

Southport Presbyterian Church
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May 17, 2009

Praise: A Priority in Prayer
2 Chronicles 20:20-22

“Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.” After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat 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.’

As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.”
(2 Chronicles 20:20-22, NIV)

The context for our Scripture reading for today involves King Jehoshaphat, King of Judah being told the following: **“...‘A vast army is coming against you from Edom... (2 Chronicles 20:2, NIV)** And this was King Jehoshaphat’s response: **“Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD...Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD...and said:**

‘O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you.’” (2 Chronicles 20:3-6, NIV) And he continued to pray a beautiful prayer to God. At the end of that prayer, we read of this response from God: **“Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel...a Levite...as he stood in the assembly.”**

He prophesied, **“ ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's...You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.’”** (2 Chronicles 20:14-17, NIV) The response to this prophetic assurance by King Jehoshaphat and the people was worship and praise in verses 18 and 19 of 2 Chronicles 20.

This is all that precedes our Scripture passage for today.

Note that the first thing King Jehoshaphat did when he got the news about the vast army, and later as they went out to meet the army, is that he praised God. Hear again 2 Chronicles 20:6 which he spoke after he got the bad news: **“‘O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you.’”** (2 Chronicles 20:6, NIV) And again as the

army marched out, he had a group of men go before the army praising God by saying, **“Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.” (2 Corinthians 20:21, NIV)**

Praising God was not an afterthought for King Jehoshaphat. It came to him at the beginning not at the end of prayer or at the end of a crisis. Even though he did make some mistakes in his reign as king, the Bible says in 2 Chronicles 20:32: **“He walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.” (2 Chronicles 20:32, NIV)** As one who did what is right in the eyes of the Lord, King Jehoshaphat knew the importance and necessity of praise in prayer to God.

Sometimes when we think of the word “prayer,” we usually associate it with one aspect of prayer such as praying for someone or for a situation or for ourselves—that is, intercession or supplication. While these are important dimensions of prayer, they are only two dimensions of it. Praise is another critical dimension which I believe is too easily forgotten. We are quick to fall to our knees or bow our heads to intercede or ask for something and to do so even for a long time. However, I am not so sure we are so quick to stop and praise God immediately or for a similar length of time.

Paul writes in **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” (NIV)** The “this” refers not to the circumstances but rather to the act of “giving thanks in all circumstances.” It is God’s will for us to give thanks—to have thankful hearts in all situations and circumstances.

A policy I started over ten years ago for mission trips that I lead is for team members to gather a group of people to pray for them a month before the trip and during the trip, and then to commit to praise God for thirty days following the trip for how He blessed it. If we spend a month praying to God for something, why should we not then spend a month praising Him and thanking Him for it? I believe that the reason we have seen some great movements of God on mission trips, among the people we work with and in the hearts and lives of the team members, is because of the added element of concentrated praise. In fact, I would not be surprised if one of the reasons we have over 30 people going on the upcoming Brazil mission trip—the largest such team ever even during an economic recession—is a result of praising God over the years for His blessings on mission trips to Brazil.

I was delighted to see recently where OMS publicly praised God in a special way in proclaiming not just to their supporters but to the world of God’s blessings—the incredible response to the Gospel—on their Every Community for Christ ministry in the nations they serve. Listen to this: “In 2008, by God’s grace, 458 Every Community for Christ teams serving in 43 countries on 5 continents helped 269,270 people repent of their sins and invite Christ to be their Lord and Savior. There were 12,537 people trained to lead local worshiping groups and churches, 39,800 people followed Christ in baptism and 2,426 new churches were established.” (“OMS International Announces Outstanding Growth in Its Every Community for Christ Church-Planting Ministry”) Wow! Praise God for such an incredible response to this OMS ministry!

We need in our own prayer life to develop praise as a natural response to whatever God does in response to our prayers or for any of His blessings.

Second, note that while Jehoshaphat could have chosen to respond to this crisis in fear or by complaining, he chose neither. Instead he chose to praise God even in the midst of an overwhelming enemy, even in the midst of fearful circumstances!

