

PRAYER'S RESOURCES

by Ray C. Stedman

What do we expect God to do when we are overwhelmed by our circumstances, when we are outnumbered and outclassed? In our series of studies on prayer from the Old Testament, this morning we will learn how to use prayer in life's emergencies. For that we will look at the life of Asa, the third king of Judah, the grandson of Solomon.

When King Asa ascended the throne, the first thing he did was very encouraging. We are told in Verse 2 of the 14th chapter of Second Chronicles:

And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He took away the foreign altars and the high places, [that is, the altars erected up on the summits of the hills] and he broke down the pillars and hewed down the Asherim [the obscene idols erected for worship by the people], and commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to keep the law and the commandment. He also took out of all the cities of Judah the high places and the incense altars. And the kingdom had rest under him. {2 Chr 14:2-5 RSV}

In other words, when King Asa ascended to the throne, the first thing he did was to lead the nation in a moral awakening. He did what many people today say is a wrong thing to do: He began to legislate righteousness.

To put this in present-day terms, what King Asa did was to clean out the adult bookstores, close the massage parlors, confiscate all the pornographic films, close the adult movie theaters, jail the drug pushers, and restore the reading of the Bible and public prayer in the schools and the courts of the land.

Now those people who say that righteousness cannot be legislated are perfectly right. Nevertheless, though King Asa did not accomplish that, it was a step in the right direction. According to the text here, the king's action produced a situation which is described, "the kingdom had rest under him." All the degrading, disturbing, defiling things were put away. But they were not eliminated. Legislation does not change people's hearts. It does, however, inhibit the manifestations of evil in crime, and public shame and disgrace. The kingdom, therefore, entered into a period of rest; a moral breathing spell was introduced by this legislation.

Then King Asa did something else which is remarkably relevant to our own day. As the account goes on to tell us, in a time of peace he greatly increased the defense budget. Verse 6:

He built fortified cities In Judah, for the land had rest. He had no war in those years, for the Lord gave him peace. And he said to Judah, "Let us build these cities, and surround them with walls and towers, gates and bars; the land is still ours, because we have sought the Lord our God; we have sought him, and he has given us peace on every side." So they built and prospered. And Asa had an army of three hundred thousand from Judah, armed with bucklers and spears, and two hundred and eighty thousand men from Benjamin, that carried shields and drew bows; and all these were mighty men of valor." {2 Chr 14:6-8 RSV}

This Southern Kingdom of Judah was made up of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Each tribe committed its young men to be trained for the army -- one tribe committed 300,000, and the other 280,000, for a total of 580,000 men. Now that is a rather remarkable number of men. This was a tiny country -- less than half the size of California -- yet its standing army in peacetime was almost as large as the army which the United States maintains in peacetime. (I called General Ray Miller of our congregation to check on that. He told me that our present standing army numbers around 700,000 men for this super power of our day.) Yet here is a tiny little country with 580,000 men under arms in a time of peace.

They would soon need them, however. Across the Red Sea, in Ethiopia, a murderous warlord named Zerah was beginning to move out on a conquest of the world, with an army of a million men. Verse 9:

Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. And Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up their lines of battle in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah. {2 Chr 14:9-10 RSV}

This enormous army came out of Africa, up through the desert and across the Sinai Peninsula. They are now right at the doorstep of Jerusalem, and King Asa went down to meet them. (The place mentioned here is south and west of Jerusalem, where the hills meet the coastal plain, near the spot where David and Goliath had their famous encounter.) King Asa's army of 580,000 men must have seemed very impressive when they were first gathered together, but now he looks out on this plain, which is covered as far as the eye can see with the tents of the soldiers who have come against him. The scouts report the size of the army, and the fact that they had three hundred armed chariots (equal to armored tanks in our day). Asa knows now that he is outnumbered almost two to one, and totally outclassed by this maneuverable band of chariots. As he sees the tremendous host arrayed against him, he feels led to pray. Verse 11:

And Asa cried to the Lord his God, "O Lord, there is none like thee to help, between the mighty and the weak. Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on thee, and in thy name we have come against this multitude. O Lord, thou art our God; let not man prevail against thee." {2 Chr 14:11 RSV}

Have you ever felt like King Asa felt? The New Testament tells us the reason these stories are in the Old Testament is that they were "written down for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come," (1 Cor. 10:11 {RSV}). They reflect experiences that we are all called to face at times. Now it's true that we're not kings with great armies facing even greater armies, but in the kingdom of our own lives we often encounter this very thing. So our feelings must be very much like King Asa's. Have you ever thought you were secure, with plenty of money in the bank, with good health and a future that looked bright and rosy, and then suddenly, Wham! Bam! -- disaster looms? You realize you are outnumbered, outgunned and outclassed, up against a circumstance too big for you to handle. I'm sure there are some here this morning facing that very kind of thing.

