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How to Pray When Hope Is Gone

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Series: Living Legends - Part 3

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How to Pray When Hope is Gone

Heavenly Father,

We bow in awe at who You are, King of kings, Lord of lords, Creator, Sustainer, tender Father, perfect Judge, Savior and Deliverer. We worship You in the beauty of Your holiness, and as inadequate as it may be, we come to say thank You for who You are, for what You have done, for what You have given us through Your Word and for what You have promised us in eternity yet to come. We worship You. We praise You. We thank You.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

By now I trust you can sense the atmosphere. Imagine a scenario where the President of the United States calls the whole nation together on television and tells us to fast and pray because he just received word on the “Red Telephone” (or whatever he gets word on), that our enemies are heading our way with seven nuclear bombs, and we have no possible way to defend against them. Imagine it! (In 2021, Israel lives with this threat every day.)

Not many of us are likely to go out and play golf or go fishing or even go about our daily chores as though nothing was happening. We’re thinking of our children not getting an opportunity to grow up, or at least not growing up free from enemy oppression. We’re thinking of the years we’ve invested in getting where we are and what we have, only to face the prospect that we will lose it all in moments.

The news commentators, who always have a field day with the slightest happening of national significance, are about to go into orbit, deepening the sense of panic and hopelessness that surrounds us. Imagine the story we are about to read in that light, and you will begin to sense how charged the atmosphere must have been that day in Jerusalem when Jehoshaphat called the whole nation of Judah to its knees

because they were about to be murdered, or at best, taken captive by the ruthless enemies who surrounded them. And these were the very enemies they had passed by without fighting a few years before, because God had forbidden them to take them on.

Try to picture it in your mind. Jehoshaphat has just called the nation to repentance, appointed spiritual leaders throughout the land, and warned them of all the dangers of violating Scriptural principles, when suddenly the “hot line” glows with devastating news. It might as well have been nuclear bombs. A ferocious army comprised of Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites has banded together to wipe out Judah, and they are camped in the wilderness on the western edge of the Salt Sea just waiting to close in for the kill. In all likelihood, women and children will be murdered or taken captive. Homes will be burned, belongings confiscated, the temple destroyed, men ruthlessly killed the way a hunter delights in killing his prey. And here they are, virtually helpless, just waiting for the echo of hoofbeats and the sound of trumpets that herald the coming of their captors.

Jehoshaphat is afraid. Make no mistake about that. The Scripture records it. *But his fear is a reaction, not a response.* Given a moment to respond, immediately he turns his attention to seek the Lord and he calls the whole nation together and tells them to fast and pray. Then he gathers them all, from near and from far, in the court of the temple in Jerusalem, and as the curtain rises on today’s story, Jehoshaphat is standing before the people about to speak the most important words of his life. You and I expect him to address them about the urgency of the hour, and the need to “gird up the loins of their faith” and fight to the finish—sort of a Davy Crockett kind of speech. This is the kind of occasion that spawns rhetoric from the lips of leaders. Let’s see what our living legend does now as this solemn, hushed crowd looks to God’s man for the trumpet call to battle. It is found in II Chronicles 20:5-13, and it reads like this,

Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD before the new court,

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and he said, "O LORD, the God of our fathers, art Thou not God in the heavens? And art Thou not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Thy hand so that no one can stand against Thee.

Didst Thou not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Thy people Israel, and give it to the descendants of Abraham Thy friend forever?

And they lived in it, and have built Thee a sanctuary there for Thy name, saying,

'Should evil come upon us, the sword, or judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before Thee (for Thy name is in this house) and cry to Thee in our distress, and Thou wilt hear and deliver us.'

"And now behold, the sons of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom Thou didst not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt (they turned aside from them and did not destroy them),

behold how they are rewarding us, by coming to drive us out from Thy possession which Thou hast given us as an inheritance.

"O our God, wilt Thou 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 Thee."

And all Judah was standing before the LORD, with their infants, their wives, and their children.

(II Chronicles 20:5-13 NASB)

No moment in the history of the Jewish people was of more significance than this. Here is the remnant who had been faithful, the nation of Judah, at a time of great national revival, when the air is literally aflame with a consciousness of Jehovah God. Now we have a leader who is walking with God, who is leading in the ways of God, and peace has become the byword from one end of the territory to the other. Suddenly the sky is falling. The enemy is not only coming, it's here, and not only do they have a slight edge militarily, it is a hands-down massacre. No contest. Our hero of the hour calls every man, woman and child in the country to Jerusalem, and there he gives the clarion call to battle.

