2 Chronicles - Commentaries by Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston

Handfuls of Purpose, Jehoshaphat's Victory: Prayer, Fasting and Praise

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(2 Chronicles 20:1-30.)

I sometimes ask young converts how they can best please the Lord. How can you best please the Lord? I should very much like to hear what you would say. I have had all sorts of answers. One said to me," Work for Him." It is a very blessed privilege to work for Him, and a very sweet thing service is. But there is something better than service, and there is something far more important for the saint to get into his soul than even the thought of service.

I was very much struck once, when a beloved brother, now gone to his rest, said to me, "How can you best please the Lord?" I began thinking, and he said to me, "Turn to the sixty-ninth Psalm, verses 30 and 31: I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving. This also shall please the Lord better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs." Of course, I saw his point then.

But how beautiful this is, "I will praise the name of God with a song." Of course, the ox and the bullock present the simple thought of service. There is something the Lord enjoys more than service.

How can I best please the Lord? "I will praise the name of God with a song," is the divine answer. We often have prayer-meetings, but I wish we more often had a praise-meeting.

Jehoshaphat had one, in the striking chapter we have read, under very peculiar circumstances.

It was a crisis in his history. We have to meet crises, individually, and I think collectively too. Jehoshaphat and all about him were then confronted by a very great difficulty. "It came to pass after this also, that the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, and with them other beside the Ammonites, came against Jehoshaphat to battle. Then there came some that told Jehoshaphat, saying, There cometh a great multitude against thee from beyond the sea on this side Syria; and, behold, they be in Hazazon-tamar, which is En-gedi" (2 Chron. 20:1-2). Well, what did they do? "And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah." Ah, you will never get a right real praise-meeting, until you first fear, and then fast, while seeking the Lord. That is it, my brethren. Do you set yourselves to seek the Lord? I am a very useless piece of goods if I am not setting myself to seek the Lord. How can we get on without His power and grace? Do you ever have a fast-meeting? I recommend you to have one. I will tell you where you will come out at the end of it. You will come out a great deal nearer heaven than before it.

Prayer and fasting are often found together in Scripture, and their importance is clear. When His disciples inquired why they could not cast out a demon, our Lord replied, "This kind goeth not out, but by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21). Again, when the Holy Spirit said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them," the assembly of God at Antioch apprehended the gravity of the call, fell into line, so to speak, "And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:2-3). The assembly was fully identified with their mission by fasting, prayer, and laying on of hands. I think when it says a fast in Scripture, it means a fast. Frequently one hears it said, "That means a moral state." Do you think it was only a moral state at Antioch? The moral state existed, and it showed itself by a material fast, which was not commanded, so far as we read. I fear that word moral is going to ruin us. If we said we were going to have a fast-meeting tomorrow, I wonder how many would be there? Would you and I be there? I shall never forget a day, when a lot of dear young brethren, in London, whose hearts were troubled about the lack of devotedness, and greatly desirous of a revival of interest in the gospel, said, "Might we meet before God for a day of fasting and prayer?" It was arranged, and I spent the day with them. It was about the best day I ever had on earth.

Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast, and Judah gathered themselves together. I think they felt the difficulty. With one consent they gathered themselves together to ask help of the Lord. They said, Lord, what are we to do? The heart of God was charmed that day. Yes, charmed. It is what He longs to see, His people counting on, and confiding in Him. "And Judah gathered themselves together to ask help of the Lord: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord" (vs. 4). Notice, they came out of all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord. You show me one good, bright, earnest, fervent brother in a district. He will have a fine effect upon those round about him. Jehoshaphat set himself to seek the Lord, and then all Judah began to seek the Lord. That was the effect. You have one man moving many here, and you will find that God has always had His men all along the line of testimony. He prepared them, and communicated His mind to them, and then used them to affect others. Here then you have fearing, fasting, and praying, an invincible trio, for Scripture well says, "Two are better than one ... and a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl. 4:9-12). Let us all go in for the three.

"And Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, and said, O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in Thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand Thee? Art not Thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before Thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham Thy friend forever?" (vss. 5-7). Jehoshaphat turns to God in a most simple way. Oh, beloved brethren, get hold of God, hang on Him simply. We have a great deal too much of hanging on men nowadays. We are not hanging simply and sufficiently on God. This man hangs confidently on God, as he prays, "Art not thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before Thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham Thy friend forever?" He has a beautiful grip of God's purposes, as he refers to Abraham. Jehoshaphat was a bold man. Nobody ever had said that Abraham was the friend of God.