Brothers and sisters, we all have a choice in how we respond to circumstances in our lives. If we choose to be fearful or if we choose to complain, neither one will improve our circumstances nor make us feel any better or make others feel better. In fact Paul says in **Philippians 2:14-15: “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.” (NIV)**

I believe that one of the reasons Paul calls on us not to complain in this verse and says it is God’s will in **1 Thessalonians 5:18** for us to give thanks in all circumstances is because to do so is part of our Christian witness. The world expects to hear people complain or be afraid or have any number of negative responses. But they certainly don’t expect to hear us still being grateful for what we do have or been given even when the rest of life is not going that well. When we do that, we shine like stars in the universe. They don’t expect to hear what the prophet Habakkuk writes in **Habakkuk 3:17-18: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” (NIV)** They don’t expect praise and joy in the midst of bad situations.

Now this doesn’t mean we can’t lament as the psalmists do about bad circumstances or that we deny those problems and live in a Pollyanna world of unreality. No, we still feel the pain, the fear, the less than ideal circumstances. But our focus does not become them. It remains on God and doing so by praising Him for who He is, as Jehoshaphat did in 2 Chronicles 20:5.

When people have hearts of gratitude to God instead of bitterness, the world takes notice and asks why? Or how? And we can tell them about Jesus and the joy He brings to us because of He Himself, not our circumstances.

And finally, we read in **2 Chronicles 20:22: “As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.” (NIV)** Victory was achieved by God, and He did it as His people praised Him. In their book, *The Best Is Yet Ahead*, Becky Wagner Systema and Chuck O. Pierce wrote: “There is, perhaps, no stronger weapon of warfare than praise and worship to the Lord. Satan hates our worship to God for many reasons. For one, he is jealous of our worship. He longs to obtain it for himself through whatever means he can. For another, he knows that the weapon of worship is strong and effective.” [See **Psalm 149:5-9**] (Chuck Pierce, *The Worship Warrior*, pp. 164)

Another Christian, Cindy Jacob writes: “When we praise God, He inhabits or enters our praises, and His power overwhelms the power of the enemy. He is a mighty God, and Satan cannot match His strength. Light will dispel the darkness through God’s entering into our praise. Through praise, the Lord Himself begins to do warfare on our behalf to silence our enemy...” (Chuck Pierce, *The Worship Warrior*, pp. 165)

God fought for Judah and won the battle as His people praised Him. You see, this battle was more even than a physical battle or war. It was also a spiritual war. Indeed one Christian scholar writes, “by praising God in song in the face of battle,” the people demonstrated the strength and power of faith in God. (*Life in the Spirit Study Bible*, p. 636)

This weekend, just as last year, we are handing out the Global Day of Prayer booklets at the end of each service. They are to be used from Thursday, May 21, Ascension Day, the day Jesus ascended to heaven, to Sunday, May 31, Pentecost Sunday, the day the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, the birthday of the Christian church. Each day there is a prayer emphasis or focus for you as an individual or as a family or small group to pray. On the weekend of Pentecost Sunday, we as a church will join with Christians around the world in praying together the same prayer in each of our worship services.

Now I want to put an added twist to this for this year. Each day I want you to praise God for something special about our state, Indiana. The reason I am asking this is that our state often gets some bad press by the media, by people in other states, even by some fellow Hoosiers. This really struck me when I read both the headlines and the accompanying article in *The Indianapolis Star* on Wednesday, April 22, Earth Day. The title: “Reams of data, 1 conclusion for Indiana: At the bottom” and was about how “Indiana ranks near the bottom in environmental issues.” Now I realize our state, along with many other states, has work to do concerning the environment and other issues. But when I read the article, it made me feel like no one would ever want to come to Indiana for anything let alone to live here. I really felt it was unfair to give such a negative view of our great state in that article.

So we need to praise God for the blessings we do have by living in Indiana, and I am going to give you some blessings for you to think about to get you started. And I believe if we keep this going even beyond May 31st, we will see some very positive things happen in our state.

