

## JUMPIN' JEHOSHAPHAT!

In Sunday School today, your teachers will be talking about the Psalms, especially the praise songs of King David and how David – and all Israel, when it was being faithful – praised God for all the wonderful things God did for them. One of the reasons Judaism has survived for four thousand years (longer than any other religion on earth) is because whenever anything bad happened, they blamed themselves – and whenever anything good happened, they gave praise and thanks to God. Actually, a lot of Americans have now reversed that, but we won't talk about that this morning.

One of the things your teachers will be trying to help you to see is that faith – trust in God – is strong. And when we notice how much God does for us, it makes *us* confident and strong. Some of the best things are not on the outside where everybody can see them. But it is harder to talk about the inside things. In any case, we need to know and remember the stories of how God has blessed us. Lack of gratitude is the severe enemy of our religion. So if that is true, why is it not named among the Seven Deadly Sins? Actually, it is. It is at the top of the list, the king of the Seven Deadly Sins. It is PRIDE: I don't thank God for anything; I did it all myself.

The Jewish people told stories all the time about what God had done for them. Most of you know the huge stories about Abraham and Jacob and Joseph. They are really stories about how much God cared and what God was doing for them. Moses, the deliverance from Egypt, Passover – we cannot imagine Judaism apart from this story, and the Covenant that was born from it. But there are countless little stories all along the way too. Well, they were not so little to the people living through them, but if they did not change the whole nation's conscious awareness of God and what God was doing, then they seem smaller than the big stories. Nevertheless, David was pretty happy that God helped him against Goliath. If God had not, a whole lot of other stories could never have been told. So when your teachers get through today, you need to keep thinking and remembering – until you also remember some of the times God has helped you. Because there are a lot more stories that are going to happen in the future because of you, if you realize God is helping you, and if you learn more and more to trust God to go on helping you.

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So now I will tell you one of the stories I bet you never heard before. Actually, a lot of people here have never heard it before. I keep trying to get them to read The Book, but not all of them realize how serious I am about this or how important it is. Or maybe they just think they already trust God too much already.

When I was a boy about your age, adults in my church used a strange expletive. Humans seem to need something to say for a verbal exclamation mark – no content; just emphasis. “Holy Toledo!” or “Ohmygosh!” – and it can deteriorate quickly from there. Well, where I grew up, if adults thought something was strange or needed special emphasis, they would frequently remark, “Jumping Jehoshaphat!”

Naturally I went to the Bible to figure out where this phrase came from and what it really meant. But I couldn't find anything about Jehoshaphat jumping at any particular time or place. The phrase did not mean anything in particular. It was just a biblical version of Hopalong Cassidy. But I did find some interesting stories about Jehoshaphat. He was one of the better kings of Judah – meaning, more faithful to God than lots of the others. But he was far from perfect. He made some pretty dumb mistakes and then God would have to bail him out of trouble he never should have gotten into in the first place.

Like one time he decided to team up with Jehoram, the King of Israel, and with the King of Edom to attack Moab. That was a kingdom across the Jordan River and east of the Dead Sea. Well, that was almost a disaster, but the great prophet Elisha saved them from dying of thirst out there in the desert where they never should have been in the first place. Now, Elisha didn't really care much about Israel or Edom, but he *did* care about Jehoshaphat and Judah, because Jehoshaphat was a king who loved God.

Well, that's a pretty good story right there, about God helping them out of a really tight spot. But even though they won for the moment, it made Moab mad. So Moab formed an alliance with the Ammonites, the Syrians, and the Edomites. The Edomites had changed sides, you notice. Some people don't care whose side they are on, as long as they think it will make them successful. Anyway, that was a huge army gathered against Jehoshaphat and Judah. And it didn't look like there was any way they could survive when such a strong alliance marched against them. So Jehoshaphat called all the people of Judah together,

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to the temple in Jerusalem, and he started praying. It was a pretty heart-felt prayer, but mostly he said, "O God, it is all over unless You do something to help us."

And before that huge army ever marched against Jerusalem, the different factions and nations of the alliance started quarreling with each other and killing each other. And Jehoshaphat never even had to go to battle against that huge army. But Jehoshaphat was not stupid. He knew that God had saved him, and that it had nothing whatsoever to do with his own intelligence or deserving. And so he never stopped giving praise and thanks to God.