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Instead of speaking, he prays. Instead of talking to them, he lets them listen while he talks to God. And as he prays, he engraves on the granite of the Word of God, a living illustration of how to pray when hope is gone. We are here today to listen carefully and to look carefully at the principles that evolve from his conversation with God when, for all practical purposes, it is all over.

The title and the outline for today's lesson is: How to Pray when Hope is Gone (II Chronicles 20).

I- The Person (II Chronicles 20:6-9)

His Worth (verse 6)

His Works and His Word (verse 7-9)

II- The Provision (II Chronicles 20:10-12)

The Problem and the Plea (verse 10-12)

The Peace (verse 13)

I- THE PERSON

Now try to picture yourself in the midst of the worst crisis of your life, and just imagine your response. Think back to our last lesson and the kinds of emergencies that simply boggle our minds. The doorbell rings, and it's bad news. The doctor calls, and it's bad news. The children call, and it's bad news. From out of nowhere there comes, like a bolt of lightning on a stormy night, words you never thought you would hear, and suddenly, who you really are becomes apparent. Not who you pretend to be, but who you really are.

And even if, on those occasions, our first response is to pray, and sometimes it is, how seldom do we pray as Jehoshaphat did. So often, when we pray, we pray, "Lord, help! The sky is falling! What's happening? Lord, how could this happen to me?" Suddenly, we are proud deep inside though, because when life got tough, we prayed. Or did we? What is prayer, anyway? Here is one definition:

Prayer: man's opportunity to behold the character of God and surrender to the sovereignty of God while appropriating the power of God to do the will of God.

Prayer isn't screaming at God to deliver you from a

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problem, the way a small child screams at his daddy because his tricycle is stuck in the mud. Prayer is beholding the nature of God until you have God's perspective of the problem. Then you can give God the problem, so you can ultimately give God the glory.

What most of us call prayer can best be summarized as religious complaining; letting God know (in proper tones, of course), just how difficult life is, and asking Him to release the valve a little and give us a break. That's what we call prayer. But that isn't how Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. And that isn't how Paul prayed in prison. And that isn't how Stephen prayed as they crushed him to death with stones. These men worshiped amidst their crises, and as they worshiped, they surrendered to the will of God, and appropriated the strength of God to stand against whatever God allowed. They prayed!

Jehoshaphat knew how to pray, beloved. He knew how to reach up and touch the heart of God, and how to crawl up into the arms of God, until he could view the cosmic conflict that engulfed him from the vantage point of eternity, even while the bullets were flying, and the cannons were thundering, and the bombs were falling. Let's listen as he prays.

His Worth

and he said, "O LORD, the God of our fathers, art Thou not God in the heavens?" (II Chronicles 20:6a NASB)

Jehoshaphat begins his prayer of desperation by reminding himself of who God is. He is I AM. Before the heavens ever were, I AM, is. Nothing was ever created that He did not create. No one was ever born without His divine authority. The tiniest plant on an abandoned hillside grew at His command. There was no earth until He spoke, and it came into being. Remember His conversation with Job in chapter 38, beginning with verse 4?

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding,

Who set its measurements, since you know? Or who stretched the line on it?

"On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons

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of God shouted for joy?"

(Job 38:4-7 NASB)

God said, "Job, have you forgotten who it is you are addressing? Let's play Twenty Questions, Job. Where were you when the heavens were stretched forth, and Jehovah spoke and the worlds burst into reality? Where were you when the living God tenderly spoke to the oceans, and they flowed majestically to the shores; when He spoke again and they stopped at precisely the centimeter authorized? Where were you?"

Oh, the foolishness of rushing into the throne room of eternity without knocking. Oh, the foolishness of addressing the King of kings by any name less than who He is. Oh, the foolishness of praying without first honoring the God to whom we pray for His majesty and His awe. He is the eternal One. And unless we stop and bow at His throne, before we dare to utter another word, we might as well walk presumptuously into His presence and begin to demand that "our will be done in heaven, as it is on earth." It's a little backwards.