So here are positive things about Indiana for which we should praise God:

For the size state we are, the impact we are making on the rest of our nation and world is far greater than many states larger than we are. Did you know:

Indiana University is among the top five universities that produce presidential cabinet members. “Indiana boasts four alumni in cabinet positions since 2001. A closer look at their [IU’s] highly ranked Business (Number 15 overall, #2 for Entrepreneurship) and Management Program reveals that IU’s innovative curriculum based on applicable, “real-world” knowledge builds connections that lead to political leadership.” (Dr. Kat Cohen, “Top 5 Schools to Attend to Be in the President’s Cabinet”, January 14, 2009)

The deputy director of the FBI, the highest nonpolitically appointed position in the agency is John Distol, a native of Anderson, Indiana and graduate of Anderson University and the Indiana University School of Law at Indianapolis. He is a committed Christian and is involved with the counter terrorism division of the FBI.

“To date, 22 Purdue alumni have been chosen for space flight, including Neil A. Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, and Eugene A. Cernan, the last man to do so...Purdue and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have had more alumni chosen for space flight than any other non-military institution...Purdue alumni have flown on approximately 37 percent of all manned U. S. space flights...Thirty nine flights of the space shuttle have had Purdue alumni as part of the crews.” (“Purdue Astronauts,” Purdue University Web site) Astronaut Gus Grissom was from Mitchell, Indiana.

We could go on and list other notable contributions from Indiana to the nation in politics, movies, art, sports, etc.

But we need to also note some other special things about Indiana.

We have the nicest state parks inns in the U.S. It is a delight to visit our state parks and stay in such wonderful accommodations.

We have one of the best family oriented amusement parks in the country with the world’s largest water slide at Holiday World in Santa Claus, Indiana. You truly feel like you are a guest there, not a customer. You will also notice that there is a Christian atmosphere about the place such as Christian hymns played in the Thanksgiving area, a nativity scene with Christmas hymns played and even Santa Claus telling children to be sure and say their prayers each night.

We have one of the easiest cities to get around in, Indianapolis, home of the NFL World Champions Indianapolis Colts, the Indiana Pacers, the Indianapolis Indians, the Ice, Indy 500, the Brickyard, etc. and an excellent symphony, the world’s largest children’s museum, more monuments than any other city outside of Washington, D.C., plus a lot of other neat museums, attractions, stadiums, etc. It doesn’t cost \$25- \$50 to park downtown, and it doesn’t even take you 45 minutes to an hour to drive downtown from the suburbs, like it would from New Jersey to Manhattan in New York City, to see the events and places as is the case in other large cities in the U. S., our son John told me.

But what makes Indiana a wonderful state more than anything else are her people. We are blessed to have a strong Christian atmosphere in this state. We have more churches per square mile than any other state. We have great Christian colleges and other institutions of higher learning. We are home to several Christian mission agencies and organizations such as OMS International, John 17 Ministries, WGM and Overseas Council on Theological Education.

Indiana is known for her friendly people who make strangers feel welcomed and let you in a line of traffic (which is often unheard of in other areas of our nation).

So, when you pray during the period between Ascension Day and Pentecost, praise God for whatever blessings He brings to your mind about our great state of Indiana. And do it beyond Pentecost. I believe God has His hand on Indiana, and we need to praise Him for the gifts He has given us all by living in this wonderful state.

Praising God is an important priority in prayer, and it is critical in spiritual warfare. In the Book of Revelation, chapter 19, while warfare occurs on earth, worship and praise goes on in heaven. We read of this praise to God in **Revelation 19:6-7: “Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.’” (NIV)**

Max Lucado describes beautifully what happens in that war on earth while praise and worship ring out in Heaven. He writes: “In the Book of Revelation... we, the soldiers are privileged a glimpse into the final battlefield. All hell breaks loose as all heaven comes forth. The two collide in the ultimate battle of good and evil. Left standing amidst the smoke and thunder is the Son of God. Jesus, born in a manger—now triumphant over Satan...

“And we, the soldiers are assured of victory. Let us march.” (Max Lucado, *Everyday Blessings*, p.135)

As we face whatever spiritual battles lie ahead for us as followers of Jesus, like King Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah, let us go forth with praise to God on our lips and in our hearts. For we, too, like Jehoshaphat are assured of victory. So, let us march.

Amen.