

GREAT OLD TESTAMENT PRAYERS - JEHOSHAPHAT

(2 Chronicles 20.1-23)

Introduction

There's a story about a vicar on a funeral visit, who became more and more desperately desperate to find a parking space. Eventually he parked his car illegally because he was already 5 minutes late. So he quickly wrote a note under the windscreen wiper, and this is what the note said: "I have gone round this block ten times. I'm really sorry but I couldn't find a space by a meter. But as the Lord's Prayer says, Forgive us our trespasses."

When he got back an hour later, he found a parking ticket for £70 and a little note attached. This is what the note said; "I have been a Traffic Warden on this block for ten years. If I don't give you a ticket I lose my job. As the Lord's Prayer says, Lead us not into temptation!"

I have a hunch that even the most strident atheist might be tempted to mutter a quick prayer when he or she is late and desperate for a parking spot.

We're embarking on a series of talks on great Old Testament prayers. This one is a prayer of desperation. We don't really like desperation. It's a bit sweaty, a bit intense isn't it? Anglicans like things a bit more middle of the road and laid back. Desperation is not terribly Church of England.

But sometimes, in real life, desperation is where we are. We can all sympathise with the desperate but doomed prayer of the schoolboy who was coming out of his exam and was heard to pray, "Oh, God, *please* make Madrid the capital of Turkey!"

When our children were young, Kathie and I were both involved up front in a church service one morning. We were busy setting everything up

when we noticed that Nathan, who was one year old and discovering the adventures of walking, was nowhere to be seen. I thought Kathie had him. Kathie thought I was looking after him. We both looked around. Nothing. We started searching the building – he was nowhere.

Those of you who have been parents know this - there comes a tipping point when you go from trying to look calm to being unable to appear anything other than terrified. A visceral feeling of dread and panic comes over you. You pray under your breath maybe, but it's the prayer equivalent of an alarm bell - you can't really string words together.

What if he's been abducted? What if he's wandered out onto the road? *That's desperation.* We looked in the side rooms, we checked the toilets and he wasn't there. All the possible places our son might be in that church were exhausted.

We burst out of the church, looked up and down the busy street and found a car with its driver's door wide open and hazard lights on, and the driver, in the middle of the road, looking around confused, holding our little boy, wondering who on earth he belonged to.

I expect all of us, at some time, have experienced something like that feeling of dread, of absolute desperation.

Jehoshaphat's Plight

That's exactly how King Jehoshaphat would have felt in the reading we had just now.

Jehoshaphat was a good king: his heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord. The Bible says that the Lord was with him because he followed in David's footsteps.

But in 2 Chronicles 20 God permits his enemies from the south and east, Moab and Ammon, to conspire against him. It is a national emergency. It's a crisis.

Jehoshaphat has that feeling of dread, of panic, of alarm - and he sets himself to seek the Lord. He proclaims a fast throughout the land and representatives from the entire nation come together to ask God to intervene.

Where else can we go in an emergency?

- when our lives are endangered
- when our families are threatened
- when our faith is failing
- when our marriages are at risk
- when bad teaching worms its way into church and undermines God's word

Whenever Satan attacks, I want us to be people who, in sheer desperation, earnestly seek the Lord in prayer and fasting.

I want us to pray like Jehoshaphat prays in v6-12.

He starts by standing his ground and declaring truth about God's sovereignty. Even when we are most desperate, and fear is churning up inside us, I want us to be people who confidently ascribe greatness to God like Jehoshaphat does.

- You are God in heaven
- You rule over every nation
- No one can withstand your awesome power

If you nourish your mind with truth about who God you will be armed to the teeth with spiritual strength in the day of desperation.

Jehoshaphat calls to mind God's amazing acts in days past.

- You drove out depraved and evil nations as you said you would

It's really faith-building to remember the times God has answered prayer before and speak that out.

Jehoshaphat is completely honest about the plight they are in with their enemies coming against them.

Imagine a Jeremy Paxman interview with Jehoshaphat:

"Tell me Jehoshaphat, what do you make of the build-up of troops in Ammon and Moab?"

"Well, I'd say that our neighbours are absolutely intent on driving us out of our land. I'm hoping that God will judge them for it."

"Hoping? Is that all? And what message do you have for the nation you're supposed to be in charge of?"

"To be honest, it looks like our national defence is not up to the challenge. We are clueless and we don't know what we're doing."

"What are you actually going *to do* about this crisis that has blown up on your watch?"

"The country will be reassured to hear that, as Moab and Ammon point their weapons at us, our eyes are firmly on God."

God Can Do It Here

2 Chronicles 20 is not just a fairy story from 860 years before Christ. It illuminates the profound truth that God, sovereign over the affairs of nations, is able to do extraordinary things when people come before him in sheer desperation and terror, faced with absolute calamity, and ask him to rend the heavens and intervene.

I want to show you that similar things are occurring in our lifetime. Did you know that there has been a national-scale move of God in Uganda in the last four decades?

