

STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES

The role of worship in the spiritual fight

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In 1999, a movie called *The Matrix* revolutionized the way movies are made. With its blend of intense action, amazing special effects and philosophical scriptwriting, it created a new breed of film.

But at the heart of the movie was the story of Neo, a man who discovers that what he thought was reality was in fact an illusion called the Matrix, created by a computer. There was a whole existence outside of the Matrix, where an enormous struggle for power was taking place between people and machines. That discovery revolutionized his life.

There is an entire reality outside of our world. A bigger existence on a cosmic scale. Something intense is happening that is connected to what's going on in the visible world, but entirely invisible and separate at the same time.

Yes, we are still talking about worship this morning, but what I would like to look at with you is the way in which worship puts us in contact with the bigger picture.

Mel Gibson was interviewed by Diane Sawyer this week about his new movie, and he spoke to her and the television audience about his belief that there are spiritual forces at war around us. He could tell that there were forces beyond human personalities that were creating resistance to his film, and he also acknowledged forces giving him supernatural help along the way.

There's a constant struggle going on.

Ephesians 6:12-13

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

We said last week that worship is expressing what we know and love about God. **When we do that, something happens in the spiritual realms.** That's amazing. There is a power in worship that is difficult to grasp or believe since we can't see it. We can't point to anything to quantify it. And we're very much physical beings. We have a hard time accepting truth we can't measure in a tangible way.

I struggle with that. How can my small acts of worship have any effect on what's happening in a different dimension? It's a hard one to wrap your mind around. Fortunately, God has given us some examples in the Bible that help us see more clearly

what is going on and the relationship between that world and ours. He shows us how worship serves as a weapon in the battle against evil.

Maybe that sounds a little too “out there,” a little too fanatical or crazy for your idea of worship. Shades of a Heaven’s Gate cult trying to contact aliens or something. That’s not it at all. To be a Christian necessarily means acknowledging the existence of spiritual beings, because that’s what God is. And Scripture tells us that evil spirits are equally real. That truth has often been abused and misunderstood, and so people sometimes shy away from it and prefer to deal with concrete reality.

But that doesn’t change the fact that spirits are real and locked in a battle of good vs. evil. And it doesn’t change the fact that by worshipping, we are joining the fight. When we worship, there is more going on than meets the eye. It isn’t just singing or reading or praying.

Remember studying sound waves in school? If Justin plucks a string on his bass, it moves the air around it and that pushes more and more air until it reaches your ear. You could be clear outside this building and still hear him, because he can crank it up and make the waves push further and further out. As we speak the name of Almighty God and truths about him it’s like plucking that string. It reverberates clear into another world. So we have to pay attention to our worship, because the implications are far-reaching. And as we grow in our understanding of it, the more effective we will be in our worship, the more we crank up the sound waves.

It’s easier to talk about this with real examples, so I’d like to look at 3 stories this morning. Each one took place in ancient Israel. Each one involved worship, and each one shows the role worship plays in what we could call spiritual warfare.

1 Sam 16:14-23

Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.

Saul's attendants said to him, "See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, and you will feel better."

So Saul said to his attendants, "Find someone who plays well and bring him to me."

One of the servants answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him..."

David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers. Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, "Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him."

Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

I have never been in the armed forces. Those of you who have can correct me if I'm wrong, but as I understand military strategy, there are really two main ideas: Defense and offense. You're either protecting something from attack, or you're doing the attacking. Either that or you're moving from one position to another. That's what soldiers do.

If we translate that into our discussion of worship, I would see this situation with Saul as being a defensive operation. **In worship, our defenses are strengthened.**

Saul is under attack from an enemy. The writer even goes so far as to identify it as an evil spirit. He's not just in a bad mood. He's not just feeling a little blue. He is being hounded and pursued by a relentless opponent.

What does he do? He calls for a harpist. I see the harpist as a picture of worship. This one happens to be David, who is probably the best model of a worshipper we have in Scripture. David knew how to play that harp for God. He had probably composed most of his Psalms while playing it out in the fields watching his father's sheep.

As David worshipped, two things happened: **Saul felt better, and the demon left him.** That is a great example of worship at its defensive best.

