

Against All Odds

2 Chronicles 20:1-30

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How many of us have faced a situation where it seemed that the odds were completely stacked against us? How many of us have been in a situation where it seems that there is no way out? Maybe physically? Maybe spiritually? This morning, I want us to study a terrifying situation, where the chances of death for a particular king seem to be almost 1 to 1. In other words, it was so bad that the destruction of the entire nation was almost guaranteed. I am referring to a situation faced by King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 (p. 717). After the death of King Solomon, we remember how the kingdom divided - Judah in the south and unfaithful Israel in the north. Jehoshaphat is the fourth king of Judah (in the south). And of those kings in the south, Jehoshaphat is one of the good kings, ruling from roughly 870 to 848 BC. Like his father, Asa, Jehoshaphat serves God (even as a young man). He sends out traveling teachers who teach the Law of Moses. He removes many of the pagan altars. According to 2 Chronicles 17, the Philistines and Arabians, and some from other surrounding nations are bringing him gifts. Jehoshaphat strengthens the nation. But, Jehoshaphat isn't perfect. You'll notice on the chart up here that Jehoshaphat rules in the south at the same time that wicked King Ahab rules in the north, and there is a time when Jehoshaphat makes an alliance with King Ahab. Overall, though, Jehoshaphat is good.

And yet even though things seem to be going very well, there is a time when Jehoshaphat is completely caught off guard by a massive invading army, only 25 miles from Jerusalem. Twenty-five miles, of course, is a distance that can be traveled in less than a day. As we are about to discover, the invading army is an alliance of surrounding nations - the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Edomites, and a band of nomads known as the Meunites. So, to start with, the armies are already nearby - this isn't an army you could see coming from many miles away, but they are already right there. But not only do they start out nearby, but we are also about to learn that they have assembled at En Gedi. I've zoomed in a bit here, to show that En Gedi is an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea. And that's where we realize that this invading army is incredibly close to Jerusalem. They are already in the land of Judah!

We find in 2 Chronicles 17 that Jehoshaphat had the ability to assemble an army of nearly a million men. That is a huge army! To put that in perspective we have roughly 1.3 million on active duty in our military, and our military is one of the largest. However, even though Jehoshaphat has access to that many soldiers, there isn't time to get these men together. A huge coalition of enemies have come together inside the border of Israel. There is no time to assemble a defense, there is no time for diplomacy, and so, in this crisis, King Jehoshaphat

is up against some terrifying odds. These enemy nations have conspired together to wipe the Southern Kingdom off of the map completely, and they have the power to do it. Jehoshaphat is terrified.

In 2 Chronicles 20, then, the odds seem to be completely stacked against Jehoshaphat and the nation. As we look at this passage, I hope we can ask: What odds are we facing? What challenges are we up against? Family struggles? Work challenges? Health concerns? Relationship trouble? Financial challenges? And not only do these random things happen, but don't we also have an enemy? The Bible describes Satan as **"...prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"** (1 Peter 5:8). Aren't there times, then, when we face persecution or pressure for making a moral decision? Are we overwhelmed by something as Jehoshaphat was? Aren't we sometimes caught off guard? Aren't we sometimes surprised by some of those terrible things that happen to us? As we study, then, I hope we can learn something from how Jehoshaphat faces his challenge.

- I. I'd like for us to start by looking at the first 12 verses as we find that even in his fear, King Jehoshaphat's first reaction, his first response, is to **SEEK GOD**.

Notice, please, 2 Chronicles 20:1-12,

¹ Now it came about after this that the sons of Moab and the sons of Ammon, together with some of the Meunites, came to make war against Jehoshaphat. ² Then some came and reported to Jehoshaphat, saying, "A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, out of Aram and behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar (that is Engedi)." ³ Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴ So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.