In the 1970s, Uganda was ruled by a man called Idi Amin. Under his rule, violence prevailed, churches were closed, the suffering of the people was immense, and no one came to their rescue. It was brutal and relentless. There was political repression, ethnic persecution, widespread assassinations, rampant nepotism, systemic corruption, and gross economic mismanagement. Apart from that, it was great...

The number of people killed as a result of Idi Amin's regime is estimated by Amnesty International to have reached as many as 500,000..

John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, was imprisoned by Idi Amin but he escaped in 1974. His wife Margaret once said, "As Christians during the Amin regime, we continued to pray the Lord's Prayer. But... when we prayed 'your will be done' [we weren't just saying whatever will be, will be], we were asking that God would intervene in this dreadful situation we found ourselves in, which lasted nearly ten years."

Well, during the 1970s, a community of believers gathered in underground caves. In desperation they prayed, "Lord, we don't know what to do. We have no power to face what has come against us. But our eyes are on you." They prayed round the clock. They prayed desperate, deep, groaning prayers that would not take no for an answer.

Today... Uganda is one of the most transformed nations on the face of the earth. At 8am in the State House, people pray. The Parliament doesn't want to discuss things until they pray. The judges don't want to hear cases until they pray. The police are faxing prayer requests. The crime rate is dropping - down by 70% in some communities. A major bank in the capital city Kampala plays praise and worship music on all 11 floors of its head office.

At one point, AIDS in Uganda was at 33.3%. The World Health Organization predicted that Uganda's economy would collapse because there would be only widows and orphans left. So people sought the Lord and prayed. Today, AIDS has dropped to 5%."

All that started out as prayers of desperation in the 1970s. Can God move that way in our nation? Of course he can.

The Office for National Statistics a few years ago published data which showed how badly our country needs Jesus Christ. Here are some highlights from that research: *Every day* in Britain at least 27 schoolgirls become pregnant, 2 under the age of 13. 20 women are victims of rape.

75 children are added to child protection registers in England alone. At least 90 children are taken into Care. 280 children run away from home. At least 470 babies die through abortion. 150 people are convicted for drug offences. This is *every day*. Somebody calls The Samaritans every 2 minutes and there are 2 burglaries and 3 car crimes every 60 seconds. Crime costs more than £5 billion every year. And so the list goes on...."

That's our country. How does that make you feel? Jehoshaphat cries to the Lord: "O God, we are helpless. We do not know what to do."
Desperation. "*But* our eyes are on you."

That is how the children in George Müller's orphanage in Bristol must have felt. It is time for breakfast and there is no food on the table, only plates and empty mugs. The kitchen cupboards are bare and there is no money in the orphanage bank account. This is desperation isn't it?

Müller prays a simple prayer. "Dear Father, we thank you for what you are going to give us to eat. Amen." The children all say "Amen." They look down at the empty table and hear a knock at the door. When they open the door it is the local baker. Mr Müller," he says, "I couldn't sleep last night. I felt you had no bread for breakfast, so I got up at 2 o'clock and baked some fresh loaves. Here they are." Müller thanks the baker and gives praise to God.

Not long afterwards, there is a second knock at the door. It's the milkman. His milk float has just broken down right in front of the orphanage. He has to empty the float to repair it, so he offers to give the children the whole lot if the orphanage can use it.

Desperation: "O God, we are helpless. We do not know what to do. But our eyes are on you."

The Battle Is the Lord's

In response to Jehoshaphat's amazing and desperate prayer the Spirit of God falls on a prophet named Jahaziel and this is what he says in v17:

“You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you.”

Ending

Jehoshaphat responds to the prophetic word about not having to fight by falling facedown and worshipping. Verse 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, worshipping the Lord.”

Worship is a powerful weapon in spiritual battle. The song “My Jesus My Saviour” was written by Darlene Zschech during a difficult time in her life. Her parents were going through a divorce, she was battling with bulimia, she was recovering from a miscarriage, she was weighed down with financial worries and struggling with the stresses of raising a young family.

One desperate day, she just sat on a piano stool, played a few notes and started to sing out some truths from the Psalms that she was hanging onto by a thread.

This is what she said about that experience: “I wrote “Shout to the Lord” when I was feeling discouraged. I felt I could either scream and pull my hair out, or praise God. The line ‘Nothing compares to the promise I have in you’ was something I clung to when our circumstances seemed so bleak. I think that rings true with anyone going through tough times.”

Nothing compares to the promises you have in Jesus.

So let me end by reading out a tiny selection of those promises as we go into Lent. And if you find yourself in the place of desperation today, receive them in faith and hold them fast to your heart:

- The water I give will be a fountain springing up to eternal life
- I will acknowledge you before my heavenly Father
- I will never send you away
- You will know the truth and the truth will set you free

- I will give you rest
- Nothing will be impossible to you
- You will have treasure in heaven
- I give you authority over snakes, scorpions and all the power of the enemy
- I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to answer
- Your faith will not fail
- You will do the same kind of things I do and even greater works that these
- My joy will abide with you and your joy will be full
- You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you
- I am with you always until the end of the age