Had he said that God was Abraham's friend it would have been only blessedly true, but to call him "Thy friend" was faith indeed.

But Jehoshaphat recollected that in a day when the thunder-cloud of God was about to burst on the godless cities of the plain of Sodom (see Gen. 18-19), God had made known His mind to Abraham. We all tell our friends our thoughts and plans. When Abraham learned that judgment was about to fall on Sodom, he began to intercede for Lot, a saint settled down in a worldly filthy city, with his family terribly mixed up with the world. Judgment too is hanging over this scene, and we should occupy the lovely place of intercessors for a doomed world. I wonder if the Holy Spirit could write about you and me, that we were the friends of God. What showed Abraham to be God's friend was that he was a man whose heart was devoted to the interests of the Lord, and that interest showed itself by intercession for God's people. How I long for this, my dear friends, for you, for myself, and for all God's people.

Jehoshaphat reminds God of Abraham's devotedness. He says, Lord, you used to have a friend down here. We talk about God being our friend. Hallelujah for that! But Abraham was the friend of God. That is manifest, for nearly two hundred years after this, God, by the pen of His prophet, in an appeal to His people, endorses Jehoshaphat's statement, saying, "But thou, Israel, art My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham My friend" (Isa. 41:8). "Thy friend" says Jehoshaphat. Yes, "My friend!" replies God. It was faith that secured Abraham this splendid title. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God" (James 2:21-23). No earthly title can eclipse that heavenly honor, "The Friend of God." Let us all go in for it. It is a great thing to be God's man, and God's friend, in a day of declension as this is.

Let us continue Jehoshaphat's prayer. He reminds God that He had given the land of Palestine to His people Israel: "And they dwelt therein, and have built Thee a sanctuary therein for Thy name, saying, If, when evil cometh upon us, as the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in Thy presence, (for Thy name is in this house,) and cry unto Thee in our affliction, then Thou wilt hear and help. And now, behold, the children of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom Thou wouldest not let Israel invade, when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them, and destroyed them not; behold, I say, how they reward us, to come to cast us out of Thy possession, which Thou hast given us to inherit. O our God, wilt Thou not judge them? for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee. And all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children" (2 Chron. 20:8-13). God's house in Jerusalem was then the gathering place of His people, and there prayer was to be made in days of difficulty. Now the house of the Lord is the assembly, and its gathering center is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. You and I have the wonderful privilege today of taking up before God all that concerns Him, in the name of His own blessed Son, with the assurance that He will hear and help. God is a God of encouragement, and what He delights to do for our souls is to encourage us.

Ah, my friends, it is a great thing to have the Name of the Lord as our center, and to taste the joy of the Lord in our midst. To ensure this, what God wants is simplicity. He wants you just to be what you are. And what are you? If you are a believer in Jesus, you are a child of God, an heir of glory, and you are of the company of the sanctified. You belong to that blessed One on high. You are His, and He is yours. And all His heart, all His strength, and all that He is, is yours; and "He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." So that we may boldly say, "The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear. What shall man do unto me?" (Heb. 13:6). The fact is, a saint that is right with God, goes through this dark world like a glow-worm. As you pass through this scene, you go with the exhilarating sense that you have no power save that which is of God, and that is infinite. You have, and are to count on all the resources of God being with you in the day of battle. What a wonderful thing it is to be a saint of God in the night of Christ's absence.

Look now at Jehoshaphat's many enemies. Bear in mind that they were his blood relations. Very often our greatest difficulty arises from our relations, according to the flesh. The children of Ammon, and Moab, and Mount Seir, were Judah's relations according to the flesh. They were descendants of Lot and Esau. The difficulty was to know how to deal with them. Jehoshaphat's prayer was charming. "We have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do; but our eyes are upon Thee" (vs. 12). Ah, that is beautiful" Our eyes are upon thee!" The Lord help you and me, beloved brethren, to turn our eyes more upon Him. Whose eyes were turned Godward that day? "And all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children." Do you bring your children to the prayer-meeting? "Oh no," you say, "we leave them at home." They were wiser in Jehoshaphat's day. "Oh, but we cannot keep them quiet." Then there must be something wrong at home — a screw loose somewhere. It is not the divine order for the men to come to the meetings, and to leave the little ones with the wives at home. But you say, That was a great crisis. I admit it was a crisis, but "Thou and thy house" is a great principle all through Scripture, and in proportion as we neglect it I believe we restrain God's arm.