⁵ Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord before the new court, ⁶ and he said, "O Lord, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You. ⁷ Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? ⁸ They have lived in it, and have built You a sanctuary there for Your name, saying, ⁹ 'Should evil come upon us, the sword, or judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before You (for Your name is in this house) and cry to You in our distress, and You will hear and deliver us.' ¹⁰ Now behold, the sons of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom You did not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt (they turned aside from them and did not destroy them), ¹¹ see how they are rewarding us by coming to drive us out from Your possession which You have given us as an inheritance. ¹² O our God, will You not judge them? For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You."

The foreign armies gather at Engedi, and the Bible tells us that Jehoshaphat is **"afraid."** But instead of panicking, instead of calling his cabinet together, instead of assembling his military leaders, we find in verse 3 that Jehoshaphat **"turns his attention to seek the Lord,"** and he **"proclaims a fast throughout all Judah."** And in response, the nation comes together to **"seek help"** from the Lord - they all come together - husbands, wives, children, and even the **"little ones"** (as we will go on to learn in verse 13) - they might not understand what is happening, but even the little children have come together with their parents to seek God.

Starting in verse 5, then, the king leads the nation in prayer, and in this prayer, he points the people to God. We might think that he might have said something like, "Dear God, please save us!" But he does not! Instead, this prayer is all about God. As he addresses God, we find him using the word **"You"** (with reference to God) over and over again (at least 17 times in this paragraph), and so he is praising God - for his power, for his authority, for his care in times past, for the great promises he has made, for the relationship he has with his people. And then, only at the end of the prayer does he describe this threat assembled just a few miles away. And only in verse 12 does he ask God to **"execute judgment."** He then closes with a powerful statement, **"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."** Generally speaking, leaders really do not like admitting that they have no idea what to do! And yet Jehoshaphat pours his heart out to God very publicly, **"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."** King Jehoshaphat is clearly in a desperate situation. The odds are completely against him. There is no earthly solution to this problem, and so he assembles the nation, he declares a fast, and he seeks God.

As we start to apply this passage to our lives today, we need to realize that when we face trouble, a good first step for us also is to come to God and to admit that (like Jehoshaphat) we also **"do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."** I think about those first few steps in a typical 12-step program. As people try to overcome alcohol or various other addictions, often the first step is to "admit that we are powerless" over whatever it is we are facing, that our lives have become completely unmanageable. Step 2 is to believe that there is some kind of a Higher Power who can help us out of it. And Step 3 is when we make a decision to turn our lives over to God's care. Isn't that basically what the king does here? **"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."** He turns away from the problem itself, and he turns to God. He seeks God. The king fears what is about to happen, and the first thing he does is to turn to God in prayer.

II. As we continue looking at what happens here, we move on, and we find that King Jehoshaphat and the people then **LISTEN TO A MESSAGE FROM GOD.**

Notice, please, verses 13-17,

¹³ All Judah was standing before the Lord, with their infants, their wives and their children. ¹⁴ Then in the midst of the assembly the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, the Levite of the sons of Asaph; ¹⁵ and he said, "Listen, all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: thus says the Lord to you, 'Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God's. ¹⁶ Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the valley in front of the wilderness of Jeruel. ¹⁷ You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out to face them, for the Lord is with you."

As they are all standing there before the Lord, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jahaziel. And Jahaziel's only real qualification seems to be that he is a Levite, a descendant of Asaph. Asaph, of course, wrote some of the Psalms. We studied those Psalms a few weeks ago in our Wednesday class. But Jahaziel has a message from God, and the message is simple, it is rather short and to the point, it points the people to God, and in the message, as he promises help from God, Jahaziel passes along some precise instructions. The battle is not theirs, but God's. And because of this, Jahaziel tells the people exactly where the enemy will be, he tells them to go down against them, but he also tells them not to fight, but to stand firm. So, they are to go into battle, but they are not to do anything!

I'm guessing this is not the message they expected to hear! The natural response to something like this would be either to run or fight. But instead of running, they are told to go to the enemy, and instead of fighting or assembling their weapons, they are simply told to "***stand firm.***" But the point here is that the people listen to this message from God. They go to God for help (they seek God as a nation), and in response, when God answers, they listen to God's message.

