**HJ Schilder A king looks on high** *2 Chronicles 20; 1-13*

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ

It is worthwhile to pay particular attention to the prayers which are sent up to God in heaven during the history of the Old Testament.

Whoever pays such attention becomes even more surprised by the prayer that this text includes. Not a prayer of a priest or prophet, office-bearers who would be more qualified for a prayer service on account of their position, but the prayer of a king. And that in the heat of battle, in sight of an audacious attack from a hostile force-majeure. It is king Jehoshaphat of Judah, who leads in prayer on the temple square, while all the people, including women and children, are gathered there. Their entire existence is at stake here. More strongly, the land, which God had promised His people is in the crisis of war. In this chapter the story is written in great detail. It ends with a complete victory because the enemies destroy each other. But that is actually not the cause of the victory. The secret of the battle and its victory lies in the leadership of Yahweh who hears the prayer of king Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat was the God fearing king of Judah, who could be so flawed in his political tact. Jehoshaphat who worked together and fraternized in different ways with the godless king Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel. Yet in this chapter he is counted as a king who goes before his people in full strength, in the way pointed out by the Lord. A king who, in the fire of danger for the promised land, seeks refuge by Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The story begins with Jehoshaphat’s prayer. A remarkably thoughtful and far-reaching prayer in which he, in a scriptural manner, seeks the Lord and places the peril before Him. This prayer is the real reply to the attack of the enemies. We summarize the main thoughts as follows:

***The attack upon the land of promise is answered by king Jehoshaphat by prayer.***

We pay closer attention by the following three points:

1) the king recognizes the danger (vs. 10, 11);

2) he calls upon the God of the fathers (vs. 6-9);

3) he confesses powerlessness (vs. 12).

**ONE**

This time we must begin in the middle of the text. Because the distress for which the king calls upon the Lord is described there.

That distress is already written about in the first verses of this chapter.

But in his prayer Jehoshaphat describes in more detail to the Lord what is actually going on.

It is clear enough what is going on. It is war!

But there are so many types of warfare in the history of the world. Also in Old Testament history. Often the wars of strange nations against God’s people had the goal of obtaining freedom. They no longer wanted to be subjects, to pay taxes. There could be many more things to mention. However here it concerns a very specific situation.

Here it was the land of promise as such that had been invaded. The Lord had given His people that land. He had carefully directed them along the way to that land. In this they had to spare certain peoples, nations related by blood. Whoever says that the Old Testament is a cruel book of wars forgets, amongst others, that the Lord very carefully spares nations whenever He can. But now those nations, spared at the entry, reward good with evil. Jehoshaphat clearly says what it is about. The Ammonites, Moabites and people from Seir, known earlier as Meunites, have come to drive them from the possessions which the Lord had given to His people. Actually it is not their own land but God’s land, His possession which He had given them as an inheritance. That is where God wanted His people too live.

It is what He had once promised to Abraham. That land was full of filthy idolatry. But the Lord came to purify it for His service. His Holy people would live there. So he drove out the Canaanites and set David’s house upon the throne.

But the nations, whom they had to leave in their places when they entered the land, now come to drive them from their inheritance. They came up against Judah with overwhelming numbers. They had chosen a route by which they would surprise Judah. They are already only a few hours off from Jerusalem. And it appears from particulars evident later in the chapter how certain they were of success. They had taken the household belongings with them. It is not only an army which comes rushing in, it is a horde of immigrants who want to establish themselves in the territory. And especially they must leave… that hated nation, the people of Yahweh, the insurgents.

That is what is particular about this war. King Jehoshaphat recognizes that danger. That is how he says it to the Lord. He does not do as some supplicants would do, being satisfied with a general petition, thinking that the Lord knows it all. No, he does what the catechism says when it speaks of prayer: he recognizes this need and misery, this particular danger, at its root, according to its nature. And this he puts before the Lord.

It is a given here that we have everything to do with this war. Because this attack is an assault at the heart of the land of promise. Therefore it is actually an assault on Christ Himself. David’s great heir of the future. They want to live in the territory where according to God’s counsel Christ will be born ~ Bethlehem is situated in the area ~ and also Jerusalem, the city from which the gospel will go to the ends of the earth according to God’s plan.

We have everything to do with this. More then ever now that Christ has come and has gathered you as His people in this world. You no longer live in that land, you are no longer a separate nation like the people of Israel or Judah.. But you have so much more of the inheritance of Christ, the whole world, a new heaven and a new earth. And today you see how the powers rise up to remove the inheritance from you. You no longer have anything to do with the Ammonites, Moabites, Meunites from Seir (a type of Edomites), but you do have to do with much more dangerous enemies who want to wipe you as Christian people from the earth. Jehoshaphat recognized the danger as it threatened Judah then. He did not have to recognize the danger then as it threatens you today. But if you would be his spiritual descendant then you do have to recognize it today.

