

Earthy Spirituality Part 3

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Finding God in Desperate Places

2 Chronicles 20:1-23

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Let me begin this message a little differently today. I'll start by telling you about some exciting changes that we're headed into as a church family. Then I want to share with you with the powerful, Holy Spirit driven dynamic behind these changes.

First, let me introduce some of the upcoming changes. For the months of July and August we'll have two different worship services. The morning service will look like a typical Three Village Church service – except that we want children to be more involved in worship and so we can all worship together as one family of God. The evening service will look very different from the morning service. We're calling it "Porch and Altar." Do you remember when people used to relax and be together on their porch? I've been on Long Island six years and I love the porches around here, but I can't recall seeing even one person sitting on a porch. We want to recapture a "porch-like" experience on Sunday nights. Come from the beach. Come in your shorts and sandals. Invite your friends and just be together. Porches are for intimacy. But the "altar" part is also important. An altar is a holy place to meet an awesome and merciful God. Altars are for reverence. Porch and Altar. Intimacy and Reverence. We'll conclude each of these "Porch and Altar" services with a time of fun and fellowship for all ages. Again, we want to grow and serve together as whole families and as one whole family of God.

Then, starting on September 9th, we'll begin our new worship schedule. The two morning worship services will look the same, but the big difference is this: we're placing a time for Sunday School and adult classes in between the two services. So it will look like this: (1) Service 1; (2) Sunday School for our kids and adult classes for the rest of us; (3) Service 2. Why are we doing this? Again, we want to grow and serve together as the family of God. We've found a horrible trend in our church life: our kids grow up, never attend worship services and when they turn 18 and they drop off the faith map we scratch our heads and ask, "Gee, how come they aren't here?" The leaders of this church are putting a stake in the ground and saying, "We can't let this happen anymore. Our kids' spiritual lives are worth fighting for." So this change will help families worship together as we become one family of God. And by putting adult classes in the middle we're taking another stand: as adults, we need to grow up too. Becoming more like Jesus is a lifelong journey and I need help. One hour a week isn't enough. We need to grow – and we need to do it together as men and women, single and married, young and old, rookie and veteran Christians. It's so important that we're willing to change our entire Sunday morning schedule to see it happen. All of these changes converge into one simple, clear focus for the next year: growing and serving together. Just four words: growing and serving together. If that's all we accomplish in next year we'll be successful.

You'll be hearing much more about the specifics, but for now let's explore the spiritual dynamic behind these changes. Turn to 2 Chronicles chapter 20. **(Read Chapter).**

This is a wonderful example of Hebrew storytelling in its sheer brilliance. I love the story not just for its brilliance but for its relevance to my life and our lives. If you were to ask me, “How long did it take you to write this morning’s message?” I would say, “O, about 47 years, but primarily the last year.” I’ve been living this story. Like Jehoshaphat, I’ve been to desperate places.

It actually begins back in chapter 17 as a man named Jehoshaphat became king about 850 years before Jesus was born. If you turn in your Bibles back to chapter 17 where this story begins you’ll find phrases like (verse 3) “the Lord was with Jehoshaphat” and (verse 5) “The Lord established the kingdom under his control” and (verse 10) “The fear of the Lord fell on all the kingdoms of the lands ... so that they did not make war with Jehoshaphat.” They enjoyed peace and stability because God kept war and trouble away from them. God protected them, but all of this came from the sovereign hand of God. Now as we enter into chapter 20 we read, “After this, the Moabites and the Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to make war on Jehoshaphat. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, ‘A vast army is coming against you from Edom ...’ This is a huge problem. King Jehoshaphat and his people could have defeated one army at a time, but the combined forces of a three-fold military alliance will destroy them. In verse 2 we learn that it’s a “vast army” and it’s already at En Gedi – or just 25 miles southeast of the capital city of Jerusalem. They are organized, strong and united.

Notice: in chapter 17 God shielded his people from war and trials; now God is allowing this invasion, but all the time God is in control. Do you realize that that’s true for our lives as well? God is big enough to keep trials and trauma and tears out of your life –and sometimes in his sovereign hand He protects us. But sometimes in his equally sovereign and good hand He allows trials and tears to come into our lives. This is a biblical truth which has become so unbelievably real to me. During some of the darkest times in my life, I’ve told God, “I don’t like this and I want it to end – NOW! – but, Father, I will never, ever go back to the person I was before this trial that you’ve allowed into my life.”

