

## **DO YOU PRAISE GOD IN THE MIDST OF STRESS? 2 CHRONICLES 20:1-28**

“Seeing the elephant and hearing the owl.” Have you ever heard that expression? It’s used by James Michener in his novel, Centennial, about how the state of Colorado was settled. A young farmer, Levi Zendt, and his wife migrate from Pennsylvania out West. They want to go all the way to California. They run into trouble in the Rocky Mountains, however. Just as they reach the other side of the mountains – where the going gets easier – it happens. Levi leaves the campsite one night to check on his oxen when out of the shadows looms the figure of a great elephant. It looks like some gigantic monster some 30 or 40 feet tall with wild, curving tusks and glowing eyes. Levi also hears the ominous hooting of an owl. After going through this bizarre experience, Levi’s courage and resolve completely vanish. He goes back to the campsite and tells his wife that they should just go back and settle in Colorado rather than trying to get all the way to California. “I saw the elephant and heard the owl,” he said.

Seeing the elephant and hearing the owl. It’s an expression that refers to some kind of awesome experience you have in life that leaves you shaken to the core and uncertain about the future. These are the experiences in life that frighten you, overwhelm you, turn you upside down and inside out, and even threaten your faith in the Lord. They pump enormous stress into your life at every level. You just can’t deal with them in the usual way. So what do you do with them? I was interested to read that every day we Americans consume about 28 tons of aspirins, tranquilizers and sleeping pills. That’s how many deal with stress.

Worship is a verb! It’s not something done to or for us but by us. Today the verb form of worship is the word “praise.” And here’s the question. Do you praise God in the midst of stress? If you remember nothing else from this message today, please write this principle on your heart. Praising God is the single best response to crisis or stress. Indeed, praising God isn’t just a luxury. Worship isn’t really an option for a follower of Jesus. Nothing has more practical, down-to-earth benefit in your life and mine than the regular, committed, faithful and personal giving up of praise to God. I want you to look with me at a fascinating story in the Bible. As you find it, let me set it up for you. The story is about one of the kings of Judah – a man by the name of Jehoshaphat. He was faced with a very stressful situation. Talk about seeing the elephant and hearing the owl! God’s people were faced with extinction and their country with complete ruin. Jehoshaphat faced a situation in life that produced utter despair initially. So how did he and the people of Judah face it? Let’s read the story. I find some principles in that story you and I can apply to our lives. First ...

### **PRAISE IS A DEFENSIVE SHIELD.**

What was Jehoshaphat up against? Several nations had formed a military alliance and were poised to attack the people of Judah. The combined armies created a huge group so victory seemed inevitable. Jehoshaphat and the people

of Judah were shaken to the core of their lives. They seemed doomed. Many of you have faced times like that in your own life. If you haven't yet, you will. You, or a family member, get a terrible diagnosis at the doctor's office. Or, a once secure job that provided a comfortable income comes to an end. Or, something happens and you realize your marriage is in serious jeopardy. Or, you discover your child has made some very poor choices and you don't know how to help. Or, a sudden accident changes your life – or the life of a person you love – in just a few moments. Whatever it is, life is just never quite the same again after one of these events. The natural and human tendency is to become almost paralyzed with fear and discouragement. You feel powerless and out of control. Your heart fills up with despair and defeat. All seems lost. You see the elephant and you hear the owl. Have you ever been there?

What can you do? What should you do? Do what the people of God did in the story we just read. What's that? They begin to praise God. They allow praise to become a defensive shield against this incredible military force arrayed against them. Jehoshaphat gathers the people together in Jerusalem and they have a national day of prayer. Then a prophet named Jahaziel encourages the people not to be afraid and not to be discouraged. Why? They're terrified and completely undone. What Jahaziel says that day you should memorize and tuck away in some corner of your heart and soul. "... 'Listen, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! Listen, King Jehoshaphat! This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid! Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's.'" (2 Chr 20:15 NLT) As they worship and praise God together, that numbing, paralyzing fear and discouragement begin to lift. They even find the strength to march out against the enemy. And as they march, the Temple choir goes with them and they sing a song over and over again: "... 'Give thanks to the LORD; his faithful love endures forever!'" (2 Chr 20:21 NLT)

"For the battle is not your, but God's." That's a promise for every child of God not just for the people in this story. Life will feature some very tough battles as you live it out. You will, at times, feel overwhelmed by fear or discouragement particularly if you face those situations in just your own strength. There's a lesson in this story. When you set your mind and heart to praise God, thank God and worship God right in the midst of that stressful event – like Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah did – you invite God into the middle of it. It's no longer just you and whatever problem has entered your life. When you praise God in the midst of enormous stress, you give that problem, that situation, that event to Him. That's how praising God can become a defensive shield against fear or discouragement overwhelming your life.

