



***"Praising Prayers"***

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Its code name was impressive: *Operation Dynamo*. In reality, it was a desperate gamble that a hastily-assembled flotilla of ragtag boats could rescue an army, save a nation, and salvage an unwinnable war.

In June 1940 the German Blitzkrieg swept across France like a tsunami, trapping 300,000 British soldiers on the beaches at Dunkirk. As the Nazi noose tightened, England was hanging by a slender thread and Hitler was now master of Europe. The Fuehrer broadcast his congratulations: "Soldiers of the Western Front! Dunkirk has fallen in the greatest battle in world history. Soldiers! My confidence in you knows no bounds."

Hitler had good reason to feel invincible. The British had suffered 68,000 casualties. More than 270,000 French soldiers had been lost. The German victory was one of the most lopsided in history.

The brilliant architect of the German blitzkrieg, General Hans Guderian begged Hitler to let his armies capture the 300,000 British soldiers trapped at Dunkirk and then speed across the English Channel to take the defenseless British Isles. To this day historians are baffled as to why the Fuehrer hesitated to seize the day.

But William Churchill did seize the day! During those dark hours he searched frantically for a way to save his trapped army. Admiral Bertram Ramsay responded with a desperate plan called *Operation Dynamo*. The cry went out to this seafaring nation to launch a citizen's flotilla. Everything that could float, from the storm-battered skiffs of Brighton Beach fisherman to the gilded yachts of British lords, headed toward Dunkirk. They heroically braved stormy seas and the German Luftwaffe to rescue their nation's soldiers from the beaches of France.

The British admiralty had hoped to save 45,000 troops. Instead, more than 300,000 British soldiers were plucked from Dunkirk in history's greatest rescue operation. It is no exaggeration to say that England was given new life by *Operation Dynamo*. Its army was saved, and its populace was galvanized to fight on against overwhelming odds. This heroic rescue convinced an apathetic America to come to England's aid.

It is an irony of history that defeats sometimes spawn greater triumphs than victories. Historians agree that Hitler's failure to go for *total* victory at Dunkirk, and Churchill's daring rescue of his army in the aftermath of a crushing defeat, prolonged World War 2 long enough to set in motion events that led to the ultimate defeat of Germany.

In speaking of the rescue at Dunkirk, military scholar David Alston wrote, "The massive doors of history swing on the smallest of hinges." Who would have guessed that a ragtag flotilla of small boats manned by citizen sailors would have outfoxed the mighty panzer divisions of

General Guderian and survived the withering fire of the Luftwaffe to turn swing the doors of history toward Allied victory? St Paul would agree with David Alston's assessment that the great events of history swing on small hinges. In 1 Corinthians 1:27 the Apostle writes, "...God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong..."

He delights in using little people to bring down the high and mighty: tiny fishing boats to snatch a helpless army from the jaws of Hitler's war machine; a small stone from a shepherd boy's slingshot to topple a giant; a child's lunch to feed a starving multitude; and a crucified Galilean rabbi to save the world. He can even use a song to rout an army.

Today, we will look at the amazing story of a desperate king who sent a choir out ahead of his outmanned army. They lifted their voices in a song: "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever," and an invincible army was annihilated. On that day the massive doors of history were swinging on the hinges of a small song. What are you facing today? Maybe you've prayed some desperate prayers, but have you offered up a song? If you are going to be an effective prayer warrior, you need to learn the seventh principle of powerful prayer:

**Our most powerful prayers  
are often wrapped in a song.**

During the darkest days of his reformation, Martin Luther was a fugitive in hiding and his children were dying of diphtheria. He squared his jaw and said, "I feel like a solitary bird warbling in the wind. No one hears my song, but I will continue to sing for a song keeps me going." He sat down and wrote his greatest song, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, which became the battle hymn of the Reformation. There are few things more powerful than prayers wrapped in songs.

Come with me to 2 Chronicles 20. The year is 850 BC. After King Solomon's death, Israel was torn apart by civil war. The twelve tribes of Jews are now two separate nations, and a house divided is never stronger. Judah is reduced to only two tribes. Its treasury is bankrupt and its army weak. During these precarious times word comes to Judah's King Jehosaphat that a coalition of nations has amassed what verse two calls a "vast army." They have crossed the Jordan River, and are only 40 miles from the capital. Jehosaphat prays in verse 12, "...we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do..."

What do you do when you don't know what to do? Where do you run when you have no place to hide? How do you stand when you have nothing to stand with? Some of you know exactly how Jehosaphat feels. But do you understand what he understood?

## 1. Prayer is always the *first* option of effective warfare.

Look at how the king responds to this crisis in verses 3&4:

“Alarmed, Jehosaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.”