As reformed churches we have received much from God. But how small in numbers we have become in this world. And how often doesn’t the attack come from nearby, from those who are most closely related in the so called ecumenism. Who would take your place as church away, your influence in the land, take away your voice in society.

Do you want to honestly pray in the spirit of Jehoshaphat, by the Spirit of Christ that is, for then you must set yourself to practice it in order to recognize the danger. Something will be necessary for that. The words before our text say that the king called the people to fast and come together for this prayer. I do not say you must fast today in the same manner. But it belongs to your inheritance from Jehoshaphat that you train in that distinction, this recognition of an enemy that would take from you the promised world.

Fasting ~ today that could come as having to leave everything which stands in the way of your training. This is also of particular importance for the youth of the church; they live in a world which gives the impression that you can participate in everything. It is not possible to just say what you can participate in or not, certainly not in a few words. But this at least: do not behave as if it is self-evident that you can join along with everything. When you recognize the dangers that threaten the church of Christ you will leave well enough alone because it makes it much easier for you. Leave many things alone in order to preserve the indispensable. Leave much that stands in the way of your training alone with sharp mindfulness.

Because you have so much, congregation. You have such a great inheritance. Train in it, train to recognize how many dangers, how many enemies would take the inheritance away from you, the inheritance of a whole world, a new heaven and a new earth, all the treasures and gifts of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**TWO**

We can say this about our text, congregation, not only because the king who prays here speaks of the need, not only because the people fasted, but also because he started his prayer with a broad petition. We first started in the middle of the text. But consequently, in the second place, we are led back to the beginning of the text now .

This prayer is a noteworthy prayer. He asks actually for very little. He “asks” for almost nothing. It consists mainly in laying the present emergency before the Lord. And then again the largest part consists of an assertion. Yet that assertion is not a compilation of beautiful words, an embellished introduction. It is much more carefully in tune with the distress which the king lays before God. Indeed, it is about the inheritance which Yahweh pledged to His people. Well, Jehoshaphat addresses the Lord in such a way that He is reminded of His own past work: Are You not the God which had driven off the inhabitants for Your people Israel and has given this land forever to Abraham’s seed?

Here the king lets it be known that this is not just a concern of their own, not just a matter important to themselves, but that it is the business of the Lord Himself. Certainly they may live there, verse 8, but why? In order to build a sanctuary there. Of what use was that inheritance if the Lord was not there with them? Jehoshaphat in an Old Testament manner says here: wasn’t the intention that we would live here with God in our midst, with Thee, God Immanuel, God who in Christ makes a dwelling amongst sinners? And this God is the only true God who has established a covenant with the fathers. That is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, also God of my royal father David. And this God is not just a small God of a small nation, but the God in heaven who rules over all the kingdoms of the nations. This is what Jehoshaphat says now that they, as a small nation, are about to be smothered by a national superpower. Then he confesses the might of that God: in Thy hand is power and might, no one can stand against Thee.

Note well, congregation, that is foremost.

Perhaps it would be easier to say that at the end. What follows describes how the Lord fights for His people and gives the victory.. But the end could come because it was of the beginning being that way. God’s people are always first in Christ’s triumphant and therefore militant church. On this occasion , for this danger, Jehoshaphat speaks these words, but at the same time it is an instruction for prayer for every age and in every need and with every struggle. It almost becomes a confession of faith, it is a statement that always applies: “In Thy hand is power and might, no can stand up beside Thee“. Everyone must yield to Thee.

This confession must be in the forefront, before there is any sign of results, when the enemy is standing near the door and the danger increases by the hour. For truly, the danger still increases by the hour. The united armies are already at Engedi. One might say that it is strategically dangerous to spend so much time praying. But this general-king does take the time for it. He knows that prayer is the mightiest weapon in the battle. Therefore he puts out such an extensive call upon God himself and His glorious virtues.

Therefore he also takes the time to recall the history, to remember the entrance into the land, Solomon’s temple, and Solomon’s prayer when he dedicated the temple.

Yes also that last part. Pay extra attention to what it says in verses 8 and 9. He brings out what his predecessor Solomon had prayed before when the temple was dedicated. Then the Lord came to live in a house amongst His people. We have already said it was an Old Testament foreshadowing of the dwelling of God amongst sinners through Christ. Therefore Solomon, at the dedication of the temple, could also cast a view to the future. He had listed all kinds of situations the people, that nation of sinners, could get into. And now Jehoshaphat says short and powerfully: Lord, now we are in such a situation, it is now that far; in the past we said: when we are overcome with misfortune…. then we will stand before this house and before Thy countenance (for Thy name rests on this house, and You live there Your self with Your rich revelation) and say: hear us in our need for You will do so, then You will hear us and help us.

