

Give Thanks to the Lord
2 Chronicles 20:1-30
Key Verse: 20:21

"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.'"

In this special Thanksgiving season, we want to give thanks to God. But how can we give thanks to God from our hearts? It is not easy when we have real problems that confront us and painful agonies in our souls. Many of us have learned to thank God by remembering what God has done for us. This is very good. Yet it is just one aspect of thanksgiving. In this passage we find another way to give thanks. It is by seeing God himself in the splendor of his holiness. God's presence inspires us with thanksgiving that flows from our hearts, together with songs of praise to God. Then we can thank God endlessly--not only for what he has done, but also for what he will do in the future. Yet primarily we thank God because he is God. This pleases God and leads to abundant blessing. Let's see how to give thanks to God today.

I. Jehoshaphat inquires of the Lord (1-13)

The main character in this passage is King Jehoshaphat of Judah. He was one of the good kings. He sought God and led his people to worship God. And God blessed him and his nation abundantly. However, he made one big mistake. He wanted to unite Judah and Northern Israel politically. In order to do so, he let his son marry the daughter of Israel's ungodly King Ahab. Ahab made use of this alliance to entice Jehoshaphat to join him in battle against Aram. God's prophet predicted defeat. But Jehoshaphat could not resist and joined Ahab's war. Jehoshaphat and Judah were badly defeated. Judah seemed weak and vulnerable. The surrounding peoples, Ammonites and Moabites, together with the people of Mount Seir, united and sent a vast army to attack Judah. They wanted to defeat Judah and divide her land among themselves. It was a sudden, unexpected attack. Sometimes these kinds of things happen to us too. Some of us have experienced sudden and serious health problems. Others have faced uncertain future employment due to the poor economy. And some have seen important relationships go sour, or even spiral out of control. As a nation, we experienced a sudden terrorist attack on 9-11-2001. In their desperate situation, how did Jehoshaphat and his people respond?

Look at verse 3. Their first response was alarm. Nobody said, "It will be okay. Don't worry, be happy." Everyone was alarmed. They felt helpless and they were scared. Some may have lost all hope and began to panic. There is an American idiom: "Jumping Jehoshaphat." It seems to have come from this passage as an expression of alarm before a sudden problem. No one knew what to do. At such times, people may seek help from worldly powers, as Ahaz did when he turned to Assyria (2 Ch 28:16). Or they may surrender to their enemy, seeking favorable terms. What did Jehoshaphat do? He resolved to inquire of the Lord. He made up his mind to seek God through prayer. To him, prayer was not one of several good options; it was the only viable option. He sought help from God alone. General Washington faced a very difficult winter at Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War. He prayed to God for help. God answered his prayer and gave birth to our nation. Later, in 1789, he proclaimed a national day of thanksgiving to God. We now face many overwhelming problems: economic, moral, and spiritual. How can we solve them? We don't know. But God can solve these problems.

Jehoshaphat not only prayed personally, he also proclaimed a fast for his people, urging them to join him in prayer. Then the people of Judah came together to seek the Lord. They came from every town in Judah. Many times, people do not follow leaders' decrees. They have different ideas about how to deal with things. They could have considered him foolish for his prayerful response. They could have demanded that he ask help from other countries. They could have raised their voices in many ways. But they did not. They came together as one. They were of the same spirit as Jehoshaphat. How could this be? It came from their common Bible study. At the beginning of his reign, Jehoshaphat had raised his royal officials as Bible teachers and sent them throughout Judah to share the word of God with people (17:9). After his first defeat in battle, Jehoshaphat again raised men who could administer the law of God to settle the disputes for all the people (19:8). When the people studied the Bible together, spiritual unity was formed among them. We can learn from them. In times of blessing, they studied the Bible diligently. Then, in times of difficulty, they had spiritual strength and unity to pray together. Then they could confront enemies with one mind and spirit. Regular and faithful Bible study with our children and Bible students builds our sense of family and community in God. It can build our nation in God. Then when enemies attack, we can resist with one mind and spirit.