The first words that ought to break forth from our lips whenever we pray ought to be words of adoration and worship. We can't effectively tell God what we need until we effectively have seen God for who He is. Then, and only then, do we see our need in its proper perspective. I don't care how rushed we are or what the emergency is, we ought never to be so rushed that we cannot pray, "O Lord, God of our fathers, art Thou not God in the heavens?" Sure, You are. Amen.

Now, ask yourself: "How often do you begin your times of prayer, even and especially during a crisis, by simply adoring God for who He is?" He is the eternal One. Why not memorize Daniel 4:3, and then pray it back to God? It says,

"How great are His signs, And How mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation.

(Daniel 4:3 NASB)

Or to pray I Timothy 6:15b-16,

who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings,
and the Lord of lords;

Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which

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no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen,
nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting.
Amen. (I Timothy 6:15b,16 KJV)

Oh, to be able to so grasp the magnitude of who God is, that each and every day of the week, we begin our prayers with a fresh anthem of adoration for a different quality of who He is. Monday, praise Him for His awesomeness. Tuesday praise Him for His power. Wednesday, praise Him for His grace. Thursday, praise Him for His omniscience. Friday, praise Him for His love. Saturday, praise Him for His mercy. Sunday, praise Him for His holiness. It doesn't matter when or in what order, but to have such a grasp on who our God is, that we never approach His throne, but that our hearts leap for joy within us, and we are struck with awe that we have been ushered into the very presence of the eternal I AM. Does that sound like a familiar thought? Wasn't it our Lord, Himself, who taught us to pray in this way?

'Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name.'
(Matthew 6:9b NASB)

Jehoshaphat began his prayer by worshiping. First, he worshiped God for His awesomeness, and then for His sovereignty. The next words that fell from his lips were these,

Power and might are in Thy Hand, so that no one can
stand against Thee. (II Chronicles 20:6d NASB)

He prayed, "Jehovah, you're not only the awesome King of heaven, you're the caring Father of planet earth. And because you care, you rule the nations. You control the destiny of kings. Seas part, rocks split, the heavens rain manna, all at your command. Pharaohs rise to the throne, but only as you allow it, and only for the times that fit your purposes. Foreign nations invade and oppress your people, Lord, but only for a season, and only as you allow it to discipline us, and only until that split second in time when your purpose has been fulfilled. And then, in the twinkling of an eye, the strongest of armies perish in the flood; the mightiest of monarchs fall to the earth, helpless and weak."

Beloved, as we pray, we must pray with an understanding to whom we pray, otherwise, prayer becomes a religious exercise rather than an encounter between a man and his

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God. We are not just addressing the God of eternity who rules the universe; we are addressing the one who knows what is best, the One who can do anything He chooses. Therefore, we have not come to tell Him our will; we have come to conform to His. Does that not sound familiar? Was it not our Lord who prayed this?

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10 NASB)

Then, having honored the majesty and the sovereignty of God, Jehoshaphat bows in adoration at the power of God. He prays,

Power and might are in Thy Hand, so that no one can stand against Thee. (II Chronicles 20:6d NASB)

He prayed, “Lord, not only are you the God of the heavens and the ruler of the earth, there is nothing You cannot do. Nothing! It was as if he were quoting Jeremiah 32:17,

Ah Lord God! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee: (Jeremiah 32:17 KJV)

In other words,

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6:13b KJV)

Here they stand in the midst of the greatest crisis of their lives, and their leader is not speaking, he’s praying; and he’s not yet pleading with God to deliver them (though he will). He is worshipping! He is worshipping God for who He is...His awesomeness, His sovereignty, His power. He is God! He rules over all! There is nothing He cannot do! He’s praying. You see, that’s prayer.

His Works and His Word

We hurry on, now, as Jehoshaphat continues his worship experience. Having seen God for who He is, his heart pours out memories of what God has done. Before he asks for God to intervene, he worships God for the times He has intervened in days past and in generations past. And He invokes the authority of God by claiming the promises of God. Here is how he prays,

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“Didst Thou not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Thy people Israel, and give it to the descendants of Abraham Thy friend forever?