Now the prayer recorded here is only one verse long, but I'm sure it does not represent everything King Asa said. (You pray longer than this when you are facing an army of a million men!) This is probably a very brief outline of the points he covered in his prayer, but they are very helpful.

They are recorded, remember, for our instruction. When we are up against situations like this, this is the way to pray.

Notice that the very first thing Asa does is to recognize the unique ability of God to give help -- unique ability -- because nobody helps like God does: "O Lord, there is none like thee to help." The reason there is none like God to help, of course, is that God knows so much more about us than anyone else. And there are so many possibilities he can lay hold of to deliver us.

I don't know if all this went through Asa's mind, but he must have looked back in history and thought of the many different ways God employed to deliver his people in the past. God has more ways of delivering people than McDonald's has hamburgers! For instance,

- He could use a thunderstorm and giant hailstones, as he did once with Joshua.
- He could use the jawbone of an ass, as he did with Samson, to overcome a great army of Philistines.
- He could use torches hidden in jars, as he did with Gideon, when a great host of Midianites confronted a little band of three hundred men.
- He could use the mere rumor of another invading army, as he did in the case of King Hezekiah. On that occasion the Syrian armies under Rabshakeh surrounded Jerusalem, but a rumor spread that an Egyptian army was coming, and Rabshakeh folded his tents and disappeared overnight.

- He could use a sound in the tops of the mulberry trees, as happened once with David, when he was confronted with a Philistine host. When the Philistines heard a strange sound like marching feet, they too thought an army was coming and they took to their heels and ran.
- He could use a woman with a tent peg, as he did with Jael, who killed Sisera, the Syrian general, in the days of Deborah and Barak.

There are a thousand and one things God can do to set us free. He may have us fight the battle, but he may tell us, as he did with Asa's son, Jehoshaphat, the next king, "Go on out with your army, but there is not going to be any battle. I will deliver you without a single blow being struck." The point of this is that the very first thing King Asa recognizes is that there is none like God to help. God has a million and one resources to command. Who can tell which one he might employ.

King Asa recognizes also that part of the uniqueness of God is that it does not make any difference whether you are mighty or weak. This phrase, "between the mighty and the weak," is not a good translation. What this really means is, "whether you are mighty or weak." Human contribution to the victory is insignificant in God's eyes. He can use armies if he wants to, or he can use a single individual. I have always thrilled at that account of Jonathan, David's close friend, King Saul's son, who was out with his armor bearer one morning when the Philistines were attacking Israel. As these two came over the brow of a hill, they saw a band of about a hundred or more Philistines. Jonathan and his armor bearer began to discuss what to do, and Jonathan said, "It doesn't make any difference to God: he can deliver with many or with few. We could sneak away unnoticed, but why don't we attack them, since God is that kind of God?" They did attack, and the two of them routed the Philistines. There was a great victory in the camp of Israel, because Jonathan saw that it does not make any difference to God whether human beings have a lot to offer or nothing to offer.

Church history and the annals of missions are filled with stories of one man or one woman who went out to a tough situation trusting God. And God did mighty works through just a single person who was armed with confidence and faith in God's promises. We can think of Mother Teresa in Calcutta; of Lillian Dixon out on the island of Taiwan, with her myriad of ministries to the hurting, the poor, the blind and the weak; of Cameron Townsend, who single-handedly began translating the Bible into Indian tongues, thereby beginning the worldwide ministry of Wycliffe Bible Translators. It does not make any difference whether you yourself have anything or nothing at all. God can work. That is the point.

I get awfully tired of some of the accounts I read today which say that until we raise a billion dollars we will never be able to do anything in world evangelism. Nonsense! God can work, with many or with few, with the mighty or with the weak. It does not make any difference to him.

The second thing King Asa did was to request specific aid for the present emergency. He prayed, "Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on thee, and in thy name we have come against this multitude."