Of course, if something like that happened today, everybody would say it was just a coincidence. They wouldn't give any praise or thanks to God. And then God wouldn't be able to go on helping them or guiding them very much.

## JEHOSHAPHAT & MICAIAH

The children's sermon and now this Scripture reading have suggested to the alert among you that we are going to be talking about Jehoshaphat (*Yahweh is judge*), the fourth King of Judah. Normally we don't hear many sermons about Jehoshaphat, so maybe we need to get oriented. After the death of King Solomon, there was civil war and the Jewish nation split into two kingdoms: Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. From then on it gets pretty complicated. Nobody goes there anymore – too many difficult names; too much idolatry; too much confusion and secularism. It's hard to find or track the theme of any "Holy History" going on. The Great Covenant was constantly broken, and despite some great prophets and a few faithful kings, the whole "Chosen People / Faithful Nation" thing was in a tailspin from which it would never recover. It is so sad and troubling that people have a serious aversion to this part of the Bible without even realizing why. It reminds us too much of our own situation, our own nation – with its vision, roots, and dreams now virtually abandoned, ridiculed, or forgotten.

Can you work your way at all into the place and time of Jehoshaphat? He has no light bulbs, no cars or trains or planes, no computers or telephones. He has no clocks or watches, no faulty calendars, and not a bicycle or typewriter or grocery store anywhere. Mostly what he knows is stored in his head and, because he is the king, he can call on priests to read scrolls and access records for him. But the amount of information at his fingertips would seem minuscule to you. Not only is it out of date and often inaccurate, it takes two days to three weeks for somebody to find the information and bring it to him. Yet he is still making decisions every day that affect the whole nation, and, because he is Jehoshaphat, he is trying to be as responsible and faithful as he knows how to be.

He doesn't know it yet, of course, but his reign will last twenty-five years, from 874 to 850 B.C. Not only is he sad that the civil war has split the Jewish nation, but he ends up with the short end of the stick – the land and peoples of two tribes – while Israel to the north has the land and peoples of nine tribes. Israel has far more resources and a lot of "modern" ways in comparison to Judah. Their king, Ahab, is a very effective king, though Jehoshaphat does not like his loosey-goosey attitude toward religion. And Ahab's wife, Jezebel, is downright dangerous.

But Jehoshaphat certainly does not want war with Ahab. Much better for Judah, he thinks, if Israel is an ally. After all, he has more than sufficient worries with the nations all around him who share no history or traditions from the past. There can be war at almost any time, with any of them: Edom, Moab, Ammon, Syria. And that doesn't even count the giants – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon – and God knows who else is “out there.” Among other things, he has no decent maps; there is no way to tell the difference between news and rumors; his only telegraph lines are men on foot, since horses are conspicuous and, in the long run, slow you down. For all Jehoshaphat knows, an enemy army could be marching against him at that very moment and he just hasn't heard about it yet.

So when Ahab suggests an alliance that they go together against Ramoth-gilead – the stronghold of Aram (Syria to you), which is looking like their most dangerous enemy at the time – Jehoshaphat thinks that may be a very good idea. Besides, it is time to heal old wounds between Judah and Israel, and maybe that way everybody will experience greater strength and prosperity. Somewhere in there, we learn that Jehoram – Jehoshaphat's eldest son and heir to the throne of Judah – has married Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. It seals the alliance. Marriage is the oldest peace treaty in the world. Only, in this case it will very nearly undo everything Jehoshaphat has ever worked for or cared about. And it will come within a whisper of turning all of Judah – like Israel – from Yahweh and from Judaism to the worship of Baal and Asherah.

On a bad day, I sometimes think the Baal worshipers won after all – that our whole country has gone off to worship fertility cults and nature gods. Does our culture not know that there is a God of light and truth who stands beyond it all, above it all – calling us to ways and purposes far beyond this tiny globe? Well, the Light is never quite snuffed out. And that fascinates me.

Jehoshaphat is not entirely gullible. He knows Ahab is no champion of Yahweh. He knows Ahab does not always deal from the top of the deck. But like so many good-hearted people – like so many of you – he thinks his good intentions can make up for faithfulness. After all, isn't love for neighbor more important than obedience to God? If our hearts are in the right place – if we want to do good for people – then that should be an adequate substitute for prayer and obedience, don't you think? Well of course; we all know that. Christianity is about being nice and doing good. Never mind what God wants or what God is asking of us – or even what God is forbidding us to do.