“And they lived in it, and have built Thee a sanctuary there for Thy name, saying,

‘Should evil come upon us, the sword, or judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before Thee (for Thy name is in this house) and cry to Thee in our distress, and Thou wilt hear and deliver us.’”
(II Chronicles 20:7-9 NASB)

In other words, “Father, in times past You have never failed to meet our needs. Never. Not always the way we prescribed, but always as You knew best. And Father, You promised us, that if we ever got into this kind of jam, and we needed help, You promised us, if we would come in Your Name, You would never turn a deaf ear to us. Never.”

Two things clamor for our attention here. The first is the need to keep a book of remembrance or some kind of list of the gracious works of God; the things He has done in our lives and in the lives of those about us, so when the enemy engulfs us and threatens us, we will immediately be reminded of the works of our God in times past, and we will be able to rest. Satan is a “seed snatcher.” He snatches memories. The second thing this passage brings to mind is the need to have memorized the promises of God, so that when trauma comes, we can stand on the Word and not on our emotions. We can respond with the Scripture, rather than react with our feelings. Jehoshaphat praised God for who He is, what He’s done, and what He’s promised. He said, “Lord, You promised us, if the sky ever falls, all we’d have to do is cry out to You, and You would listen.”

THE PROVISION

The Problem

“Now, Lord, since You made that promise, there is something on my mind. Something rather important, Lord. You see, Lord, these guys from Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir—the ones you commanded us not to invade—they are coming down the mountain, Lord. They do not want us to join

them for an after-church fellowship. They want to take from us something you gave to us, our inheritance. Lord, as you can see, we've got a little problem."

Now notice a few things about the manner in which this man prayed. First, he related the problem he had to a promise. In other words, he made it an issue where the Word was involved. Secondly, he made it clear that this test, this invasion, was not a result of disobedience. And that's important, because the nations around them were there because God allowed them to be. He forbade the Jews from destroying them when they wanted to. So, this prayer was not one asking God to deliver them from the fruits of their own disobedience. Thirdly, he related the problem and the plea to their rightful inheritance as God's own.

But isn't it interesting how brief his description of the problem was, once he got to that part of the prayer? He knew God knew the problem, but he knew God wants us to be specific when we pray, so we can be specific when we praise once He delivers us. So, he prayed specifically, but he didn't wallow in it. He didn't belabor the point. He just stated it.

The Plea

Now listen to his plea. And here is the key to effective prayer.

"O our God, wilt Thou 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 Thee."
(II Chronicles 20:12 NASB)

Jehoshaphat knew how to pray when hope was gone.

He acknowledged that either God had to solve this problem, or it wouldn't get solved. And he gave God two good reasons. He said, "Lord, we don't have the strength, and we don't have the wisdom. We don't have what it takes to defeat the enemy, and even if we did, we wouldn't even know how to begin. So, Lord, here they come. Our enemies. Your enemies. Look at them, Lord, there are thousands of them. We are powerless, Lord. And not only that, Lord, we don't even know what to do."

There is one thing God requires when we pray: that

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we understand that because He is who He is, only He can defeat the enemy. And until we have that level of helplessness overcome us, we often cannot pray aright. That is why, so often, God seems to have to bring us to the end of ourselves so He can reveal His majesty and His power and renew our confidence in who He is.

That may well be the reason for that crisis that exists in your life or in mine, even today. A loving God cares so much that He has allowed the enemy just enough freedom to come at us in what appears to be overpowering numbers, so at last, we will acknowledge that the battle is not ours, but God's. Remember what prayer is? It is beholding the character of God, until we come to surrender to the sovereignty of God, and appropriate the power of God, to do the will of God. That's what Jehoshaphat just did. Now they were ready for anything the enemy did, and anything God did. It wasn't their battle anymore; it was God's. He was ruler over all, and He knew what was best, and there was nothing He could not do, so why fret? Instead, why not crawl up into Him, acknowledge our helplessness and hopelessness, and rest.

And one more thing. Wait. I know, the enemy is about to round the bend and come crashing into the temple. I know. God knows, too. And He'll not be late in coming. He doesn't just observe time, beloved; He owns it. If need be, the sun will stand still. If need be, the enemy will suddenly be frozen in their tracks until the time is right; but, beloved, God will not be late for the battle. So, once you've worshiped, and once you've relayed the problem and made your plea, fall down at His feet and wait.

