



# Central Peninsula Church

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## The Strength of Weakness

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N.T. Wright says, “We live in a world full of people struggling to be, or at least to appear, strong in order not to be weak; and we follow a gospel which says that when I am weak, then I am strong. And this gospel is the only thing that brings healing.”

Last week we began looking at the life of Jehoshaphat as an example of this very principle. Overall, he was a good King; he did what was right in the sight of the Lord. But he had to learn some hard lessons through his mistakes. In his times of strength and success he often revealed his weakness in compromising by making alliances with other nations. So part of his life was an example of the weakness of strength. But this week we will see him as a more positive example; an example of the strength of weakness.

Have you discovered that secret? Have you learned that the problems you are facing, the nagging issues that just won't go away are all there for a purpose? I mean, how is it that God teaches me this lesson? How do I learn that when I am weak then I am strong? Well, I have to face something that I can't handle. Sometimes it's not a nagging problem but a huge crisis. This is what happened to Jehoshaphat.

### I. Life hits us with a crisis.

Look at 2 Chron. 20:1-2. **“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. 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).’”** Notice the writer says, **“it came about after this.”** It's significant that these armies massed and mounted their attack at a time when Jehoshaphat was on a high. This was a time of great victory for the young king. At the end of ch.19 we see that God used him to bring about a great revival. But now, with word that he was about to be invaded by three nations, he came down from his high in a hurry. Hazazon Tamar was only 15 miles from Jerusalem, less than a day's march away. That's like saying to us here in Foster City, “There are a million ruthless soldiers in Palo Alto right now and they are headed this way.” This was a daring and unexpected move. These guys would cross the Dead Sea, climb into the Judean hills, and strike Jerusalem before they knew what hit them. This crisis threatened the very existence of

God's people!

Crises come like that, don't they? They come like a thief—uninvited and unexpected. And often, they come after some life-changing decision or time of spiritual growth. You should expect that every advance on your part will be met by a counterattack from the enemy. The question is not, Will I be assaulted? but rather, When will I be assaulted? and What will I do when it happens?

### II. We are afraid, but we set our minds to seek the Lord.

Look what Jehoshaphat did. **“Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to seek help from the LORD; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the LORD”** (vv. 3-4). Notice that it says, **“Jehoshaphat was afraid...”** This, of course, was a totally normal reaction. Sometimes we think that it's wrong to be fearful, but it's not. Fear is a natural, instinctive reaction to a situation like this. I would be concerned about a person who never experienced fear. In *Moby Dick*, the chief mate in Captain Ahab's boat, said, “I will have no man in my boat who is not afraid of a whale.” There is such a thing as a healthy fear. I wouldn't want to fly with a small plane pilot who had no capacity to be afraid. Someone has said, “There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots.” In other words, there are some things a person ought to be afraid of.

The problem is not fear but our response to it. Fear is not sin, but it can lead to sin. Fear can paralyze us from doing the right thing. But fear can also lead to courage. Courage is not fearlessness, but a commitment to do what is right in the midst of our fear. Fear should lead us to do the best thing, as with Jehoshaphat. What did he do? He **“turned his attention to seek the Lord.”** And he didn't just do it by himself. He got the whole nation involved. We see what a great leader he was because he got them all on the same page; not just those in Jerusalem but those in the surrounding cities as well.

As part of seeking help from the Lord they fasted. They denied themselves food for the body so they could attend to the things of the spirit. But fasting is not just about food. The idea behind fasting is to deny yourself ANY resource other than God himself. When crisis strikes, our tendency is to start looking around for some tangible

asset we can rely on, like our bank account or just our own ingenuity. But when you fast, you're saying, "God, it is YOU and YOU alone that I'm looking to."

When crises hit, you will be afraid, but what will you do with that fear? We tend to seek help from everywhere else and make the Lord our last resort. But you have to make a choice to seek the Lord. I want you to see that there is an intentionality behind all of this. You have to get rid of all the distractions and all the normal crutches and focus your energies on him.

### **III. In our prayer, we focus on God's power and his promises.**

And much of this energy will be spent in prayer. That's the next thing we see Jehoshaphat doing. Starting in v.5 we have one of the great prayers in all the Bible.

