group leaders or a ranging team of pastors coming through

your town to teach you the Word of God. This is the second thing that we learn from Jehoshaphat, that is to ***train yourself in God's Word before the storm, so that you are well-fortified when the battle comes***. We see in the king, that not only does he seek God before the storm, so turning to Him is natural, but he trains himself in God's Word before the storm so that he is well-fortified when the battle actually comes. We see Jehoshaphat discipling the people, extending the knowledge of God in His Word. He grows steadily greater, things are going well. In 2 Chronicles 18, he is tempted from that posture of strength, and we notice this in our series, that sometimes when we are strong and everything is going well, there's a real temptation to turn away from God in that moment. Jehoshaphat, in 2 Chronicles 18, is tempted to make a marriage alliance with Ahab in the north, those worshiping other gods, and he is rebuked and warned by that. This is the third thing that we learn from the king and his experience with God. ***Receive correction from God before the storm so that we are open to grow when the great challenge comes***. Jehoshaphat is tempted in this moment of strength to veer away from God, and God sends a prophet, as He does repeatedly does in the studies that we have been in this fall. This time it's Jehu, son of Hanani, and he corrects the king, and the king takes the correction. So, you have to be open to God's speaking in your life before the great distress comes. You receive the corrections, and you are open to grow when the great challenge comes. Jehoshaphat receives this correction. He appoints judges and leaders to do justly and rightly and prays that the fear of God would be upon the people. In 2 Chronicles 19:7, he tells the judges:

"Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes."

This set of things we can observe in Jehoshaphat function like preludes for us. They are patterns of discipleship that should be in our lives that happened before a big crisis or a moment of distress. Anytime you go to a recital, a piano recital or any musical recital, there are hundreds of hours behind that young person at the keyboard soloing for the first time to the delight of the parents and grandparents and extended relatives. When you see someone run a race and they run well, there are hundreds of hours of training that happened before that public moment. We had a great time yesterday. About 25 of us ran in the Hunger 5K. It was great time, and I think we emerged injury-free. That was one of my big goals, but there was a lot of preparation behind moment.

Before we break into the storm that emerges in 1 Chronicles 20, I want you to see this. I want the Spirit to write these things on your heart—those truths that we are to seek God before the storm so turning to Him is natural; that we are to train ourselves in God's Word so we are well-fortified when a difficult moment comes; that we receive God's correction and are open to grow when a crisis comes. We never know the nature of the crisis. We never know if the next lesson God has for us in our discipleship will be an easy one or hard one, and so let's enter into

the text we heard. Second Chronicles 20:1 begins, it seems, not so bad. It begins:

“After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle.”

If you are unfamiliar with the geography of the ancient world, this may be a verse you just gloss past, but 2 Chronicles 20:2-3 helps us clarify the gravity of the situation:

“Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, ‘A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar’ (that is, Engedi).”

This is from the eastern side of the river Jordan, the territories of Moab and Edom, and beyond the sea, which is probably the Dead Sea. His mention of Hazazon-tamar should send the shockwave of terror through every one of your hearts. The Chronicler knew that the people he was speaking to would be unmoved, and so he added for clarity's sake: *“that is, Engedi.”* We still remain unmoved. Let me just bring this further up-to-date. What he just said is that they've already crossed the border. Hazazon-tamar is on the western side of the Jordan river, so the natural border of defense has already been breached, and when the Chronicler is writing, that city or that area is called Engedi, so he tells his readers they are already in Engedi!

This great multitude has already crossed the border, and they are arraying themselves for battle. This is a terrifying moment. Last Sunday, we were given a number of a million men. This time, we are just told a great multitude. I imagine it's more than a million, and they are coming to defeat you. They are coming to dispossess you, and so here is a moment of great distress for Jehoshaphat. What will he do? His response is profoundly instructive for us, because you are going to face these moments. I love serving you as one of your pastors, and I love the trust that you give to me by sharing with me some of those moments when the storm breaks in your life. It can be a cancer diagnosis. It can be major class V hurricane that broke out in your marriage. It can be total uncertainty about your future or a major conflict with coworker, indecision with what direction to take, your child is not walking with Christ and breaking your heart. It can be all of these things and many more. It can be that all of a sudden I lost my job. I remember a couple here, a very gifted professional couple at Kenwood, working downtown Cincinnati. They had just bought a house, and the wife called and said, “I just lost my job.” Then, three days later, the husband, who worked at the same company, said, “I just lost mine!” Both lost their jobs. Whatever it is, you are going to face these moments.

Maybe you are facing one of these moments right now. In 2 Chronicles 20, when Jehoshaphat received the report that a million men are coming and pouring over the border, what does he do? The first thing he does is that he genuinely feels afraid. I want to give you space this morning to be afraid. Christianity is not like Christian Science. The Christian life is not a life of denial. Jehoshaphat doesn't say: “I don't believe there are a million men crossing the border.”