How does Jehoshaphat respond to the overwhelming force arrayed against him? First, he’s alarmed (verse 3). He’s scared out of his wits and he should be. At this point, many of us would lose heart, crawl under a rock, run away, throw up our hands and give up. But here’s what I love about Jehoshaphat: he believes that some things are worth fighting for so he will not lose heart. There is a scene in the movie *Braveheart* when the father of Robert the Bruce, the leader of the Scottish people, tries to manipulate his son into turning against his own people. A vast horde of English soldiers are threatening and bullying the Scottish people and only William Wallace will stand up to them. Robert’s father wants him to give up too, give in to the English and get what he can. “All men betray,” he whispers insidiously into his son’s ear, “all men lose heart.” To which Robert shouts back, “I don’t want to lose heart! I want to believe like Wallace does. I will never be on the wrong side again.” It’s a defining point in his life – and the life of his people. So Jehoshaphat is alarmed and afraid and overwhelmed and he really has no solutions, but he will not lose heart because he does have one more option: turn up and face the Lord. So we read in verse 3 that he prays. This is the defining moment of his life – and the life of his people.

So we read in verse 4 – “The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town to seek him. Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly ...” This verse will introduce us to a key word that appears in this passage over and over again: seek. They seek the Lord – and they do it together, as a community. They run hard after God. They quit dabbling in their spiritual lives; they quit playing games with God; and instead they decide that their relationship with God is something worth pursuing. Seeking God doesn’t just happen; we have to fight for it – but it’s worth it. For the people of God this active seeking the Lord is never just for themselves. They were called by God to be a blessing to the world.

Now notice how Jehoshaphat prays because this isn’t your typical nice Christian prayer. This is raw, gutsy, authentic prayer from the heart. If you look at your Bible, you’ll notice that it’s divided into two neat sections. The first section (verses 6-9) basically reminds God who he is and what he’s done for them in the past. I love verse 6 (read). Remember that a vast horde is coming against him and his people; he’s way over his head and his heart is melting within him. Perhaps you feel that way this morning about something – your family problems, or health problems, or spiritual life. But as his heart melts and his knees shake with fear, Jehoshaphat gets in touch with and grabs on to the sovereign power of God. When everything else is crumbling, he finds that God is solid and true. Verses 7-9 remind God of what God has done. And then in verse 10 the prayer shifts to the present situation and distress. He prays, “Look, God, we’re struggling here. There’s a horde of people trying to kill us and I don’t know what you’re up to so could you give us a hand?”

In human terms this prayer would be like my 19 year old son Matt calling me from Kenya (where he spent the last semester) and saying, “Dad, you know you’ve always been there for me and you’ve always been reliable and you’ve always told me to come to you if I have any problems and you’ve always promised to help me out. So, dad, now I’m really struggling. I’m out of money and I need to finish the semester. And these bullies down the hall are threatening to beat me senseless and I’m scared and I don’t know what to do so I’m taking you up on your promise. So won’t you do something to help?”

I love this prayer because it’s so utterly desperate. Some people have the assumption that as you grow in faith your prayers will become more calm, more respectable and less desperate and urgent. That’s not true. The best prayers are desperate prayers. God would rather have a scorching hot angry, urgent groan than a nice, articulate, respectable but ice-cold prayer. Notice the end of this prayer in verse 12: “For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” Did you hear that? This is not the way for a respectable king or pastor or elder board to pray. Kings pray like this, “Well, folks, things are spiraling out of control, but don’t worry, we’ve been looking into the situation, we have our best people working on it, and we’ll determine a plan for certain success. Just trust us: we’re from the government (or Minnesota or Three Village Church) and we’re here to help you.”

Instead, King Jehoshaphat stands up before everyone and basically says, “Okay, gang, I’m the king but I have no idea what to do. I’m totally lost and confused. Nothing is working right. We have no power to face this and we do not know what to do.” But from this desperate place, he also knows how to pray these simple words: “But our eyes are upon you.” In other words, “We are totally lost, but Sovereign God, merciful God, God of the promises, God of faithfulness, we’re looking to you to get us through this. We’re clinging fiercely to you and to your mercy and your power.”