Sometimes, life can feel like one big attack. A friend of ours from our California days had an extremely stressful and crazy job that was really pulling her down. It was a miserable situation. What she did to get through it was turn to worship. Everybody in

California has some commute time to work (we used to say it took 45 minutes to get anywhere – it didn't matter where). Our friend intentionally made the effort to not turn on the radio during her commute to work and instead spend the time worshipping and praying. When I asked her about it, she said, "It made all the difference to my day – I actually felt like a richer and deeper person when I made that investment of worship and prayer."

I don't believe that every time we are discouraged or depressed it is necessarily a spiritual attack. There are all kinds of other causes, both physical and emotional. But at times, it is. I believe that worship can be the defensive tool to help us overcome those black periods of our life. One pastor I know described it this way: If we are feeling like we are caught down in a pit, like David described it so often in the Psalms, worship is a ladder we can use to get out. Each time we praise God, we are climbing another rung, getting closer to daylight. It tells the enemy that we still believe in God's power, and that in itself is enough to make the demons turn and run.

Attacks can also come in the form of temptation – when there's a strong urge to do something that we know isn't morally or ethically right. Worship can offer protection here, too, and it's not difficult to see why. Spending a few moments focusing our attention on God can help us restore our perspective. We can recognize temptation for what it is and resist it more easily if we are busy expressing what we know and love about God.

One thing I think is great about this story is that Saul wasn't afraid to lean on the worship of other people to be at his defense. He brought in someone else to play the harp. When we're really feeling under attack, sometimes we might not even have the strength or frame of mind to worship on our own. But we can call for a harpist – someone else who can come to our defense.

This week I emailed a friend and asked him to pray with me and for me about something that was starting to feel overwhelming to me. And he came alongside me in a way that was a big encouragement, just by the words he spoke and his offer to pray with me. Don't be afraid to say to someone else, "I'm really going through it right now, and I need some help." As you spend some time praying and worshipping together or sharing Scriptures with each other, you can gain new strength for the fight. And in turn, you can be a harpist for someone else and use your worship as a defensive weapon on their behalf.

There's another incident worth looking at that involved the prophet Elisha. At this point in history, the Jews had divided into two kingdoms – Israel and Judah. The kings of both countries joined with the king of Edom to go fight the Moabites. But they got part of the way there and they ran out of their water supply.

2 Kings 3:4-24

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of the LORD through him?"

An officer of the king of Israel answered, "Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah."

Jehoshaphat said, "The word of the LORD is with him." So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him.

Elisha said to the king of Israel, "What do we have to do with each other? Go to the prophets of your father and the prophets of your mother."

"No," the king of Israel answered, "because it was the LORD who called us three kings together to hand us over to Moab."

Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you or even notice you. But now bring me a harpist."

While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha and he said, "This is what the LORD says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the LORD says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the eyes of the LORD; he will also hand Moab over to you. You will overthrow every fortified city and every major town. You will cut down every good tree, stop up all the springs, and ruin every good field with stones."

The next morning, about the time for offering the sacrifice, there it was—water flowing from the direction of Edom! And the land was filled with water.

Now all the Moabites had heard that the kings had come to fight against them; so every man, young and old, who could bear arms was called up and stationed on the border. 22 When they got up early in the morning, the sun was shining on the water. To the Moabites across the way, the water looked red-like blood. "That's blood!" they said. "Those kings must have fought and slaughtered each other. Now to the plunder, Moab!"

But when the Moabites came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose up and fought them until they fled.

Elisha was being a little feisty. He didn't particularly feel like being helpful. But he finally gave in out of respect for Jehoshaphat. But you'll notice that he doesn't immediately answer. Instead, he too calls for a harpist.

Again, the harpist symbolizes worship – someone who was expressing what they knew and loved about God through music. And as they played their instrument, something remarkable happened. Elisha got a word from the Lord. That's because

In worship, battle plans are revealed.

As the harpist worshipped, Elisha paid attention to more than the music. He realized that God was present. It says the hand of the Lord was upon Elisha during the music. God was right there!

Psalm 22:3 says,

*But You are holy,
Enthroned in the praises of Israel.*

When we praise God, we make a place for him. I picture in my mind one of those chairs that people carried the king down the street on. We lift God up and he is sitting right there with us in worship.

So he is near enough to answer and give us our action plan. Sometimes God speaks very clearly during worship.

The trick is whether or not we're listening for him. Quite honestly, I'm more prone to think about what I want to say in worship instead of what I want to hear. When we're truly worshipping, though, there will be as much waiting on God as there will be expressing ourselves to him.