**"Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD before the new court, 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. 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? They have lived in it, and have built You a sanctuary there for Your name, saying, "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." 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), see how they are rewarding us by coming to drive us out from Your possession which You have given us as an inheritance. 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.' All Judah was standing before the LORD, with their infants, their wives and their children"** (vv. 5–13).

I want you to notice three things about prayer at a time like this.

**A. Focus on God's power:** First of all, he started with God. He didn't start with his own need; he started by talking to God about God. He focused specifically on the fact that all power and all authority

belongs to him: **"Oh Lord, the God of our fathers, are you not God in the heavens? Are you not ruler over all the kingdoms? Power and might are in your hand. No one can stand against you."** Do you do that in your prayers? Do you start with God? Do you talk to God about God? Of course, you don't just do this for God's sake, you do it because YOU need to be reminded of who he is. He really doesn't need to be "battered up." But as you're reminded of who he is, you will find yourself more and more at a place of peace and trust. "Well, if it's really true that he is the ruler over all the kingdoms and no one can stand against him, then I just might not have to be all that afraid of these people."

**B. Focus on God's promises:** But it's not just enough to focus on his power. I mean, how do we really know that all that power is for us and not against us? So the second thing you have to focus on is his promises. That's really what Jehoshaphat is doing as he takes this little trip down memory lane. **"Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel...?"** He reminds himself that God had given this land to them by covenant; he had guaranteed their integrity in the land. And then he talks about how they built a sanctuary as a place where when things like this happened they could cry out to God and he would listen and deliver. Then he even reminds God that he didn't allow Israel to attack these same three nations when they came out of Egypt, and now look how they are paying them back! And out of all of that history he can say, **"O God, will you not judge them?"**

When you face a crisis, it's not enough to focus on his power; you have to focus on his promises. What has God promised you, a believer in Jesus Christ? Well, for one, that there is nothing that can happen to you that he will not use to accomplish his good purpose in your life; that he will take all the dissonant notes and turn them into a beautiful song. Eph. 1:11 says he always **"works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."** And according to Romans 8:39, nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that means that, according to Phil.1:6, **"he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."** In the meantime, he says **"I will never leave you, not forsake you."** I could go on and on. These and more are what Peter calls his **"precious and magnificent promises."**

### **IV. In our prayer, we acknowledge that we are powerless and clueless.**

But, once you have done that, once you have anchored yourself in God's power and his promises, you must take one more step. You must acknowledge something. I dare say this is the crux of the whole matter. If you don't get this you won't get anywhere. You must acknowledge that you are not just powerless but you are clueless. He already said in v.6 **"Power in might are in your hand..."** But now he says in v.12, **"For we are**

**powerless...**” And then he says, **“nor do we know what to do.”** In other words, we are powerless and we are clueless!

I really want to say, what kind of leader is this? They never taught this in all of the classes and seminars and conferences I've attended on leadership. You didn't learn this in business school and I didn't learn it in seminary. You want to rally the troops. You want to get them going in the right direction. You want to inspire commitment to a cause. “Okay, Mr. Leader, here is what you do. You go before your people and say, ‘We are powerless and we are clueless.’” I've never heard that one. But that's what Jehoshaphat did, and that's what we must do.

But that's not all. We must take it one more step. It's not just, “We are powerless and we don't know what to do” but he also says, **“our eyes are on you.”** And then with their eyes on him they stand before him and wait. We say, “Don't just stand there, do something.” Well, maybe what we should say is, “Don't just do something, stand there!” Admit that you are powerless and that you haven't a clue what to do but stand there with your eyes on him.

A father watches through the kitchen window as his little boy attempts to lift a large rock out of his sandbox. The boy is frustrated as he wrestles with the heavy object because he can't get enough leverage to lift it over the side. Finally, the boy gives up and sits down on the edge of the sandbox with his head in his hands.

The father goes outside and asks, “What's wrong? Can't you lift the rock out?”

The boy says, “No, sir. I can't do it.”

His dad asks, “Have you used all the strength available to you?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy replies.

“No you haven't,” the father says. “You haven't looked up to me or asked me to help you.”