Two things cause most of the grief and damage I have seen going over in the last forty-five years. I am not talking globally; I am talking personally – about the lives of real people I have actually known and shared life with.

One is lack of faith – trust – in God. The result is fear, guilt, missed purpose – and the failure of commitment and devotion because of the fear – from which comes all manner of confusion, lostness, foolish decisions, hurtful patterns.

The second is soft hearts. All of us have soft hearts, no matter how deeply buried. But soft hearts that have not sworn allegiance to Christ are sentimental without power, perspective, or purpose. Soft hearts without allegiance to Christ are enabling; they play victim; they put up with relationships that are wrong and not healing; they forgive the unrepentant and side with evil. Soft hearts try to pretend there is no Satan, no evil. Soft hearts are Chamberlain going along with Hitler, when Hitler could have been stopped before he ever got started. And it cost twenty-five million lives.

Soft hearts have no deep respect for themselves as children of God, so they forget that other people have obligations and responsibilities under God as well. Soft hearts want to be loved and to avoid all trouble, so they end up valuing nothing and no one. They keep on giving and forgiving, and hope for the best. But it is not a hope born of faith in God; it is a hope based on luck, and mortgaged to wishful thinking.

Jehoshaphat is not entirely gullible. He knows they need to consult God before rushing off to battle. It looks good – seems good – from a human perspective. But how broad, high, and deep is human perspective? So we get this interesting scenario. First of all, it is very clear that Ahab does not care about or want to know God's opinion. He and God have not been friends for years. However, Ahab does have a few prophets – religious, spiritual men, four hundred of them – who stand ready to speak for God and tell Ahab whatever he wants to hear. Moreover, they can help persuade others that Ahab is blessed by God and doing the godly thing. "We prayed, we consulted the Scriptures, we cast the urim and thumin, we did the incantations ... and Ahab is right. Absolutely you should go along with Ahab." Need I translate?

Jehoshaphat is not entirely gullible. He can smell the mendacity. These prophets are all telling the same party line, in the same way,

at the same time. What are the chances of perfidy? He wants to know (from Ahab): Is there no other prophet in the realm? “As a matter of fact, yes – there is Micaiah – but you don’t want to hear what he has to say; he still tries to listen to God instead of to me.” (That’s not exactly how Ahab puts it, but it is clear all the same.)

So Micaiah comes in and plays the game for a while, but in such a way that everybody knows he is not serious. “You don’t really care what God wants, so why should I stick my neck out?” But finally Micaiah speaks the truth he has known all along: Ahab has been playing God and pretending faith for long enough, and this last plan and scheme of his will be his death. As an aside, Ahab senses it himself. He is one of Israel’s better warriors and more successful campaigners. He has won many victories in the past, some of them surprising. Why does he seek alliance with Jehoshaphat now? He smells danger and looks for a patsy – a sucker to maybe be a buffer between himself and the disaster he fears is coming. How conscious or semiconscious of this he is, we cannot tell. But the story is there.

So I ask you: Why doesn’t Jehoshaphat pack up and go home right then and there? Micaiah has spoken. Does Jehoshaphat doubt that Micaiah has told the word of the Lord honestly? Ahab’s toady prophets – the pretend men of God – are enraged. Zedekiah, their leader, smacks Micaiah in the face and Micaiah is hauled off to prison. Prison and bread and water for speaking God’s truth. How surprised are we?

But why doesn’t Jehoshaphat pack up and go home right there and then? I guess we all know. He doesn’t for the same reasons we don’t: We hate to give up on our plans. They represent things that seem good to us, if only we can pull them off. Surely Ahab couldn’t be as bad as we suspect. And we sort of agreed – sort of gave our word – to do this thing, and it seems unkind to pull out now. Maybe we should just sort of go along, make the best of it, hope for the best. Besides, how do we know there really *is* a God or that God spoke through Micaiah? I mean, we *believe* it, but how do we *know*? With a little effort, we can manage to not think about it very much – or at least not very clearly.