Let me be really honest: that’s the last place I want to be – in a desperate place. Most of us would rather keep running away from our helplessness and weakness and spiritual poverty. But then we hit a wall (and we always will eventually) and we say, “I can’t get over it; I can’t get around it. I can’t shake this addiction. I can’t fix my marriage. I can’t defeat death. I can’t find love. I can’t heal the sadness and loneliness in my heart. I can’t right the world’s wrongs by fighting injustice and racism and poverty because there’s selfishness in my heart. I can’t get over my anger or my fear.” And like Jehoshaphat we’re forced to cry out to God, “We have no power to face this ... We do not know what to do.”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I want you to know that the leaders of this church have been to desperation. But rather than speak for all the leaders, let me just speak for myself. About a year ago – as I look back on my prayer journal – I basically told God one thing over and over again: “I have no idea what to do. God, I’ve used up my bag of tricks.” That’s not what we want to hear from our spiritual leaders but I’m going to tell you anyway. I read this week that when God wants to do something good, he chooses a difficulty. When God wants to do something incredible, He chooses an impossibility. I’m starting to like impossibilities. I’m starting to like desperate places. (Solzhenitsyn quote).

In this desperate place, what’s the first thing you’re supposed to do? Here’s what they did in verse 13 – “All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord.” We gather together. We say to each other, “I’m so tired of slogging through life by myself. I need you. We need each other so let’s come to God together.” So all ages, all generations, both genders and for us – all nations and races and ethnic groups – stand together as one body in Christ. Brothers and sisters, that’s exactly one of the most powerful lessons God has been teaching us as a church family: just stand *together* before the Lord. We need you here. You matter to God and you matter to this spiritual community.

Now here’s the most important lesson in this story for us: when we’re desperate, when we’re lost and confused, when we’re at wits end and we cry out to God, the God of power and mercy and truth, when we do it as a whole community, crazy and wild and good stuff happens because God unleashes his power in and through his people. We become a blessing to the world. If you read the rest of this passage you’ll notice a strange and wonderful dynamic: as they come to this desperate place and cry out to the Lord, there is a burst of power, worship, praise, artistry, music and song. From their admission of weakness, they discover untapped wells of courage and creativity. It all comes pouring

out of them. That's the next thing that God always does for his people: God unleashes power and creativity and praise and music and song from within this body to bless the world around us. Desperate places can do that for us because we finally give God room to work. I have a strong hunch that's why God allowed this invasion in the first place.

This unleashing begins in verse 14 – “Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahazeil ...” As the community gathers together and stands before the Lord, the Holy Spirit comes upon one individual. That's what God always does when we give up our gimmicks and tricks and rely on Him. There is a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit that goes way beyond our insight and our planning and our cleverness and our abilities. Notice the key words in this Spirit-inspired prophecy in verse 15 and 17 (“Do not be afraid or discouraged ... For the battle is not yours, but the Lord's ... You will not have to fight this battle ... Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged.”

And then what do they do next? They worship. They sing at the top of their lungs. And they march into battle with the worship team upfront leading the charge (see verse 21). Jehoshaphat appoints his frontline troops but they aren't the brutal warriors; it's the choir, it's Bart Patton with his guitar and the whole worship team. They lead the charge. As a military strategy, I believe this is unheard of in the history of warfare. But notice verse 22 – as they begin to sing, God starts the battle, and the enemies, the ruthless alliance that was determined to destroy God's people, is thrown into confusion as the people of God gather together – young and old, men and women, children and parents, married and single – confess their desperation, cry out to God and lift up one voice of worship. The three armies turn against each other and the battle is over before it even starts.

What does this mean for us? This ancient story tells the story of how Christians live. We begin our journey with Christ through desperation. Christians call this salvation. What does that mean? It means we come to the end of fixing ourselves, saving ourselves, carrying and atoning for our own sins. It's as if we've been carrying this huge burden on our backs saying to God and ourselves and everyone else, “I can handle it. I can carry it. It's mine; there is no other way.” So we run, and walk and eventually trudge through life with the pack on our shoulders. Every once in a while we hear a voice whisper, “There is a better way. Let go. Put it down.” But we keep going, slogging forward, saying, “No, I have to do it. I have to figure it out. I can't stop or I'll die. I have to pay for my sins.” But then for many of us here, we met Jesus face to face and heard him say, “I already paid for this. I already bore this. Take your bag of sins, your worries, your pride, the hurts you've done to others and the hurts that have been done to you and lay it down. I want to set you free – free to serve me and others in my name ...”

Then we commit this tragic error: we think we're done for all time. No, we keep coming back to this desperate place – only now we do it together, as a community. Like Jehoshaphat we say, ““For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” And God unleashes the power of the Holy Spirit on the church. God pours out gifts of creativity and courage in and through his people. And then they worship. Why? So that His people will be a blessing on the earth.