Again, Jehoshaphat also says this beforehand, even before the Lord gave deliverance. To pray after a deliverance is easy enough, but to pray when you can not see your hand in front of your eyes and then to still see the Lord, that is what it depends on. That is what the king does, he remembers what Solomon asked in the happy hour when God’s house was dedicated in the city Jerusalem. Connected to that, portraying the hour of need with those old words, he says: now it has come that far, now we are in such a situation. And herein the entire prayer is decided. Here he expresses at the same time his total trust in the Lord. Ahead of time, with the enemy at the door.

How could Jehoshaphat do so, Congregation? By the Spirit of God you would say. That is true. But it does not say that. You must not also say too soon; he could do it because he was king and therefore extra gifted. For although being king he had no special privileges in the gift of prayer. As far as that goes we must say that he was “only a king”. So again, why was Jehoshaphat able to do it? Let us explain it very simply in this way: because he knew God from the Scriptures, and from the history of His people. And simpler yet: Because he had a good catechism, and used it as king.

There is reason to use these words, for in a previous chapter (17) it is told how Jehoshaphat took measures for the catechizing of God’s people. He had again made the people trust in the Lord. And now it appears that this had not left him behind. In this way, that is from the Scriptures and the history of his people, he had learned himself to know God. The Holy Spirit of Christ had worked in him in this ordinary manner. This way the Spirit also makes him to be competent for his office. Therefore he is able to call upon God.

Therefore we may say with full confidence that you can too. You can all the more so. You who, in catechism, from the Bible, and by the preaching, have learned so much more to know God in the Lord Jesus Christ. Think therefore about the catechism, think highly of Bible study and preaching, hold high the means which the Lord gives you in that line: society work, lectures. In short: train yourself in the insight and knowledge of faith. Using these means learn to know God, learn to understand the times, and learn to call upon Him whenever the inheritance is in danger. With it you learn to recognize the enemies. Thereby you learn in a timely fashion to call upon Him, the God of your fathers, your God and Father in Jesus Christ, thereby you learn to “set yourself up to call upon the Lord” (as said in verse 3) whenever the distress approaches. When you learn to know Him from His Word in the history of His people you will be able to speak to Him, and find your strength in Him, whenever your inheritance is threatened.

**THREE**

So now the ending can be short.

We have already said: a noteworthy prayer, it barely asks for anything, it does not even say in so many words: “Lord save us”. The last verses puts a question before Him ~ and this question is at the same time a call ~ oh Lord our God, wilt Thou not judge them? ‘Them’, who have aimed for our inheritance, wherein Thy sanctuary stands? Because we cannot. We are powerless. That is the end of it: the king confesses his own powerlessness. Verse 12: “we have no power against this great multitude… we do not know what to do”, we can not think of any military defense to protect the land of promise, there is only one thing Lord, our eyes are upon Thee. It is written even more briefly: ‘on-Thee our-eyes’.

Therewith the king delivers himself with his people over to the grace of the God he has called upon. The next verse explains how much it was a matter for the whole nation; they were all standing there, even the little children, their wives and their offspring. They are not standing there as a army armed to the teeth, but as a totally helpless nation. As a nation to whom God had given promises, to whom He had pledged the land. So they say together: Lord, it is Thy concern, and therefore our concern, ‘on-Thee our-eyes’. That is our last word, we now wait for the next word from Thee.

That word does come; the rest of the story speaks of it. But it comes because they had prayed in this way. Where ever prayer is given in this way the Lord gives deliverance. He does not give deliverance when his name is called upon afterwards but when it is done beforehand. For then He is acknowledged. This prayer was the most important part of thankfulness; it satisfied what the catechism calls the requirements of prayer, it calls upon the only true God. It places our own need and misery before the Lord, it speaks in the certainty of a hearing.

And therefore God did give a hearing. Therefore He came to help. Therefore He came to protect the inheritance and preserve it for them. In this way He kept the road open to David’s and Jehoshaphat’s great Son, your Lord Jesus Christ. So He preserved the inheritance of a new heaven and a new earth for you.

Congregation, we said it already in the beginning, today the assault upon your inheritance is much more vehement. We add to it: you have received a so much richer prayer instructions. Remain in Jehoshaphat’s faith and with the praying nation, train yourself in prayer, deny yourself everything that can take the inheritance away from you, recognize the enemies who have an aim on your inheritance and keep to the last word: “on-Thee our-eyes.

**Amen.**

Reading ~ 2 Chronicles 20: 1-13

Text ~ 2 Chronicles 20: 6-11

Sing ~ Ps. 68: 1; Ps. 68: 12; Ps. 89: 12; 89: 14, 15; Ps. 74: 12,13 (BoP)