He doesn't bury his head in the sands of Judea. He hears the report, and he's afraid. You are going to be afraid when you get that moment, that news, that big distress, and the question is: What will you do when you are afraid? Jehoshaphat is afraid, and he resolves and sets his heart to seek God. He sets his face toward the Lord. He resolves to seek God. He proclaims a fast throughout all Judah. Fasting is a precious spiritual discipline that quiets down our regular clamoring for food and self-care to affirm in a very concrete way our dependence on God. Fasting quiets our soul down so we can hear the Lord well.

Jehoshaphat, in his fear, turns to God. Why does he seek God? Because he's in the habit of seeking God, so when that big moment crashes, it's a habit of the heart. Judah assembles to seek help from the Lord. The cities come to seek God. It's a habit of heart for the nation as we've seen earlier with his sending out teachers. We see the King leading by example, and where does he go to seek God? He goes to church. He goes to worship. He goes to the public place, to the house of the Lord, in prayer. We are given access in 2 Chronicles 20:6 to Jehoshaphat's prayer before God, and I want you to see that the king prays to a God that he knows. This is not the first time that Jehoshaphat prays to God. He says:

“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.”

We worship a God who rules over the nations, even the ones who don't acknowledge Him. God rules over the United States, just the same as he rules over North Korea, because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and He directs the heart of a king like a watercourse. *“You rule the nations, in Your hand are power and might, and none can withstand You.”* Jehoshaphat knows of a God, in 2 Chronicles 20:7, who was active in the past:

“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?”

Jehoshaphat remembers the acts of God and the promise that goes together with the sanctuary, and this is why in the vision of Chronicles, the worship of God is the center of our life together. God enthroned in our midst means that there's a sanctuary, there's a place of God's dwelling, so that in 2 Chronicles 20:9:

“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.”

When disaster or difficulty comes upon us—whatever its variety: sword, judgment, pestilence, famine, loss of jobs, cancer diagnosis, whatever it is—we're going to stand before God. We are going to come to Him and cry out in our affliction, and God will hear us and rescue us. He will save us.

Jehoshaphat presses into the specifics of his moment. He says in 2 Chronicles 20:10:

“And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, [these people on the east side of the Jordan River] whom You would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy.”

This is such an important line, and it's a subject maybe for a different sermon, but very quickly let me add that the most common question I am ever asked (and I get this question at least once a month in some variety) is: “What about the Canaanites? What about the dispossessing of the land? Is God unjust? Is the God of the Old Testament different from the God of the New Testament?” My wife and I were interviewed on national radio on Friday morning on this question: “What’s the role the Old Testament in the Christian life?” I had the privilege of starting the interview by saying: “That was the question that launched my marriage proposal.” We were there in Boston studying at Gordon Conwell, and we were talking about how the Old Testament relates in the Christian life, and my godly, beautiful Christine was waxing eloquent on the role the Old Testament and its instructive value, and I just had this flash. I thought: “Boy, if we got married, we could keep having this conversation for the rest of our lives! Right?” The interviewer said: “You know, that's probably the most romantic story I’ve ever heard.” It was! But, brothers and sisters, even this line tucked in Scripture answers that question. In Deuteronomy 2, God does not allow the people to dispossess the inhabitants of Mount Seir and Ammon and Moab, but they are instruments of His righteous judgment in a contained and controlled way in the land, filling up the sin of the Ammorites as He had told Abraham centuries before. God treats His own people with the same standard when they are driven out from the land by the Babylonians. So, if anyone asks you the question: “Is God just, is He righteous,” the short answer is: “Yes, He is. All His ways are right, even the ones that we don't yet understand.”

In Jehoshaphat's prayer, he knows that story, so he knows that these nations pouring over the border are transgressing the boundaries that God has set. In 2 Chronicles 20:11, he says:

“They reward us by coming to drive us out of Your possession, which You have given us to inherit.”

He looks to God and says in 2 Chronicles 20:12:

“O our God, will You not execute judgment on them? For 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.”

Brothers and sisters, this is a prayer that we must have, because you will be tempted when you face great distress to rely on your own power or strategy. You will also be tempted to bring down the hammer of your own sense of justice. This prayer, “O our God, will not You do what's right?” When you're in distress, ask God to act on your behalf. I mean really act, to do what you cannot do, to execute a righteous judgment where it is needed, for God to deliver you and to

acknowledge openly your own lack of power and ability to change the circumstances, and to say: "Lord, we don't know what to do." Can you incorporate that into your prayer life? "Lord, I don't know what to do." If we're honest, it's really not that difficult for us. I don't know what to do, but my eyes are on You.

What does God do with this prayer? He responds. God responds first by speaking, because the living God hears and answers. In 1 & 2 Chronicles, there are all of these prophets that we never talk about, like Jehu, Shemaiah, and here we meet Jahaziel. Who has studied the works and words of Jahaziel recently? And yet, here he is, as another brother, another member of the community, and notice in 2 Chronicles 20:14 that the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and he speaks. He says:

"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.'"