With all Judah assembled at the temple, Jehoshaphat stood up and offered representative prayer (5). He focused on who God is. He called God "the God of our fathers," and "the God of heaven." He is the Creator God who knew their forefathers personally and called them out of bondage to be his people. He is the Sovereign Lord who rules over the kingdoms and nations of the world. He is Almighty God; no one can withstand him. This God was at the center of their nation. God was with them. God had delivered them from enemies in the past. God had given them the land they dwelt in and there they had built the temple, the holy dwelling place of the one true God. God had promised to listen to their prayers, saying, "...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Ch 7:14). Jehoshaphat claimed God's promise and prayed based on this promise. Jehoshaphat's prayer was not just a selfish cry for help. He was more concerned with their relationship to Almighty God. He revered and honored God himself, remembering God's grace and confessing his faith.

Verses 10-12a show us that Jehoshaphat's prayer was also based on justice. When the Israelites had come out of Egypt, they had an advantage over the Ammonites, Moabites and men of Mount Seir. But God did not allow the Israelites to attack. The Israelites showed mercy from their position of power. However, these same nations, sensing they now had the upper hand, wanted to destroy the Israelites. They were cruel and unjust. So Jehoshaphat prayed, "O our God, will you not judge them?" He did not seek favoritism from God, but asked God to deal justly with his enemies. At the end of his prayer, Jehoshaphat admitted that he and his people had no power. He also admitted they had no strategy or wisdom. Usually leaders give an impression that they have resources and strategies even when they do not. But Jehoshaphat admitted before God and man that he had nothing. Then he said, "...but our eyes are upon you" (12b). After bringing the problem to God, Jehoshaphat did not dwell on the problem. His eyes and his people's eyes were upon God. He believed that the living God would do something. He trusted in God and waited on God. He had no "plan b," or "plan c." He did not even have a "plan a." He simply looked to God for help. Here we learn to empty ourselves and trust in God alone. Power and might are in God's hand. Almighty God can change any circumstance or situation.

Jehoshaphat was representing his people before God. Though he alone prayed audibly, all of them were assembled together with him, joining his prayer. Verse 13 says, "All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord." Parents did not shield their children from this event. They brought them to God together with the community. How did God answer this earnest and sincere prayer?

II. The battle is God's (14-19)

As the assembly waited, God spoke through one man, Jahaziel, who was inspired by the Spirit of the Lord. We don't know much about him. We know he was a Levite, not a priest (1 Ch 9:15). Yet one thing is clear: when he was inspired by the Spirit of the Lord, he became God's messenger to the king and all the people. He began by saying, "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's." David had spoken similar words when he fought Goliath. He said, "...for the battle is the Lord's..." (1 Sam 17:47). The battle is the Lord's. This unburdens us; we have nothing to fear. If the battle is ours, we have to prepare well and fight with all our strength. If the enemy is weaker, we can defeat him. But if he is stronger, we cannot defeat him. We will lose. But when the battle is the Lord's, God will fight against the enemy. God is Almighty God. God can defeat and destroy any enemy. Victory is certain for the Lord.

Then what did he want his people to do? Jahaziel said, "You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you" (17a). They needed only to stand firm and see God's deliverance. When we simply trust in God and stand on God's side, he gives us the victory. The battle is not ours, but God's.

However, standing with God does not mean escaping the problem. Jahaziel told his people to march down against the enemies and confront them. They were to take up their positions and stand firm. Then they would see how the Lord delivered them. We should not hide from our enemies. We must confront them with faith in God. Then we can see God's deliverance. James 4:7b tells us, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

How did the people respond to Jahaziel's message? They could have ignored it, saying that he was not an official priest. Jehoshaphat could have thought that if God was going to speak, he would do so through the king. But Jehoshaphat realized that God spoke through Jahaziel. So he bowed down with his face to the ground. And all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the Lord. They accepted the word of God with faith and believed God would do as he had said. They believed God's deliverance would come to them. They were deeply moved by the power and love of God and they worshiped God. Some Levites, Kohathites and Korahites (1 Ch 6:33),

expressed their worship in a different way. They stood up and praised the Lord. They had a conviction that God already gave them victory.