When you are confronted with a situation like that, you do not have time to pray "around the world." I once heard of a man who was invited to pray for someone who was dying in a hospital. As he stood beside the bed, this man began his prayer, "Bless the missionaries in China and India and Africa," etc. He continued in that vein until someone stopped him and said, "I'm sorry. While you were in India the patient died." It is important to come to the point in our prayers, to deal with the specific situation, as King Asa did here: "Help us, O Lord." When you get into trouble like this, ask God for help.

Now, do not tell God what to do. That is the mistake so many of us make. We have our prayer all outlined, written down even. We say, "Lord, first do this. Then when that happens, do this." God's best and most frequent answer to such a prayer is to check the square that says, "None of the above." He has his own way of working. He will not give way to us. That is what makes us get so angry at God.

But King Asa leaves it up to God: "Help us," he says. Now Asa has an army there -- he intends to fight -- but he knows that God's way of helping could be any of a thousand and one ways, so he leaves it to him.

Then, third, King Asa reminds God of a divinely established relationship: "O Lord, thou art our God." "We did not make you our God," he is saying, in effect. "You chose us. You created this relationship we have. We

are your people, therefore, if this battle is lost, you lose." Asa says, "let not man prevail against thee."

That is exactly the ground we stand on in our prayers before God. "If God be for us who can be against us?" is Paul's cry in Romans 8{:31}. The Book of Hebrews tells us we are not to love money or seek after those things, because, God says, "I have said I will never, never, ever, ever leave you nor forsake you," {cf, Heb 13:5b}. If we cry, "If God is our helper," what can man do unto us?

This is what King Asa is crying. Any defeat would be God's defeat. Asa stands upon that relationship.

That relationship gives us boldness too. We are invited to come before God and ask for help because we are sons. Again, Hebrews tells us, "Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need," {cf, Heb 4:16}. We are invited to come boldly because it is not only a possibility; God himself promises that we will obtain mercy and find grace. It is already ours to help in time of need, so we are exhorted to come boldly.

Now let us look at the result of this prayer. Verse 12:

So the Lord defeated the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.
{2 Chr 14:12 RSV}

Everything is put in that one brief sentence, but what a battle that must have been. There was an immediate and overwhelming victory; a thorough and complete rout of the enemy. We are told (Verse 13):

Asa and the people with him pursued them as far as Gerar, and the Ethiopians fell until none remained alive; for they were broken before the Lord and his army. The men of Judah carried away very much booty. And they smote all the cities round about Gerar, for the fear of the Lord was upon them. They plundered all the cities, for there was much plunder in them. And they smote the tents of those who had cattle, and carried away sheep in abundance and camels. They returned to Jerusalem. {2 Chr 14:13-15 RSV}

The Ethiopians were accompanied by great herds of animals, together with supplies, which Asa captured.

We might leave the story there were it not for a very fascinating sequel which is traced in Chapters 15 and 16 of Second Chronicles. In both of those chapters, King Asa is met by a prophet of God (a different prophet in each chapter), each of whom has a quite contrasting message for him:

First, immediately following the battle with the Ethiopians, Asa is met by the prophet Azariah, who emphasizes the human responsibility in prayer and walking closely with God. Chapter 15:

The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, and he went out to meet Asa, and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The Lord is with you, while you are with him. [A very important principle: The Lord is with you when you are with him.] If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you." {2 Chr 15:1-2 RSV}

That sounds like a contradiction of the very thing we just quoted from Hebrews, "I will never, never, ever, ever leave you nor forsake you." But we have to understand that this is the language of experience here. The reality is that God never does forsake us, but he seems to. In our experience we sense that we are alone. We do not hear his voice; we do not feel any inner witness or response, so it looks like he has forsaken us. But this is God's way of reminding us that in some sense we have forsaken him. Therefore, the reminder is, "The Lord is with you when you are with him."

Now we must always remember that none of this is possible to us without God's gracious spirit at work in our own hearts. (We will not turn to him unless he is at work in us.) But the point is that the choice of whether we walk in the power of the Spirit available to us is ours. We can choose to be with him and seek his face, and when we do he promises that he will be found by us. On the other hand, if we do not do this he will leave us, apparently; we will feel abandoned and left alone. Now God has not delivered us over entirely, but it feels that

way. This includes more than prayer. It also means meditating, seeking his face, confessing our sins, whatever. But this phrase, "If you seek him," clearly refers to prayer.