"Then upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, came the spirit of the Lord in the midst of the congregation; and he said, Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow go ye down against them: behold, they come up by the cliff of Ziz: and ye shall find them at the end of the brook, before the wilderness of Jeruel. Ye shall not need to fight in this battle; set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the Lord will be with you" (vss. 14-17). Notice that Jahaziel was a Levite, one of the sons of Asaph. He was a singing man. I like to meet a singing saint, one who is marked by constantly praising the name of God with a song. It was one of these singers that came out that day. He was, so to speak, a simple brother in the meeting, but he had the mind of the Lord that day, as he rings out to the praying congregation, "Thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's." How beautiful! The work is God's. The whole testimony is God's. And it is a great thing to let God do His own work in His own House.

I believe the secret of much of our failure and defeat is, that we are rather like Uzzah (see 2 Sam. 6:1-8). We think He cannot do without our help, but He can. God can take care of His own ark — Christ.

The great point is to have the sense that God is ever working for the glory of His blessed Son. Nevertheless I think we should sec a great deal more of His work made manifest if there were more prayer and fasting. When saints are not very happy, they sigh. If they are happy, they sing (James 5:13). If you are walking with God, you will pray with the man that is afflicted, and, if you are happy in your soul, you will sing with the brother that sings. It is the Spirit that produces joy in the soul, and that relieves itself in song. The question of having a voice, as men say, has nothing to do with it. I remember a dear brother, a fisherman, who was in the Edinburgh Infirmary when I was a Resident Physician there. He had leave to go out on the Lord's Day mornings to meet with the saints for the Lord's Supper. On his return, he said: "Oh, it was graund, the presence o' the Lord, and the singin' was se sweet. Ye ken, doctor, I hae nae v'ice, se I canna' sing masel, but I aye mak' a joyfu' noise." His heart was overflowing with the grace of the Lord. And, brethren, the Lord stir us up a little bit more to that. He loves to hear our songs.

“Stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the Lord will be with you,” must have been a most cheering and comforting word to them in that day of difficulty. If the Lord is with us, we are all right. But if the Lord is not with us, it is an awful thing. To merely have the ark in the midst as Israel had (see 1 Sam. 4:1), without the presence and power of God, will not do. Assumption God will always expose. He can take care of His ark, or, if need be, let it pass into the enemy’s hand, for their discomfiture. God will have reality, and all we have to do is to be what we are, confessedly nothing.

“And Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground: and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, worshipping the Lord” (vs. 18). There is a distinct step here. God’s testimony leads now not to praying and fasting, but to worship. Jehoshaphat is a worshipper, and all Judah with him. The sense of God’s gracious answer to their cry brings about a worship-meeting. You cannot manufacture that; you cannot get that up. Worship is the overflowing of a heart filled with what God is. You never can get it save by the power of the Spirit of God, and you cannot have it apart from the delight of the soul in Christ. When He fills the vision of our souls there is real worship.

“And the Levites, of the children of the Kohathites, and of the children of the Korhites, stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel with a loud voice on high. And they rose early in the morning, and went forth into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went forth Jehoshaphat stood and said, Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper. And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the Lord, and that should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army, and to say, Praise the Lord; for his mercy endureth forever” (vss. 19-21). Now you get the song breaking out. You have had the fasting, the prayer, and the worship, and then the song comes out. All was very simple, and very proper. Jehoshaphat’s faith was in full exercise, as he says: “Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.” Confidence in God secured full deliverance, and faith sang its songs of victory before a blow was struck. “Praise the Lord; for His mercy endureth forever,” rent the heavens. That is, they really had a thanksgiving meeting over the victory before the battle began.

The appointed singers lead the army, and the moment the song begins to rise to the Lord, the Lord begins to work. “And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, which were come against Judah; and they were smitten. For the children of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, utterly to slay and destroy them: and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, every one helped to destroy another. And when Judah came toward the watch tower in the wilderness, they looked unto the multitude, and, behold, they were dead bodies fallen to the earth, and none escaped” (vss. 22-24). There is no battle, and no fighting. All the difficulties melt away, as every foe helped to destroy another. “And when Jehoshaphat and his people came to take away the spoil of them, they found among them in abundance both riches with the dead bodies, and precious jewels, which they stripped off for themselves, more than they could carry away: and they were three days in gathering of the spoil, it was so much. And on the fourth day they assembled themselves in the valley of Berachah; for there they blessed the Lord: therefore the name of the same place was called, The valley of Berachah, unto this day” (vss. 25-26). What a victory! Their only work was a three days’ gathering of the spoil, and on the fourth day a renewed worship-meeting in the valley of Berachah, followed up by a return home with joy.