Common sense says, “Don’t waste time. The enemy is at our doorstep. There’s a time to pray and a time to fight. Now’s the time to fight!” It’s not that Jehosaphat isn’t gripped by the urgency of the moment. Verse three says that he is “alarmed.” The Hebrew word literally means that his innards are melting in fear. But verse three also says, “Jehosaphat *resolved* to inquire of the Lord...” The Hebrew word for *resolve* means to fix or “set” your mind. It’s a word that speaks of discipline. Jehosaphat refused to let his emotions override his mind. Great leaders discipline themselves never to show fear in public. They remain calm when those around them are coming unglued. There is no greater calming effect on God’s people than for a leader to call them to prayer in times of panic.

A sign outside a rural schoolhouse in Kentucky says, “In case of nuclear attack, the Supreme Court ban on school prayer has been lifted.” When all else fails, *then* we turn to prayer. Jehosaphat’s advisors must have been urging him to shore up the walls of Jerusalem, call out the troops, and devise a battle plan. But Jehosaphat calls his people to a fast and a prayer meeting. Someone once asked the 18<sup>th</sup> Century evangelist, George Whitfield what he would do if he only had four hours left to live. He replied, “If would spend the first three hours in prayer so that the last hour would be most effective for my Lord.” From Jehosaphat I learn that, no matter how urgent the situation, my first action is to pray.

## 2. Prayer does not so much release God’s power to us as it reconnects us to his power.

Remember, Jehosaphat is scared to death, and he doesn’t have a clue about what to do next. It would be easy to panic. The people of Judah were undoubtedly seized with terror. Wouldn’t you panic if a three-nation coalition (say Russia, Iran, and Cuba) had assembled a vast army already halfway up Alligator Alley, moving toward Naples? But, though his people are under attack, God still sits relaxed on his throne. The doors of history swing at his sovereign command. God doesn’t need to *hear* Jehosaphat’s prayers to be moved to action. Rather, Jehosaphat needs to *pray* the prayer to be moved to action. God is not fragile that he needs to be reminded of how great he is. But we are so fragile that we need to recall how great *he* is. Again, prayer is not so much about releasing God’s power to us as it is reconnecting *us* to *his* power.

So how do we find our bearings through prayer? It begins with the content of those prayers. Two things strike me about Jehosaphat's prayer in verses 5-13: there is great *faith* and *simplicity*. When we pray like Jehosaphat, we pray by:

### **1) Reminding ourselves who God is**

He begins his prayer where all prayers must begin in verse six: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kings of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." When we face a crisis, the issue is never who we are (or aren't) or what we have going for us (or don't). Rather, it's who God is. Prayer takes the focus off us and puts it on him. In two short sentences, Jehosaphat sums all that he and his people need to know about God: he exists in heaven; he is in absolute control of this earth; he is all-powerful; and no one can stand against him. That's all that any of us needs to know when we are up against an enemy too big to conquer.

### **2) Remembering what God has done**

Jehosaphat goes on in verse seven to pray, "O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham who was your friend?" Jehosaphat is not so much asking God to remember (our Lord's memory is infallible); as he is reminding himself and his people that God is a covenant-keeping God. He has never broken a single promise to his people. When panic rises within you, it helps to recall God's faithfulness in other times past when you were at the end of your rope.

### **3) Recounting God's promises**

In verses 8&9 Jehosaphat remembers the temple that his ancestor Solomon built. In verse nine he recalls when King Solomon dedicated that temple, and the promise God made that day: "If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your name and will cry out to you in our distress and you will hear us and save us." God never forgets his promises to us. But sometimes we forget them. The most transforming prayers are those where we remember and claim the promises of Scripture. Nothing will build your resolve as a spiritual warrior more than recounting God's promises.

### **4) Recalling God's righteous judgments**

Jehosaphat goes on to plead in verses 10-12, "But now there are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not

allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt, so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. See how they are now repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave to us as an inheritance. O our God, will you not judge them?" Jehosaphat doesn't need to remind God of this bit of history some 700 years ago. But Jehosaphat needs to remember that history. God told the invading Jews that they couldn't attack those three nations, and they didn't. Of all the nations chosen for destruction, only these three were treated with grace and mercy. Now they are repaying that ancient kindness with malice. Jehosaphat is recalling what we all need to remember: God is righteous in all his judgments. What goes 'round, comes 'round. Though sometimes his dealings seem unfair, we can count on him to bring all things in this world (and in our private affairs) to a just conclusion.

### 5) Resting in God's mercy on the weak

Look at the utter humility in the way Jehosaphat ends his great prayer in verse twelve: "...For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you." Prayer is the ultimate confession of *human* inability; the refuge of the desperate. You can reduce the last line of this prayer to two statements: we are weak and we are stupid! No wonder he says, "Our eyes are upon you." They would be wasting their time to look at themselves! Our final hope in prayer is that a merciful Father looks upon his weak children with pity, and a loving Father will protect them at all costs. .