Here's another way to think of it. Praise is a defensive shield against self-reliance. Jehoshaphat's prayer underlines that fact: "'O our God, won't you stop them? We are powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack us. We do not know what to do, but we are looking to you for help.'" (2 Chr 20:12 NLT) Have you ever prayed like that when you're faced with some great stress or giant

crisis? “Lord, I don’t know what to do, but You know so I’m looking to You for help.” Many people get so used to working problems out on their own that they have to learn to step back in a moment of great crisis or stress and consciously rely upon God. It doesn’t come naturally to most of us. Begin to ask God for help by praising Him. Acknowledge His presence and His greatness. Your own natural, human pride can prevent you from looking to God as your first, best and ultimately only resource in facing many of life’s crises. Praise and pride can never exist together. When you choose deliberately to praise God in the midst of stress, you’re making an assumption that human power and human answers are limited and inadequate at best. When you praise God in the midst of stress, you strike a blow at your own pride and sinful self-reliance.

Praising God in the midst of stress does not mean, however, denying reality. Jehoshaphat faced his problem squarely. On the one hand, he didn’t run away from it. On the other hand, he didn’t face his enemies in his own strength. Instead, He invited God into the situation. Jehoshaphat didn’t downplay the severity or seriousness of this crisis. He didn’t play mind games in an effort to motivate himself. Instead, he threw himself utterly and absolutely upon the power of God. That’s exactly what you need to do with you face those “seeing the elephant and hearing the owl” experiences in life. Don’t cut and run! But don’t pretend it isn’t there and deny its reality either! And, whatever you do, don’t stick out your puny little chest and try to face it in your own strength. Call it for what it is. Lay it all out before the Lord. Throw yourself upon His grace and cry out, “Lord, I don’t know what to do, but You know so I’m looking to You for help.” When you begin to learn to praise God right in the midst of stress –not just before it comes or after it leaves, but right smack dab in the middle of it! – God will give you the strength to do what Jahaziel advised the people of Judah to do, “... ‘Go out against them tomorrow, for the LORD is with you!’” (2 Chr 20:17 NLT). Praise is a defensive shield. Now, here’s a second principle from our story.

### **PRAISE IS AN OFFENSIVE WEAPON.**

Praising God isn’t just a defense. It has offensive capabilities as well. When you praise God in the midst of stress, it enables you to focus on God instead of the crisis. It enables you to focus on God instead of yourself. I don’t know how you react to stress, but my first response typically is to focus on the problem itself or focus on whether I have the necessary resources to handle that problem. That’s a pretty normal, human response, right? When I do that kind of analysis and I get discouraged or become afraid, it’s because the problem appears to be much bigger than me or any resources I possess. That’s what makes it a crisis, right? At that point, I might start telling God about my problem and describe how I think He should solve it. Now, listen.... Telling God how to solve your problem is not the same thing as simply praising God in the midst of your problem. Think about our story. Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah don’t tell God how to defeat their enemies, do they? They never try to instruct God. What do they do? They simply praise God, worship God and thank God. They put simple trust in God.

They believe that He will find a way to defeat their enemies so it isn't necessary for them to tell God what He should do.

May I suggest something to you? The next time you get all agitated and worked up in a time of crisis or stress, just stop and begin to praise God. Yes, by all means, tell Him all about your problem. Admit your inability to resolve it in your strength and by your own intelligence. God already knows all that but it's helpful to remind yourself of what He already knows only too well. Now, don't wallow in the problem itself. Don't wring your hands and get heartburn – literally and spiritually – over your inability and lack of resources. Don't tell God how to fix the problem. Instead, simply begin to praise God right in the midst of that stressful crisis by focusing on who God is and what God has already done.

Now, you find that model right in the story we read today. Here's how Jehoshaphat begins his prayer, "O LORD, God of our ancestors, you alone are the God who is in heaven. You are ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth. You are powerful and mighty; no one can stand against you!" (2 Chr 20:6 NLT) What is that? Praise! Jehoshaphat is focusing on who God is. Notice that he doesn't focus on the enemy army or even his own inadequacies. He reminds himself of God's character and God's greatness. Then Jehoshaphat reminds himself of what God has done in the past. "O our God, did you not drive out those who lived in this land when your people Israel arrived? And did you not give this land forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham?" (2 Chr 20:7 NLT) You can do the same thing when you praise God. Remind yourself of all the different ways God has been faithful to you and blessed you in the past. Has God ever failed you? You've failed yourself. You've failed others. Others have failed you. That's all true. But God has never failed you. When you praise God in the midst of stress, you remind yourself of God's incomparable faithfulness.