All of this, of course, is a pretty good pattern for us today. As we face challenges, we turn to God and admit we need help, and then we look to the word of God for help and encouragement. And sometimes God's message comes through an unlikely source, often from someone in our spiritual family. We come together as a church, and someone brings a message from the word of God that speaks directly to something we're going through. So, we go to God for help, and then we listen for his response in scripture.

III. **As we move into the next paragraph, we find that in response to this message, the people PRAISE GOD IN ADVANCE.**

As Jehaziel finishes speaking, the king responds in verses 18-19,

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ The Levites, from the sons of the Kohathites and of the sons of the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

What is amazing to us is: At this point, God hasn't even done anything yet! The surrounding nations are still assembled down in Engedi, but Jehoshaphat has so much faith in God that he praises God in advance. He bows his head with his face to the ground, and all the people do the same thing. They all fall down worshipping the Lord. Most of us don't fall down before the Lord these days, at least publicly. Last Sunday, I worshiped at the church in Sevierville, Tennessee, and as I was sitting on the back row (as I always try to do), a woman comes in and sits down next to the man who was sitting next to me. He tried to introduce himself, but the woman didn't speak English. We could understand nothing she was saying. We're in a room of several hundred people, many of them are missionaries from all over the world, but we didn't know where to start. The guy on the other side of me was a member of the congregation, and he said that the woman has been visiting for several weeks, and they couldn't figure it out either. Somebody pulls out a phone with a map of the world, and she points to somewhere India. By that time, worship was starting. But during the song before the Lord's Supper, she did something that I don't think I've ever seen in worship up to this point in my life. We were singing *Night With Ebon Pinion*, and the woman gets down on her hands and knees, and she bows her face to the floor for the rest of that song. And at that point, it was obvious that she knew what we were about to do. I mention this only to point out that she did what Jehoshaphat did. Even before anything happens, they all fall to the ground and worship God.

Today, can we praise God - even before he fixes whatever problem we're facing? Can we thank God for whatever he is ABOUT to do, even if he hasn't done it yet? It seems that we can! It seems that we praise God in faith. Jehoshaphat praises God, not because God had ALREADY done something, but he praises God trusting that God WILL DO something. Some of you here this morning are in that exact situation. God has not fixed your problem yet, but you are here to praise him anyway. You are praising God in faith, you are praising God in advance.

- IV. And this leads us to the next two verses, as they not only **TRUST GOD**, but they also **OBEDY GOD** - they do something, they demonstrate that they really do believe the message.

Notice what happens in verses 20-21,

²⁰ They rose early in the morning and went out to the wilderness of Tekoa; and when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the Lord your God and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed."²¹ When he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who sang to the Lord and those who praised Him in holy attire, as they went out before the army and said, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness is everlasting."

At the beginning of verse 20, it seems that we have some eagerness, don't we? They get up "**early in the morning**" to do what they are about to do here. They seem to be eagerly anticipating this. Well, they go out into the wilderness, they leave the safety of the city, Jehoshaphat gives some encouraging words, and then he consults with the people. In other words: This is what God has said to do, now exactly how do we do this? Jehoshaphat, therefore, as a leader, he gets input from the people, and then he makes the decision, and his decision is to send the singers into this battle first! I just want us to picture this: They are facing this threat to their existence as a nation, several surrounding nations have already crossed their border and are less than 25 miles away, and the king (after consulting with his people) decides to send the choir into battle first (in verse 21)! To put this in terms we can understand, I'm putting two pictures on the wall up here: The United States Army Chorus and a group of US Army Rangers. King Jehoshaphat goes with the chorus! Now, I'm sure the men in this chorus up here probably know how to do some very bad things, but their training and their experience is primarily in music. Jehoshaphat, though, demonstrates his faith in God by sending in the chorus.

