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Sermon Summary #4

The Life-Transforming, Demon-Defeating, Heart-Healing Power of Praise 2 Chronicles 20:1-23

We who live in the United States are witnesses to and participants in a power struggle that occurs every four years. We've just emerged from one. Whatever else you may think about the race for the presidency of the United States, be assured of this one thing: it is all about the pursuit of power. Yes, there are certain individuals who run for office based on principle, but they are few and far between. Most do so because they have an insatiable passion for power.

Much of what we do in life is either from the fear of the power others possess or in our own pursuit of it. We talk about political power, nuclear power, purchasing power, power in the home, power in the office, power on the playing field. **We are a power-hungry people.** And one of the more dangerous things about power is that it is intoxicating and addictive. A small taste of real power invariably fuels a desire for even more. Charles Colson, former special counsel for President Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal, once said that "power is like saltwater; the more you drink the thirstier you get" (*Kingdoms in Conflict*, 272).

But we who are Christians know that there is no power on earth that can compare with the power of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ, said Paul, "is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). When Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesus he asked that they might come to know "the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power toward us who believe" (Eph. 1:19). Paul prayed for himself and said that he wanted to know Christ and "the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10).

Where might God's power be found? In what ways does God make it available to us? Paul spoke in Ephesians 3:20 of "the power [of God] at work within us." So how do we tap into this power? What can be done so that we might avail ourselves of it? Certainly we can pray. And we can study and memorize God's Word. And we can regularly participate in the Lord's Supper. In all these ways God's power is made available to us. But today I want to talk about the power of God that is unleashed and accessible when God's people praise him. When the people of God corporately unite themselves in the adoration and exaltation of God, things happen. God moves. The Spirit goes to work in us and on our behalf to do things that we might otherwise never see happen.

Jehoshaphat and the Power of Praise

Jehoshaphat ascended to the throne of Judah (the southern kingdom) at the age of 35 and reigned for 25 years (873-848 b.c.). He was generally a good and righteous king who walked in the ways of the Lord (see 2 Chron. 17:3-5). The peace in Jerusalem, however, was being threatened (2 Chron. 20:1-4). Jehoshaphat's immediate response was to pray (vv. 5-13).

Notice three things in his prayer. First, he begins with a **recognition of God's position** as God of heaven who rules "over all the kingdoms of the nations" (v. 6). God's absolute and unchallenged sovereignty is the basis for Jehoshaphat's confidence in prayer. Second, we read of his **remembrance of God's performance** (vv. 7-8). God had driven out the people from the land of promise and had given it to the descendants of Abraham. Third, there is humble **reliance upon God's power**. "We are powerless" (v. 12) in ourselves. We have no hope apart from you stepping into this situation.

God responds to the prayer and praise of Jehoshaphat by sending him a prophet, a man named Jahaziel, who through the Holy Spirit tells them to prepare themselves to witness a display of God's power:

"Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's" (v. 15).

“You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf” (v. 17).

The response of Jehoshaphat and the people is crucial. We read in vv. 18-19 that he and all the people worshipped the Lord. Note *the variety of postures*: Jehoshaphat himself “bowed his head with his face to the ground” (v. 18a); all the people “fell down before the Lord” (v. 18b); while others “stood up to praise the Lord” (v. 19). And all of them together worshipped “with a very loud voice” (v. 19b). Nobody remained seated!

The strategy employed by Jehoshaphat as they prepared to engage in battle with the Ammonites, Moabites, and those from Mount Seir, was incredibly strange, and from a purely human point of view, stupid. He first called on the people to “believe in the Lord your God” and to “believe his prophets” and “you will succeed” (v. 20). He then ordered the choir, the worship team, “those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire” (v. 21) to go and stand in front of the opposing armies. ***The only weapon they were to take with them was their worship!*** There was nothing overly complex in what they were to sing. Simply say:

“Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever!” (v. 21b).