It's really such a simple truth but unfortunately one that we resist at every turn. The world and our own flesh tells us, “You can do it. You can do it. You can. You can.” And we keep trying. But sooner or later, if we're honest, we will admit that we can't do it. And if we can just take our head out of our hands long enough to lift our eyes to our see our heavenly Father, and stand there waiting for him, he will help us.

Let me just add something to this. Whether we know it or not, we're ALWAYS weak. Even when we're not in a crisis. Even when life is smooth sailing, whatever strength we have comes from God. There will be times when you will feel strong, but you are always needy, always inadequate, always dependent on God. One of the most startling statements Jesus ever made was an insistence that even he was completely dependent on the Father. He said in John 5:30, **“The Son can do nothing of himself.”** Imagine HIM saying such a thing. This is Jesus. This is God in the flesh! But when Jesus became a man in what we call the incarnation, he took on our weakness. He had to rely on

his Father at every moment. That was the secret of his strength—all the time. And in this he was a model for us of how God designed us to live.

## V. In our faith, we stand and believe his word.

When we learn that lesson, we really do experience his power. That's what happened with Jehoshaphat. As they were standing before the Lord, someone spoke up from the crowd. The Spirit of the Lord came on this guy named Jahaziel and look what he said in v.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. 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. 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” (vv. 15–17).**

And then in vv.18-19 Jehoshaphat and all of Judah begin to have a praise and worship service right there. I guess they believed him.

I want you to notice something here. God is speaking to his people through this prophet. He tells them flat out that the battle was the Lord's. They didn't have to fight. He would do the fighting for them. But I want you to notice that they did have to do something. What did they have to do? Verse 16 says they had to **“go down against them.”** And then v.17 says they would need to **“station themselves, stand and see the salvation of the Lord.”** Sometimes we think that if we know we are powerless and clueless and we have our eyes on the Lord that we don't have to do anything. But that's not true; we have to take our stand.

It reminds of how in his letter to the Ephesians Paul is addressing them about spiritual warfare. Over and over again he tells them to stand. Listen to what he says, **“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” (Eph.6:10-13 NIV).**

How many times is the word “stand” used there? This idea of “standing” is a mental posture as much as a

physical posture. It's a matter of standing our ground and waiting to see what God will do. We can't retreat into self-pity. We can't flee towards self-indulgent devices that numb our fear. We stand. And what do we stand on? We stand on the word of God. We put our trust in God's word.

Look what happened the next morning. **"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'"** (v. 20). It almost seems that their fears returned, and so Jehoshaphat reminds them to trust in the Lord and trust in his prophets. Why should they trust in his prophets? Because the prophets spoke the word of God and the word of God said God would deliver them.

Whatever battle you're facing, you must realize that you are powerless and you are clueless. You must put your eyes on him. But this is not a passive thing. This is taking your stand on the word of God. This is not letting the enemy convince you that God has somehow gone AWOL or you have messed up one too many times and God is done with you.

And when they did that, God showed up. Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah marched out to face their foes. The band struck up a tune and they all began to sing an old song, **"Give thanks to the Lord, for his lovingkindness is everlasting."** And when they came to the final hill and looked down into the valley, vv.22-24 says they just saw **"corpses lying on the ground"** because **"the Lord had set ambushes against the sons of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir...so they were routed."** Their enemies were DOA and Jehoshaphat led his people back to Jerusalem with the spoils of war.

## CONCLUSION

How do we experience strength in weakness? First, we admit we're afraid, but we set our minds to seek the Lord. And then we pray. In our prayer, we focus on God's person and his promises, and we confess that we're powerless and clueless. But we don't just stay there; we put our eyes on God. In faith we take our stand on the word of God. He will do the rest. He will either do away with our enemies or give us the grace to continue to stand against them. Whether it is here on earth or in heaven above he will deliver us from evil and surprise us with joy. The valley we have dreaded will become the valley of blessing.

The prophet Joel, when speaking about the coming of the Lord, calls the place of final conflict **"the Valley of Jehoshaphat"** (Joel 3:2,12). Jehoshaphat's victory in his day was symbolic of all God's victories and will find its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus returns in glory. In the meantime every dark and dangerous valley can be for you the Valley of Jehoshaphat—the place where you see his strength in your weakness.