Ecclesiastes 5:1

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Before we engage in any kind of spiritual battle, we need wisdom from God. We need to know the battle plan. That only comes if we are willing to turn our times of worship into times when we seek to hear God out.

It can be intimidating to stop long enough to listen. God might actually say something to us. And sometimes when God gives us a plan, it involves hard work. The armies of Israel and Judah had to do some digging before God gave them any water. They had to be willing to participate.

And when God shares his battle plan with us, we might find we have our own digging out to do. We may need to make some room for the water to flow. We might need to ask somebody's forgiveness. We might need to forgive someone ourselves. **Listening for a plan implies a willingness to act on it.**

The good news is what Elisha said next: "This is an easy thing for God to do." What we'll discover when we go along with the plan is that the hard work of a miracle comes easily to God, and he will bring the promised new water to our thirsty souls.

In worship, God reveals his battle plan and shows his own capability to execute it.

There's one more story to tell.

2 Chronicles 20:2-25

Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar" (that is, En Gedi).

Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him...All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD.

Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph, as he stood in the assembly.

He said: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'"

Jehoshaphat bowed 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 very loud voice.

Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful." 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."*

As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. The men of Ammon and Moab rose up against the men from Mount Seir to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they helped to destroy one another.

When the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped.

Here we meet Jehoshaphat again, and he once again inquires of the Lord. Unlike Saul, Jehoshaphat is not yet under attack. The enemy is out there, but the armies haven't engaged each other. In this case, instead of taking a defensive posture, the army goes on the attack. They go out to meet the enemy.

Worship isn't just for our protection – it's for God's advancement. Because **in worship, the enemy is defeated.**

Did you catch what happened in that story? You may have missed the central line, so let's look at it again:

As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.

God fought the battle as the worship happened. The people sang and God did his work.

There is real power in worship, not just to ward off the enemy when we're under attack, but to actually take new ground and gain victory.

2 Corinthians 10:4

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

What is it about worship that can do that? For the people of Israel, choosing to worship and put singers out in front of the army was a declaration of trust in God. They were choosing to believe in him rather than to give way to fear.

Fear is one of the primary tools of our spiritual foe. As we choose to say, "No. I'm going to believe God and not give into this fear. No matter how the circumstances may look, no matter how bad my prospects may seem, I'm going to worship God as Creator and Lord of the universe and let him fight this battle."

The bottom line is this: Although the struggle continues, God has already fought the battle and won. When Christ died and rose from the dead, it was a decisive victory over evil. In worship we claim the name of Jesus and cling to the reality that it has been accomplished even when the situation looks and feels otherwise.

In 1944, the Japanese army sent Lt. Hiroo Onoda to the remote Philippine island of Lubang. His mission was to conduct guerrilla warfare during World War II. Unfortunately, no one ever told him that the war had officially ended. He saw some flyers at one time that said the war was over, but assumed it was enemy propaganda. So for 29 years, Onoda continued to live in the jungle, making raids on the villagers, believing they were enemies in disguise. He hid in the jungle until March 19, 1972.

Satan, our enemy, hides in the jungle, living in denial of the fact that the war is over. He will make raids on God's people and continues to hound us and cause trouble. But the

bottom line is that Jesus Christ has won. And in worship we keep declaring that fact, in the face of which the enemy has no choice but to flee.

In worship we celebrate victory and we watch it as it unfolds. We hold fast to what we know is true.

Given that, as we go out into our week where we will all inevitably face attacks of one kind or another, I'd encourage you think about three things.

First, who are my harpists? All of us at one time or another come under attack. Who will come along side me and drop a ladder down into the pit for me to climb out? Or, if I'm standing on pretty solid ground right now, who around me needs to borrow my ladder? Can I be a harpist for someone else?

Second, am I listening for the plan? Am I taking the time to worship God and wait on him for answers to my dilemma? And am I ready to do some digging in my heart when the plan is revealed?

And finally, who is fighting my battles? Am I remembering the battle is the Lord's and that God has already sealed up the victory in Jesus, or am I still out there trying to fight the battle on my own?

When the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, Moses sang these words:

Exodus 15:3-4

The LORD is a warrior;

the LORD is his name.

Pharaoh's chariots and his army

he has hurled into the sea.

The outcome of the battle has already been decided. There are still going to be daily skirmishes with a persistent enemy. But it's over. We know the final outcome. Hallelujah. What a great reason to celebrate in worship.