The Peace

The passage concludes,

And all Judah was standing before the LORD, with their infants, their wives, and their children.

(II Chronicales 20:13 NASB)

They were totally at rest in the midst of the greatest trauma of their lives. They stood united as families; they stood united as a nation before the Lord, and waited. There is nothing like an attack from the enemy to solidify the people of God

and draw them into oneness. Satan hates that, but it is a by-product of his own onslaughts. And God uses it to unify us.

That's where we will take up in our next lesson. But between now and then, why not practice praying the way Jehoshaphat prayed? Perhaps it's not a time of crisis in your life. Don't wait until then to learn to pray. Start now worshiping Him for who He is, worshiping Him for what He's done, worshiping Him for what He's promised. Then, take His promises of spiritual blessing and claim them as you name your specific burdens and needs. And once you have reminded Him of what your burdens are, don't wallow in them. Lay them at His feet. He'll take it from there. He may well have something for you to do, but don't rush out to do it until you have acknowledged your helplessness apart from Him, and crawled up into Him to rest. Then wait for further instructions. They will come. And when they do, you'll know what to do. In the meantime, gather your family, and the greater family of God together, and worship and wait. Beloved, even if the hoofbeats can be heard in the distance, don't panic. Your God is always on time.

Maybe you are in the midst of that kind of battle right now. Maybe the sky is falling, and the enemy is riding into your life with wave upon wave of apparent doom and destruction. He may be taking from you everything you ever thought you had to have. Beloved, I remind you, he cannot touch anything unless God allows it. And when God has had enough, and His grace has been sufficiently multiplied in your life, suddenly the sky will begin to clear, the clouds will begin to part, and your loving God will reach down and smite the enemy and great will be their fall.

Until then, beloved, gather together and pray. Pray the way Jehoshaphat prayed. And watch your God move onto the center stage of your life as the drama unfolds. When all hope seems gone, it's time to pray. "O our God, wilt thou not judge them? We are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do. But our eyes are on Thee. Oh, blessed Lord, we focus our thoughts on Your every Word. We focus our hearts on Your awesome power and even in the midst of life's darkest hour, the veil is removed. At last, we can see, Yours is the battle. Our eyes are on Thee."

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Let's pray.

Our Father,

Teach us to pray as Jehoshaphat prayed. Teach us to worship as he worshiped. Teach us to rest as he rested. Teach us to trust as he trusted. We acknowledge before You, we don't have the strength to deal with the enemy; we never have. We thought we did, but we know we don't. And, Father, even if we had the strength, we wouldn't even know what to do.

Your ways are so much higher than ours. Your thoughts are so much higher than ours. And You are just waiting to move into that situation in our lives with such power, such awesomeness. You are just waiting to move into our lives and transform them in such a way in the midst of the crisis, that we will become all You want us to be. So, Father, we lay ourselves at Your feet, and rest.

Yours is the Kingdom. Yours is the power. Yours is the glory. Our eyes are on Thee.

Amen.

An Assignment on Learning to Pray When Hope Is Gone

1- Read and re-read Jehoshaphat's prayer from II Chronicles 20. Memorize at least the key passages.

2- Take several sheets of paper, and call one "Worshipping God for Who He is". Make a list of the attributes of God. Beginning with the three Jehoshaphat majored on...His awesomeness, His sovereignty, His power, try to define those attributes using the Scriptures as your dictionary.

3- Take one attribute of the nature of God for each day of the next week, and worship Him for that attribute each time you begin to pray.

4- Name another page, "Worshipping God for What He's Done" and begin to list the wondrous ways God has met your needs in past times of crisis and warfare. Praise Him

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continually throughout the week for those evidences of His love.

5- Another page will be titled, “Worshipping God for What He’s Promised.” Use that page to list the Promises of God that have become a part of your life.

6- Finally, spend some time each time you pray this week, crawling up into God and acknowledging your weakness and His strength. Learn to pray, “We have no power...neither know we what to do.” Then practice learning to wait on God until He directs you into battle.

7- Above all, should a crisis come, or should your heart faint from the onslaught of life’s disappointments, be prepared to face God as Jehoshaphat did. He will honor your faithfulness, and He will fight the enemy on your behalf.

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