### 3. The answer to every prayer: "the battle is not yours, but God's"

Verse 14 tell us that, as the gathered nation stood in silence at the end of their king's prayer, "Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel..." The king ended his prayer by confessing, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you." God responded by giving an answer through a man named Jahaziel. Too often we run around trying to find our own answers. We speculate, cogitate, ruminates, meditate (and even hallucinate). We consult with experts, form committees (and even subcommittees). We Christians are very good at coming up with worldly solutions for our battles in this world. Having cobbled together answers to our problems, we *then* rush to God with a prayer to bless our action plans. **Instead of coming up with an answer and asking God to bless it, Jehosaphat blessed God and he gave him an answer!**

Over the next several verses of 2 Chronicles 20 we see the answer God gives through Jahaziel. You can reduce God's battle plan to four strategies: 1) **face your enemy** (vs. 16); 2) **take up your positions** (vs. 17); 3) **stand firm** (vs. 17); 4) **watch the Lord win the battle for you** (vs. 17). Some 2900 years have come and gone, but this battle plan is just as

relevant for kingdom warriors today. But the key is Jehaziel's promise at the end of verse fifteen: "For the battle is not yours, but God's." That is the answer to all our prayers, and precisely the reason why we must pray *first* in every battle we face. Unless the battle is the Lord's to win, we will be defeated again and again in every conflict of our lives.

#### **4. Sing your way to victory!**

The next day, as the armies marched to the Pass of Ziz to take up their positions, God gives another answer to Jehosaphat: put the temple choir in front of the army to sing as you march into battle. Verse 21 says, "Jehosaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying, 'Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.'" In 850 BC God forever put his stamp on church choirs. He lets us know that a song is a powerful weapon in spiritual warfare. What is a song? It is simply a prayer put to a melody and lifted to heaven on musical notes. Often, we men think that singing is a woman's thing. Too often church praise teams and choirs are made up mostly of women. But did you notice that this choir is made up of men? God is saying that singing is a manly thing to do. Singing puts starch in warriors, and routs the enemy. Can I share some insights I see from this singing army?

##### **1) Sing loudly!**

Verse 19 says, "Then some Levites...stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with a *very loud* voice." This is no small point. Satan's greatest weapon against us is discouragement. If he can cause us to give up, he wins the battle before it even starts. The ultimate question is this: will we go out in his strength, or ours? If the battle is yours, *you* are in big trouble. If the battle is ours, *we* are in big trouble. If the battle is the Lord's, our enemy is in big trouble. Singing lifts our spirits and confuses the devil. That's why St. Paul writes to the church in Ephesians 5:19, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." Can I challenge you (especially you men)? Don't stand in the worship services and listen while the singers up front sing. Don't coast while those around you sing. Don't let the fact that you aren't a great singer silence you. The Psalmist say to all us vocally-challenged warriors, "Make a joyful *noise* unto the Lord." Join in the chorus of the redeemed. Sing loudly. Sing passionately.

##### **2) Invade the devil's territory!**

Listen to the words of Martin Luther: "I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the devil and lifts people...after theology I give to music the highest place and the

greatest honor." The Enemy of our soul hates it when we sing because it rouses our souls, gives us courage, restores our faith, unites our voices, and lifts up the name of Lord Almighty. Verse 22 says that, as the choir went before the Israelites, "the Lord set ambushes" against the enemy. Singing isn't preparation for spiritual warfare, it *is* spiritual warfare! When God's people sing together, we invade the devil's territory.

### **3) Sing a doxology to defeat the devil!**

When you read the rest of this story, you see the three enemy nations thrown into confusion by this singing army. They go crazy, turn on each other, and slaughter one another in mass chaos. Verse 24 tells us that when the Israelis "...looked toward the vast army they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped." There is only one conclusion: music played a vital role in defeating the enemies of God's people. John Piper says, "God has appointed the use of spiritual songs as an effective weapon against his archenemy Satan." China missionary, Mary Schlosser wrote that when discouraged, "I sang the doxology and dismissed the devil." Another missionary, Amy Carmichael often said, "I believe that Satan slips out of the room when there is a true song."

### **4) Use music to fight the devil, not each other!**

Notice something simple, but profoundly relevant: the Israelis didn't turn and slaughter one another. The enemy did that! But sometimes instead of uniting our voices in unity, we Christians turn on each other by allowing our different opinions, musical tastes, and church traditions to erupt into "worship wars" (contemporary verses traditional, hymns versus praise songs, guitars versus the organ, liturgical versus informal worship). We slaughter each other instead of singing songs that unite us against a common enemy. Satan must delight in our divisiveness. We need to ask God to deliver us from musical pride and focus on the God to whom we sing, and not the *way* in which we sing.

At the beaches of Dunkirk a ragtag flotilla of small boat rescued a trapped army, saved a desperate nation, and struck the first blow that would lead to the destruction of an invincible army. A weak and clueless army lifted their voices in a song and a vast army was annihilated. Indeed, the massive door of history swing on small hinges. Do you dare believe that the doors blocking the way to your victory can be swung open if only you will sing a song of praise?