It is a great thing if saints are animated by a spirit similar to that given in this scene. It will lead them to fling their souls into God’s work, not only the gospel, but every branch of it. The evangelist’s is an important gift, but if the evangelist has done his work, what a privilege all saints have in taking care of the new-born souls, to nurse them, and lead them on. That was evidently found in the Church in early days. Each servant and his work was intimately connected with the assembly. His heart was in it because Christ was in its midst. On the other hand, the assembly was deeply interested in his work. If God make you the means of the conversion of a soul, my heart ought to be interested in that person, to feed, and lead such an one on.

Without denying this, I often hear this kind of a speech, “Of course it is right to help, but as I do not see what I can do, I have a little difficulty.” I think that little word “I” is the difficulty. “I” is just a straight line, and you would think it to be the smallest, whereas in fact it is the fattest and biggest letter in all the alphabet. It would be a real victory if we could drop the “I” altogether, and just inquire, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). My brother, that is the whole point. Do not forget that the Lord “gave authority to His servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch” (Mark 13:34). To every one of us He has given some little bit of service to do for Him here.

Jehoshaphat’s victory was followed by great praise and joy (vs. 26). They had a real praise-meeting in the valley of Berachah. That is the valley of blessing. If our hearts are set to win victories for Christ now, we shall have praise and joy too, as we see souls won for Christ. That is not everything, because we may not always be privileged to see this fruit of the gospel. Our responsibility is not to bring all the world to Christ, but our responsibility is to bring Christ to all the world I repeat, we are not responsible to bring all the world to Christ, but I believe God has given us the privilege, as well as responsibility of bringing Christ to all the world. How are we answering to this responsibility?

When the day of blessing and thanksgiving had concluded, we read, “Then they returned, every man

of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat in the forefront of them, to go again to Jerusalem with joy; for the Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies. And they came to Jerusalem with psalters and harps and trumpets unto the house of the Lord” (vss. 27- 28). They get back to the assembly, as it were. Because you know, beloved brethren, every Christian ought to be like a bee. The bee goes out and labors all the day, and then it comes laden to the hive. If you have gathered anything, bring it back to the hive. We must love the assembly, and live for it too, in the widest sense. Paul writes of “the love which ye have to all the saints,” not only the nice ones (Col. 1:4).

The point is, the assembly of God is still on earth, and we should each live in view of it. You are not the assembly. I hope you do not think you are. Do you, who in this city gather to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, think you are the assembly? You are of it, and thank God you are gathered on the ground and basis of it, but we must not forget that we are not it. It includes all God’s saints on earth today. I shall never forget what our dear brother, Mr Darby, once said at a meeting at Torquay in November 1863. There had been a good bit talked that day about our being “God’s testimony.” “Well,” said he, “brethren may be God’s testimony, if they keep their heads down, but if they do not they will be a testimony, not to God, but a testimony to their own folly and weakness.” Wholesome words! Let us heed them!

We are apt to get a little lop-sided. We all need to get back to Scripture. Scripture corrects us, as well as directs us. God always supposes you will go right. If we should go wrong, correction comes in to help us. We are not to think that we are the people, and that wisdom will die with us (Job 12:2). It will not! God has given us light and truth. Let us seek grace to answer to it, by going out, and living Christ on every hand. It is not what I say, but what I am, that is of such importance.

In connection with the truth of the assembly, let us never forget that, though we are on the ground of it, we are not it. There are thousands of saints in this town who are part of God’s assembly. They are not in function and order. They are in disorder. And the effort of every one of our souls should be to help them in the Spirit of Christ, and in no other way can we do so.

Who is on the Lord’s side,

Who will serve the King?

Who will be His helpers

Other lives to bring?

Who will leave the world’s side,

Who will face the foe?

Who is on the Lord’s side?

Who for Him will go?

Not for weight of glory,

Not for crown and palm,

Enter we the army,

Raise the warrior psalm;

But for love that claimeth

Lives for whom He died:

He whom Jesus nameth

Must be on His side’

Fierce may be the conflict,

Strong may be the foe;

But the King’s own army

None can overthrow:

Round His standard ranging,

Victory is secure,

For His truth unchanging

Makes the triumph sure.

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