By this time, Ahab knows that Jehoshaphat is hooked and not thinking straight. If he were, he would have gone home. So Ahab can take full advantage of Jehoshaphat without much concern that Jehoshaphat will awaken from his cooperative stupor. Ahab knows that the King of Syria will most likely single Ahab out in the upcoming battle – that he will

tell all of his soldiers, “Above all, kill Ahab.” So Ahab says to Jehoshaphat: “Tell you what, you wear your royal robes into the fray, but I’ll go into battle in disguise.” Very cute! And Jehoshaphat goes along with it. Can you believe that?

“Hey, my dear friend and bosom buddy, I have a good idea: You take all the risks and let me reap all the benefits, okay? Won’t that make you feel noble and good and righteous? If God is with you, maybe you won’t die. But in any case, you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that you loved your neighbor. Pretty good deal, eh?”

“Hey, my dear friend and bosom buddy, I have a really great idea: You give me your money and I’ll promise to pay it back, though both of us know I never will. And then you can feel really good about being so generous and loving, okay?”

Of course, I could go on. But I shouldn’t be bugging *you*; I am just as guilty as any of you. Jehoshaphat realized by the end of that day at Ramoth-gilead that he had been really stupid, and that he had been saved by the sheer grace and favor of God. Meanwhile, a strangely random arrow had somehow found a vulnerable spot in Ahab’s armor, despite his disguise. Ahab was dead by sundown. The battle was lost, and Jehoshaphat was fortunate indeed to make his way back to Jerusalem in safety.

Jehoshaphat was still a remarkable king. Truly he did the best he could most of the time. He “sought the Lord with all of his heart,” as Second Chronicles 22:9 puts it. And while this was not the only time the Lord bailed him out of foolish moves, it seems clear that God was trying to help him. And who among us does not make foolish moves?

Jehoshaphat tore down the “high places” and “groves” where people were burning incense to other gods. Do we know of any other king who gathered a team of teachers and sent them to every city in Judah to teach the people “The Law” and to strengthen their loyalty to the Covenant? A nationwide educational program in 860 B.C.? Not bad!

I mentioned that Jehoshaphat’s eldest son, Jehoram, married Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. Jehoram murdered all of his brothers in Judah to secure his throne, but when he himself died of a horrible disease, Athaliah became the Queen of Judah (first and only). Of course, like her mother Jezebel, Athaliah continued to suppress the

worship of Yahweh and to build up the worship of Baal and Asherah. So Jehoshaphat's faithfulness and good intentions were very nearly undone by his one most grievous error: his misguided friendship with Ahab. But never mind; it's only ancient history. Today we know we are supposed to love everybody and judge nobody. All are welcome and all are equal.

Despite Jehoram's apostasy, Jehoshaphat's granddaughter saved the royal line from extinction and paved the way to the recovery of Judaism in Judah. But that's another story for another time. Jehoshaphat also had another son besides Jehoram and the seven brothers that Jehoram murdered. His name was Jehu, and he lived in Israel, not Judah. He was not married to any of Jezebel's daughters and, like his father, he was strong for Yahweh. Maybe watching his father play footsy with Ahab had taught him a lot. In any case, he was anointed by Elisha. It was one of the commands Elijah had received from the still, small voice at the Holy Mountain in the Sinai. The Kingdom of Israel seemed lost from Yahweh after the long reign of Ahab and Jezebel, whose dynasty seemed firmly established on the throne. But Jehu cut it all to pieces in a few days and became the tenth King of Israel, returning the Northern Kingdom to the worship of Yahweh. Some of you don't think it matters, but I do. Yahweh is not the same as the other gods.

When Jehoshaphat returned to Jerusalem after that battle at Ramoth-gilead, another Jehu (not his son) went out to meet him – the son of Hanani, the seer, who also admired and appreciated Jehoshaphat and his efforts to be faithful, at least a good deal of the time. But this Jehu was not impressed with the foolishness of trying to be friends with Ahab. Jehu went out to meet Jehoshaphat as he came toward Jerusalem and said to him: *“Do you take delight in helping the wicked and befriending the enemies of the Lord?”*

I wonder if any of us need to have a friend like Jehu, the son of Hanani. Life is sometimes hard, and often it comes fast. Don't *we* also need prophets to give us perspective and keep us on track? I think we just don't call them prophets anymore – we call them Mentors. In any case, if they don't ask you the question, somebody else should.

*“Do you take delight in helping the wicked and befriending the enemies of the Lord?”*