Strange! If they were to sing, why not with words such as: “The Lord is great and mighty and he will slay all our enemies”! Or, “God is omnipotent and his will cannot be resisted!” But no. They simply sang a song in which they first gave thanks to God for all he had done and then declared that his “steadfast love endures forever!”

No arrows filled the sky. No swords were wielded against the enemy. No stones were thrown. No spears were needed. All they did was sing! And note what happened when they did. God was poised and ready to engage the enemy on their behalf. What happened to trigger the release of divine power? Look at v. 22a – “And *when* they began to sing and praise . . .” ***Is there a cause and effect relationship between God’s people worshipping and praising and celebrating the steadfast love of the Lord and God moving on their behalf, unleashing his power to defeat their enemies and fulfill his promises to them? Yes!***

In fact, when God’s people began to sing and praise, God “set an ambush” against the Ammonites, Moabites, and people of Mount Seir. So “they were routed” (v. 22b)! Look at the final line of v. 23 – “they all helped to destroy one another.” God sent confusion and chaos into the enemy camp so that instead of fighting against Judah they turned on each other and fought one another! Or as Andrew Hill put it, God stirred the armies “into a spirit of self-destruction” (NIV Application Commentary, 492). If you want to hear of the aftermath of the battle, take time to read vv. 24-30.

Consider the influence of praise and worship on the enemies of God as described in Psalm 149:5-9,

Let the godly exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written! This is honor for all his godly ones. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 149:5-9).

Today, in the era of the New Covenant, our “enemies” are not physical armies of literal nations that surround and threaten us with bullets and bombs. Our enemies are demonic forces, principalities and powers of spiritual darkness. But the principle hasn’t changed: we defeat our enemies through power of praise! Here is how Spurgeon put it:

“Praise and power go ever hand in hand. The two things act and react upon each other. An era of spiritual force in the Church is always one of praise; and when there comes some grand outburst of sacred song, we may expect that the people of God are entering upon some new crusade for Christ” (459).

Or consider what happened when Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned in Philippi:

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened” (Acts 16:25-26).

This earthquake was not the result of fracking or waste-water disposal! It was the release of divine power that occurred when Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God!

Something similar happened earlier in Acts 13. Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, gathered with the people of God there. And we read:

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said . . .” (Acts 13:2).

It is no mere coincidence that the Spirit spoke prophetically “*while* they were worshipping” the Lord! ***God speaks, God moves, God intervenes and changes history when his people worship him!***

Why? What accounts for this connection between God’s people worshipping and God releasing his power on their behalf? The answer may be found in Psalm 22:3.

“Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps. 22:3).

Some translate this as: “dwelling in the praises of Israel” or “inhabiting” the praises of Israel. It has even been suggested that we should read this as a description that God is “sitting” upon the praise and worship of his people.

In other words, ***praise creates a dwelling place for God in our situation***. Praise does not make God more powerful. Neither does it compel him to act. But God is pleased by praise. He loves to act on behalf of his people when his people exult in him and exalt him in worship. Praise is where God lives! It is his home! That is why when we worship, things happen: the spirits of the discouraged are lifted and refreshed, sick bodies are healed, unsaved souls come to faith, the Spirit’s voice is heard, relationships are healed, hope is restored, the Word of God is more readily heard and obeyed, unforgiveness toward others is overcome, bitterness disappears, demons are routed, otherwise stingy people become incredibly generous, and joy inexpressible and full of glory fills the hearts of God’s people!

Consider what happened when the Ark of the Covenant was finally brought into the Temple that Solomon had built:

And when the priests came out of the Holy Place (for all the priests who were present had consecrated themselves, without regard to their divisions, and all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters; and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD), and ***when the song was raised***, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever,” the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God (2 Chron. 5:11-14).

Once again we see that when God’s people proclaim his goodness and the eternally enduring glory of his steadfast love, God shows up in especially powerful ways. ***When*** they began to sing and praise, “the glory of the Lord filled the house of God” and the priests were knocked to the ground!