"... 'Give thanks to the LORD; his faithful love endures forever!'" (2 Chr 20:21 NLT) God's people sing or chant that over and over again as they march. They concentrate on God. What can you learn from their example? All genuine praise focuses on God. Praise isn't problem-centered or self-centered. Praise is always God-centered. Leave the actual solution to God. Let Him figure it out. Refuse to focus on the problem itself or your own inadequacy and inability. Your job is to praise God, to give thanks to Him, to remember and remind yourself of who God is and what He's done. You might ask, "But how can just focusing on God make any real difference to what I'm going through?" It's then that you begin to see your life from God's perspective – even the crises and the times of stress. And when you see it from His perspective, it changes everything. What is that problem compared to God and His greatness? Is any crisis or stress a match for Almighty God? So what if you are inept? Aren't we all? Is your inability somehow an obstacle that God has to maneuver around?

There's a wonderful story over in the New Testament that illustrates the same principles. Paul and his friend, Silas, are telling people all about Jesus in the

Greek city of Philippi. They end up getting severely beaten and thrown into prison for their efforts. That would definitely be a crisis for Rick Breusch! How did Paul and Silas handle it? Why, they begin to pray and sing songs of praise to God. They don't ask God to slay their captors with His mighty sword of judgment! They don't complain to God about how rough it is to serve Him. They don't question why He allows this to happen to them. They don't even ask God to get them out of prison. What do they do? They simply praise God! And as they worship and praise God, He sends an earthquake that releases them from their chains and ultimately frees them from prison.

Praise is an offensive weapon because somehow it releases God's power into your life and into the crises you're facing. I'm not sure why this is true or even how it's true. What is clear, however, is that God responds with power when you begin to praise and worship Him in the midst of a crisis. I love this part of the story! "At the very moment they began to sing and give praise, the LORD caused the armies of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir to start fighting among themselves." (2 Chr 20:22 NLT) God simply gets these three armies to turn against one another. They end up annihilating each other. In fact, the army of Judah never has to draw one sword or shoot one arrow! God performs that miracle in response to the praise and worship of His people. I freely admit that I don't know how it works, but there is an undeniable connection between praising God and spiritual power. At the very moment they began to sing and give praise, the LORD went in to action and the enemy was defeated.

Observe with me how God's people praised Him. First, they praise Him corporately. Yes, you're called to have your own personal praise time with God, but it's never intended to replace praising God with others. Jehoshaphat is wise to call all the people of Judah together when he faces this great crisis. When a crisis hits, some followers of Jesus say, "So what if it's Sunday morning. I'm just not going to praise God today." My friend, that's the most important time to praise God. Call out the troops – like Jehoshaphat did - and praise and pray to God together. Second, God's people praise Him continually. They praise Him before God did anything. They praise Him during the crisis itself. They kept on praising the Lord after the enemy is defeated. So remarkable is all the praise offered up to God in that place that the people rename the location the Valley of Beracah which means the Valley of Praise. Praise God before He provides the answer to your problem. Praise Him during the problem itself. Praise Him when He provides the solution. The lesson? Learn to praise God continually.

Thirdly, God's people praise Him passionately. The posture of God's people reveals that simple fact. What does the story say? "As they praised God, they all sat comfortably in their padded pews and fought to stay awake." Is that what it says? No! "Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the LORD. Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice." (2 Chr 20:18-19 NIV) I'd love to watch

the faces of people walking into this room on a Sunday morning if they saw dozens of people on their faces before God crying out to Him in a loud voice. In our story, the praise of God was joyful, expressive, loud, demonstrative, noisy, emotional, and passionate. “Then, led by Jehoshaphat, all the men of Judah and Jerusalem returned joyfully to Jerusalem, for the LORD had given them cause to rejoice over their enemies. They entered Jerusalem and went to the temple of the LORD with harps and lyres and trumpets.” (2 Chr 20:27-28 NIV)

In Fiji, singing hymns can get you into big trouble. About one million Methodists live in that south Pacific island country, and each summer 20,000 to 50,000 of them gather for a conference. Before the conference begins, they have a massive choral contest. About 10,000 people participate. They sing hymns. That's it. *Hymns*. But in July of last year, the government shut them down. "No choral contest this year," the government said. There's a lot of turmoil in Fiji, and the government feared that the big crowd might get out of hand. Church officials said the government feared the conference and singing contest would lead to further political instability. Nothing like a bunch of singing Methodists to make a government nervous! But maybe – just maybe – the Fijian government was on to something there after all. Christians worshiping the Lord really are dangerous — although perhaps not as those officials feared. Worshiping God in Christ upsets world systems. Praising God defeats armies. Rejoicing in the Lord releases God's power into problems big and small. Praising God is revolutionary and subversive. It brings another kingdom into view.

“Seeing the elephant and hearing the owl.” There will be times when some crisis looms up so large in your life that it will shake you to the core of your being. Or, perhaps, accumulated stress over a period of time leaves you exhausted and discouraged beyond words. All seems lost. Defeat seems inevitable. Failure seems certain. What can you do? Give the battle to the Lord and keep your eyes on Him. Learn to praise God right in the middle of every stressful situation you encounter in life. Make it an habitual response. Praise is a defensive shield. Praise is an offensive weapon. Use it for the glory of God!