III. Jehoshaphat defeated enemies with a praise band (20-30)

Early the next morning, they all got up and went out to the Desert of Tekoa to confront their enemies. As they began to move, they might have been afraid. Jehoshaphat encouraged them, "Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful" (20). Their real battle was to keep faith in God's promise and to march out without shrinking back. Jehoshaphat could encourage them because he had assurance of victory based on God's word. By faith in God's promise, he became courageous and creative. He could plant a sense of victory before fighting in his people. He also initiated the formation of a praise band to lead the army and asked for volunteers. From a human point of view, it seemed ridiculous. How could artistic singers defeat well-armed soldiers?

Let's see the contents of their praise. Let's read verse 21. "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.'" There are two main reasons for their praise and thanks. One is the splendor of God's holiness. God's holiness is a wondrous mystery. It is the ineffable quality of God that is totally transcendent. God is amazing and awesome beyond understanding. When they beheld this God with eyes of faith, praise and thanks flowed from their hearts. One secret of thanksgiving is to think about God; not just about the good things God has done, but about God himself. God is awesome, amazing, and glorious, beyond our understanding. He is worthy of all praise by his creatures. Revelation 4:8,11 tells of four living creatures who say day and night: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come...You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

The second reason for their praise and thanks was that "his love endures forever." Usually at the time of crisis, people doubt God's love and complain. However, the Israelites realized that God loved them and would love them forever. So they thanked God and praised God. They had assurance of victory in God's love. St. Paul faced many difficulties: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword. He even faced death all day long. But he knew that God loved him and God was with him. A sense of victory and great joy filled his soul. So he said, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Ro 8:37).

The problem is how to praise God and give thanks to God when we feel threatened, wounded, cracked, broken, and almost seem to be useless? Usually we doubt God's love and complain. We think, "If God loves me, why does he put me in this situation?" Again we learn from Paul. He said in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In his love, God guides us in the best way in order to mold us into the likeness of Christ. God never fails. God puts all the wounded, cracked and broken elements of our lives together into a beautiful cross. How beautiful the cross is. It is no more a symbol of shame and defeat. It is a symbol of victory and glory in the love of God. God's love through trials makes our lives wonderful. When we realize God's deep love, we can praise God and thank God. We know that God works for good. God is doing something good. Wow! Thank God. Even in a bad or desperate situation we can experience God's glory and victory. God turns all the bad things into wonderful expressions of his glory and goodness. So all we have to do is to thank God and praise God. Then God will do great things for us. Also, God can do great things for our nation. Let's look at God, so that we may praise God and give thanks to God.

Let's see how God worked. As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against their enemies. Suddenly the men of Ammon and Moab rose up against the men of Mount Seir and annihilated them. Then the men of Ammon and Moab began to destroy one another. When the people of Israel came to the place that overlooks the desert, and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground. All that was left to do was to collect the plunder. There was so much plunder that it took three days to carry it all away. On the fourth day they assembled in the Valley of Beracah, where they praised the Lord. They acknowledged that their great victory had come from the Lord. Then, led by Jehoshaphat, all the men of Judah returned joyfully to Jerusalem. There were no casualties and complete victory. 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 lutes and trumpets and had a joyful and victorious worship service.

Look at verses 29-30. "The fear of God came upon all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard how the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. And the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God had given him rest on every side."

Through today's passage we learned that victory comes from God. We must focus, not on the problems, but on God in the time of hardships. Then we can praise and give thanks to God, and God gives us victory. God reveals himself as the holy, awesome, almighty God who loves us. There is no reason for us to complain. But there are enough reasons to praise and thank God when we look at God. So let's fix our eyes on God.