Ruth Myers, who used to work with the Navigators, tells the story of the final days of her husband’s life. He was dying of cancer. She writes:

“He told me that he would be praising God for all eternity, but only here on earth could he bring joy to God’s heart by praising Him in the midst of pain. So Dean decided to make his hospital room a special dwelling place for God through praise. Officiating at his funeral some months later, a close friend said, ‘His room became a sanctuary, his bed a pulpit, and all who came to comfort him were (themselves) blessed.’ Praise did not bring healing of the cancer. But through praise and faith Dean brought refreshment of God’s presence into a painful situation, honoring God in death as he had in life” (34).

C. S. Lewis struggled with the constant demand in the psalms that God’s people worship him. He couldn’t figure out why. It seemed like God was a vain and insecure old lady who constantly needed people to tell her that she was still beautiful. That is, until he made a profound discovery:

“I did not see that *it is in the process of being worshiped that God communicates His presence to men*. It is not indeed the only way. But for many people at many times, the ‘fair beauty of the Lord’ is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together” (“A Word about Praising,” 93).

This same principle is seen again in Psalm 68:1-4.

God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God! But the righteous shall be glad; they shall exult before God; they shall be jubilant with joy! Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the LORD; exult before him! (Ps. 68:1-4).

A more accurate translation of v. 4 would be, “cast up a highway for him who rides through the deserts.” The imagery is drawn from the ancient custom among Eastern monarchs who would send heralds and pioneers before them to make all the necessary preparations for their arrival, to remove obstructions, etc. The point is that our praise and worship prepares the way for God to act in power in our presence and for our welfare!

The Power of Praise in Defeating the Devil

We earlier looked at 1 Samuel 16 where the demonic spirit that tormented Saul was sent packing, as it were, every time David played on the lyre. Saul was refreshed and healed by David’s instrumental praise of God. We know that our worship of God infuriates the Devil. You may recall that one of the temptations that Satan brought to bear against Jesus in the wilderness was the offer of all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. All Jesus had to do, said Satan, was “fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:9). *Satan’s number one goal is to thwart God’s number one goal*. God’s goal is to be enjoyed and glorified by his people. This is why Satan will do everything he can to confuse us, divide us, and set us against one another, all with a view to distracting us from our focus on God and disrupting our corporate praise of him.

Consider the underlying motivation of Satan in his attack on Job. Job was a devout and faithful worshiper of God and Satan couldn’t bring himself to believe that Job did it freely. It’s as if Satan said to God: “Don’t flatter yourself. Job doesn’t worship you for nothing. You purchased his praise with gifts and good health and a wonderful family and great wealth. Let me at him and we’ll see if he still clings to you and sings to you.” So God said, “Go for it.”

After Satan’s assault in which he destroyed all of Job’s property and possessions and slaughtered his children, we read this in Job 1:20-22 –

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Satan wasn’t satisfied. He told God that the only reason Job continued to worship was because he had his personal physical health. So God gave Satan permission to afflict Job with boils and sores from head to toe. But Job continued to worship God, and Satan didn’t stand a chance.

We may never suffer as Job did, but you can rest assured that Satan will do everything he can to you individually and to us corporately as a local church to try to persuade us that God isn’t deserving of our praise. Nothing infuriates and enrages him more than when, in spite of hardship and loss and suffering, we enjoy and exult in God and in doing so exalt and extol him as altogether lovely and righteous and great.

This is a warning to us all. Any time there is an escalation of praise and adoration and heart-felt, joyful worship in a church, there is *a corresponding escalation in spiritual warfare*. As you’ve heard me many times before, once again I will quote the words of J. I. Packer: “Whenever God moves, Satan keeps pace.”

The Power of Praise in Blessing God's People

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to hold a resentful or unforgiving or angry thought in your head at the same time you raise your voice to worship the Lord? It's simply not possible to enjoy God and exult in God and exalt his name at the same time you harbor bitterness and jealousy in your heart. I dare you to try it! Try holding in one dimension of your soul hateful and bitter thoughts about another Christian while you simultaneously hold in another dimension of your soul joy and gratitude and adoration of God. It can't be done. Or at least it can't be done for long. Eventually one passion will crowd out and conquer the other.