Don't be afraid, this is God's fight. Then, in 2 Chronicles 20:17, he says:

"You will not need to fight in this battle."

Then he says something so electrifying. This is so powerful. He looks at the King and the people and he says: *"Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf."* You know why that line so powerful? That line is so powerful because it's a quotation. That line is a quotation from Exodus 14. Those are the very words of Moses at the moment of the greatest distress in national, spiritual history up to this point. It is the very moment when God reached out His hand and brought us out of Egypt, and it seemed that we were free and ready to serve Him. Then we came up to the edge of the sea, and Pharaoh regretted that he had let us go, and he said, "You know, I'm coming after you." Consider being in a moment of great distress. Here we are, pinned against the sea, backs to the water, looking out at the army of the most powerful nation in the world racing towards you. What are you going to do? God speaks and He tells Moses to tell the people: "Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of God work for you." I get really excited about the Old Testament in the New. I get really excited about that. I have grown to get excited about the Old in the Old, and that's what we have here. God's people, and you and I this morning, we have to have deeper memories. We are living in a cultural moment that says everything that happens that's significant for you happens in the next 24 hours. We live in a sequence of days that our memories are just being withered away, so we forget, and we get into a moment of distress, and we say, "O Lord, I don't know what to do." Jahaziel says: "Remember the God that you know." You want to talk distress, disaster? Do you remember. . .?" and he quotes Exodus 14: "Stand there, hold your position, look to the Lord." When he looks to the Lord, he invokes that memory of God's reaching out a powerful hand and splitting the waters, and we walk on dry ground.

If you forget what God has done, then there is no remedy for your distress, but the God who answered that prayer, answers this prayer, and will answer yours. Jahaziel says: “Go out tomorrow. The Lord will be with you.” The people respond by worshiping in 2 Chronicles 20:18:

“Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD.”

Then the leaders, the praise team, come up in 2 Chronicles 20:19:

“And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.”

Then, in 2 Chronicles 20:20, they went out early in the morning, and the king stood in front of them and addressed the people:

“Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in [trust] the LORD your God, and you will be established; believe His prophets, and you will succeed.”

This is true. This is true in the 10th century BC and is true in the 21st century AD: “Believe in the Lord and you are going to be established. Believe in His prophets and you will succeed.” It’s a call to trust Him.

Then we have the strangest army and military formation. Look at 2 Chronicles 20:21:

“And 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.’”

The choir and the praise team and Pastor Alberto are thinking: “I don’t know about this! Does the Old Testament really apply to us this morning?” It looks like the choir and the praise team are going out in front. Hope it goes well. We are trusting in the Lord, brother. It does look like a big group, and they are singing: “Give thanks the Lord for His steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks the Lord, His steadfast love endures forever!” God is constant. You are never going to be in a situation outside the scope of His steadfast love, and the key to victory is worship. In 2 Chronicles 20:22, we read:

“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.”

When they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against their enemies, and they were routed. There is something about praising. The enemies were routed, and people came down and just watched it. They didn't fire a shot. The only thing that was required of them was to worship. We have got to get a hold of this. They don't fire a shot, just like coming out of Egypt, they don't fire a shot; just like the battle that the Lord Jesus Christ wins on His glorious return. We don't fire a shot, but we sing; we praise Him.

Brothers and sisters, we need this vision. We need the theological vision of Chronicles this morning. It's powerfully instructive for us. Remember the preludes. First: Seek God before the storm so returning to Him is natural as a well-developed habit. Second: Train yourself in God's Word before the storm so you are well-fortified when the battle comes. The battle came, and Jehoshaphat knew Deuteronomy; he knew the Exodus victory; he knew God's promise and presence. Third: Be in the habit of receiving correction from God's prophets along the way so you're open to grow when the great challenge comes. Jehoshaphat was corrected when he was tempted to make alliance with a Ahab. He put the prophetic word into practice, as we saw last week, and this time, when you Jahaziel speaks and says: "Trust God, the battle belongs to God," and he tells him: "Stand there and see what God will do for you and praise Him," he receives that. He doesn't say: "You know what? That's a good word. That's exciting. That's encouraging, but we are still going to go out in full battle array. He obeys the Lord.

We need this this morning. We need this individually; we need this as families; we need this for our nation. It's an important week, and so we asked God to act. We are a people who do not retaliate or fight with our own strength, but we are a people who know God's power, who can stand firm, unshaken, and see the salvation He will work for us. We are called this morning, when we do not know what to do, to set our eyes on the Lord. I am so privileged, and I love that so often you come back to me, and you say: "Let me tell you what God is done." That's the God we worship and serve this morning, and that's the God that gives to us the greatest of all victories.

Amen.