This chorus, by the way, puts on their holy clothing, and they head out, singing as they go, "**Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.**" And I would emphasize: They still have no idea what God is about to do here! All they know is that God has promised deliverance. They demonstrate their faith through obedience. God has told them to go take a stand in front of the enemy, and that is what they do.

What about us? We have the reminder here that faith without works is dead (as James says in James 2). Jehoshaphat trusted God and demonstrated that trust with obedience. They went into battle just as God had commanded - not to fight, but to praise God for a victory. And we can do the same thing today. We trust God, and then we do what he has commanded us to do.

- V. And this leads us to the end of this passage as we find that the people **REJOICE** as they **THANK GOD FOR HIS VICTORY**.

Notice, please, what happens in verses 22-30,

²² When they began singing and praising, the Lord set ambushes against the sons of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; so they were routed. ²³ For the sons of Ammon and Moab rose up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir destroying them completely; and when they had finished with the inhabitants of Seir, they helped to destroy one another. ²⁴ When Judah came to the lookout of the wilderness, they looked toward the multitude, and behold, they were corpses lying on the ground, and no one had escaped. ²⁵ When Jehoshaphat and his people came to take their spoil, they found much among them, including goods,

garments and valuable things which they took for themselves, more than they could carry. And they were three days taking the spoil because there was so much.

²⁶ Then on the fourth day they assembled in the valley of Beracah, for there they blessed the Lord. Therefore they have named that place “The Valley of Beracah” until today. ²⁷ Every man of Judah and Jerusalem returned with Jehoshaphat at their head, returning to Jerusalem with joy, for the Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies. ²⁸ They came to Jerusalem with harps, lyres and trumpets to the house of the Lord. ²⁹ And the dread of God was on all the kingdoms of the lands when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. ³⁰ So the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God gave him rest on all sides.

Notice, please, the timeline here: As they begin to sing; that is, as they start traveling out into the wilderness - at the same time, the Lord sets an ambush, and the Lord causes all of these enemy armies to turn on each other - this is as Jehoshaphat is still on the way. As one author points out, “They never shoot an arrow, never swing a sword, never throw a single spear, and yet every enemy is dead on the battlefield.” So, by the time that Judah shows up, they look out into wilderness, and all they see are dead bodies. In other words, as they are singing and marching to this battle, God is doing his work at the same time. By the way, that is exactly how I look at baptism. We obey, and as we obey, God is working in us. We obey, and God does the work (Colossians 2:12). Nevertheless, as they sing and make their way to the battlefield, and as they step out in faith, God gets it done. They can’t see it happening, they can’t feel it happening, but when they show up, they see the results.

And not only is everybody dead when they get there, but these bodies are surrounded by piles of valuable goods, and we find in verse 25 that carry stuff away until they could carry no more - for three days they haul loot off of the battlefield. They rename the valley, and then they travel back to Jerusalem where they praise God some more. What I want us to get out of this is that when God helps us through some trouble, let’s not forget to say “thank you”! Let’s not forget to praise!

Conclusion:

As we close, obviously we don’t need some kind of crisis to do these things. And yet, when some situation surprises us like it did Jehoshaphat, we do have his example. We have this passage for a reason. As Aaron read for us earlier, ***“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*** We have this passage to encourage us, to give us hope. When we are up against some situation that seems almost overwhelming, we SEEK GOD. We look to His word for a MESSAGE that might apply to what we’re going through (sometimes we look to our church family, to a Bible class, for this). We then PRAISE GOD in advance - that doesn’t mean we’re ignoring our circumstances, but it means that we trust God. We then demonstrate that trust by OBEYING GOD - we do what his word tells us to do. And then we remember to THANK AND WORSHIP GOD on the other side of it.

This morning, we want to close today’s service by giving everybody here an invitation to obey the gospel, to accept that Jesus is the Son of God, to turn from sin, and to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you’d like to know more, we hope you will stick around for a bit or give us a call. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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