Worship is the antidote to depression and despondency and fear and doubt and disdain for others. Consider this prophecy from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified (Isa. 61:1-3).

God's remedy for a "faint spirit" and for those who "mourn" is to show himself so great and gracious and glorious that they find themselves anointed with "the oil of gladness" instead of madness and clothed with a "garment of praise" instead of a faint or weak spirit.

This is nowhere more in evidence than in the so-called *psalms of lament*. These are the psalms in which the author unashamedly and passionately pours out his heart to the Lord, crying aloud of his anguish and despair and his sense of having been abandoned by God. There are three elements in virtually every psalm of lament: "I'm hurting. They are winning. You don't care!"

You need not turn to each of these. Just listen as the psalmists cry out in pain and distress and loneliness and then resolve in their hearts to once again praise God:

Psalm 7:1-2, 17; 13:1-2, 5-6; 31:9-10, 21-24; 35:17-18; 42:5, 9-11; 43; 57:4-11; 69:29-30.

When we worship God in the midst of our troubles and trials he releases a supernatural power into our hearts that enables us to persevere and live through adversity. Sometimes he will even deliver us from the pain and heartache itself, but if not, he will always supply us with the strength to endure as long as it lasts.

Praise has the potential for hastening and quickening the process of spiritual healing in our hearts. It awakens us to remember all of the marvelous blessings God has bestowed and the countless ways he has shown himself faithful in the past. It empowers us to trust him for the fulfillment of his promises in the future.

It isn't unusual for God to respond to our worship by supplying us with power for physical healing. But even if he doesn't, he will always enable us to respond as Job did: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord!"

Praise accelerates the process of sanctification. When we are absorbed and obsessed with God and his greatness, the power of sin loses its grip on our hearts. This doesn't mean that we can guarantee for ourselves a utopian, pain-free life if only we would worship more. But it does mean that when our hearts and minds are consumed with God and his promises to us in Christ that earthly problems and pain become increasingly more tolerable.

Conclusion

Gordon MacDonald was at one time president of Inter Varsity Fellowship. But he yielded to temptation and found himself caught up in an adulterous affair. He stepped down from all ministry and spent a couple of years in counseling and prayerful repentance. His marriage was saved and he was eventually restored to ministry. He wrote about his

experience in a book titled, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. In it he describes one occasion when worship accelerated the healing of his heart:

“In one of the darkest hours of my broken-world condition, I found myself one day in the front row of a Dallas church where I had been asked to give a talk. I had made a long-term commitment to be there, but had it not been for my hosts’ hard work of preparation, I would have tried to cancel my participation. Frankly, I was in no mood to speak to anyone. But I felt constrained not to cancel, and so there I was.

When the service began, a group of young men and women took places at the front of the congregation and began to lead with instruments and voices in a chain of songs and hymns: some contemporary, others centuries old. As we moved freely from melody to melody, I became aware of a transformation in my inner world. I was being strangely lifted by the music and its content of thankfulness and celebration. If my heart had been heavy, the hearts of others about me were apparently light because, together, we seemed to rise in spirit, the music acting much like the thermal air currents that lift an eagle or a hawk high above the earth.

I not only felt myself rising out of the darkness of my spirit, but I felt as if I were being bathed, washed clean. And as the gloom melted away, a quiet joy and a sense of cleansing swept in and took its place. I felt free to express my turbulent emotions with tears. The congregation’s praise was a therapy of the spirit: indescribable in its power. It was a day I shall never forget. No one in that sanctuary knew how high they had lifted one troubled man far above his broken-world anguish. Were there others there that day feeling as I did? Perhaps they would have affirmed as I did: *God was there*” (178).

Such is the life-transforming, demon-defeating, heart-healing power of praise!