Here is a helpful quote on the ministry of prayer from the writings of Reginald E. O. White, which I would like to share with you:

Prayer lies at the heart of all experience of God. In prayer God is known and met and touched. In prayer all our knowledge about God kindles into life. Our understanding of the Scripture gains personal illumination and power. Our whole conduct and career passes consciously under the divine judgment. In prayer the soul is molded and attuned to fresh obedience and confronted with new duty. Our relationship to others is seen in a new perspective, and conscience grows tender again. In prayer vision is clarified, the horizons are broadened, the goal becomes better defined and the inner resources by which the soul lives are replenished from eternal springs of power, hopefulness and peace. Prayerless religion is mere theory.

Now look at the results of the prophecy of Azariah. Verse 8:

When Asa heard these words, the prophecy of Azariah the son of Oded, he took courage, and put away the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had taken in the hill country of Ephraim, and he repaired the altar of the Lord that was in front of the vestibule of the house of the Lord. {2 Chr 15:8 RSV}

The rest of the chapter outlines how Asa gathered the tribes together and they had a great time of cleansing and renewal before God, of the heart being changed as well as the outward behavior being adjusted. A period of some thirty years of peace was granted to them because they set their hearts to walk with God, to obey what he had said to do. God responded by leading them into this place of renewal and cleansing and blessing.

In Chapter 16 there is a different story, however. Some thirty years later, the Kingdom of Judah is now threatened by Baasha, the king of Israel (the northern tribes). Baasha comes down and begins to build up defenses in a border town, which make it obvious that he is going to attack the king of Judah. But this time Asa does not turn to the Lord.

Here is a picture of what happens when Asa relies on his own rationality. He began to play politics, and did a strange thing: He robbed the treasure of the temple of God and sent the money up to the king of Syria, on the northern side of Israel. Using the money from the temple, Asa suborned the king of Syria, that is, he bought his loyalty, and urged him to break the peace treaty between Syria and Israel and launch an attack upon Israel from the north. And it worked. The king of Syria came against the king of Israel and took some of his cities. Asa must have thought he was pretty clever. He had worked it all out himself.

But now God sends another prophet to meet him. Verse 7:

At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah, and said to him, "Because you relied on the king of Syria, and did not rely on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you." {2 Chr 16:7 RSV}

That is a remarkable revelation. It indicates that if Asa had walked with God in this circumstance (as he had when the Ethiopians came against him) God would not only have overcome the threat from Israel, but he would have delivered the king of Syria and his armies into his hands too. Because he chose to walk by his own cleverness and his own rationality, however, Asa lost this great opportunity.

Furthermore, Hanani goes on (Verse 8),

"Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with exceedingly many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on the Lord, he gave them into your hand." {2 Chr 16:8 RSV}

There follows a great verse, one I urge you to memorize:

"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show his might in behalf of those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this; for from now on you will have wars." {2 Chr 16:9 RSV}

There is one further reference to King Asa, in Verse 12:

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe; yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians. {2 Chr 16:12 RSV}

That disease led to his eventual death.

God sent the prophet to point out to Asa that his reliance upon his own wisdom and cleverness was very destructive. It meant, first, a lost opportunity for a great victory he could have had. It meant, second, a very troubled future: "You are going to have wars from now on," he was told. It also meant a very personal, painful reminder in his own body that something had gone wrong with his walk -- his feet became diseased. God speaks in these symbolic terms to us all through the Scriptures. This was a symbol to Asa that something had gone with his walk.

When Jesus gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, he took the basin but did not wash their whole bodies. (That had already been done, he said, when they believed in the word of the Lord.) He washed their feet. That was where they had gone wrong.

So these Scriptures remind us that this is the problem area. This is the subtle danger of resting on our own resources, not upon God to work and use those resources. Our ultimate trust must be in God himself.

The great question we face in our spiritual life is this: On whom or what do we count for success? Is it on man, or God, on money, or the Spirit of God, on the flesh, or the Spirit? That is how we can tell whether our solutions are God's solutions or not. What happens if it fails? Is God going to be put to the test and shamed, or are we and others whom we are counting on shamed?

Work according to God's promise.

That is where the life of faith begins.

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