



# Central Peninsula Church

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2 Chronicles  
17:1-19:3  
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## The Weakness of Strength

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In the next two weeks we'll be looking at the story of a man named Jehoshaphat. His story is found in 2 Chronicles 17-20. The fact that he's given considerable space in this book is indicative of the importance of his life in the mind of the writer. If you look at his life from a bird's eye view you would have to say that he was a good king. In an overall sense, he did what was right in the sight of the Lord (20:32). And yet, as for all of us, there were some hard lessons to learn along the way. The most important lesson was the seeming paradoxical truth that we're at our weakest when we're strong, and we're at our strongest when we're weak. In fact, we can divide his life right down the middle along those very lines. This morning we'll look at the first part of his life as an example of the weakness of strength. And then next week we'll look at the last half of his life from the perspective of the strength of weakness.

It reminds me of a story I heard about the CEO of a Fortune 500 company who pulled into a service station to get gas. He went inside to pay, and when he came out he noticed his wife engaged in a discussion with the gas attendant. It turned out that she knew him. In fact back in high school before she met her husband, she used to date this man. The CEO got in the car, and the two drove in silence. He was feeling pretty good about himself when he finally spoke: "I bet I know what you were thinking. I bet you were thinking you're glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a gas attendant." She looked at him and said, "No, I was thinking if I'd married him, he'd be a Fortune 500 CEO and you'd be a service station attendant."

That's a good example of the weakness of strength! Let me just ask you to think about this right here at the outset: Have you learned this lesson? Maybe a better way to put it is, are you learning this lesson? Are you learning that your greatest liability might be your own strength and success? Are you learning that it's only when you're emptied of your own strength that you can be filled with God's? You're certainly not hearing that message from the world around you. What we hear from the world around us is some version of that constant refrain often heard at high school football games: "You can do it, you can do it, you can, you can!" Deep down we know it's not really true. At the end of the day, we know there are things we can't do. It might be fixing some problem at work, some flaw in our personality or character, some nagging issue in our marriage or our

family, or even some dreaded disease. You can't do it!

I was painfully reminded of that just three weeks ago. We were down in Los Angeles watching our daughter, Kim, play soccer. It was her first game of her sophomore year of college. Meanwhile our son was up here in the Bay Area playing in his first high school football game as a freshman. Both of them had earned starting roles on their team and we were excited for them even though we wished we could be in two places at once. Thirty minutes into the game our daughter went up in the air to head a ball, collided with another player, and came down with a big, bloody laceration over her left eye. They stopped the game, took her off the field, and drove us off to the Urgent Care Clinic. While she was getting 11 stitches over her eye, I got a call telling us that our son had injured his arm in his game. An hour later we learned he broke his left arm so badly that it would require surgery. So Lynn hopped on a plane to be with Matt and I stayed back with Kim. To top it all off, that night Kim and I were driving along the freeway and just missed being part of a major accident caused by reckless driver which took place right in front of our eyes. At that point I wanted to climb into bed and pull the covers over my head! Oh, but "you can do it, you can do it, you can, you can." Sometimes life just whacks you over the head and whatever strength you thought you had is gone, and you realize that you can't do it.

That's the lesson Jehoshaphat had to learn. He was Israel's king at a time when Israel was split in half, the Northern kingdom being called Israel and the Southern kingdom called Judah. He was the fourth king of Judah. He was 35 years old when he took the throne and he died at the age of 60. He was a contemporary of Ahab who was king of the Northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab was extremely wicked, as was his wife Jezebel. For years there was bitter fighting between Israel and Judah.

### I. Strength comes from the Lord.

#### A. Jehoshaphat's strength came from the Lord:

The account opens in ch.17 with a depiction of Jehoshaphat in his strength.

**"Jehoshaphat his son then became king in his place, and made his position over Israel firm. He placed troops in all the fortified cities of Judah, and set garrisons in the land of Judah and in the cities of Ephraim which Asa his father had captured. The LORD was with**

**Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did. So the LORD established the kingdom in his control, and all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor. He took great pride in the ways of the LORD and again removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah. Then in the third year of his reign he sent his officials, Ben-hail, Obadiah, Zechariah, Nethanel and Micaiah, to teach in the cities of Judah; and with them the Levites, Shemaiah, Nethaniah, Zebadiah, Asahel, Shemiramoth, Jehonathan, Adonijah, Tobijah and Tobadonijah, the Levites; and with them Elishama and Jehoram, the priests. They taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the LORD with them; and they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. Now the dread of the LORD was on all the kingdoms of the lands which were around Judah, so that they did not make war against Jehoshaphat. Some of the Philistines brought gifts and silver as tribute to Jehoshaphat; the Arabians also brought him flocks, 7,700 rams and 7,700 male goats. So Jehoshaphat grew greater and greater, and he built fortresses and store cities in Judah. He had large supplies in the cities of Judah, and warriors, valiant men, in Jerusalem” (vv. 1–13).**

Jehoshaphat's strength is seen in a number of arenas. He was strong militarily. He made his position over the Northern kingdom Israel firm with troops and garrisons. Besides Israel, the Philistines and other nations were clearly intimidated by him and sought to stay in his favor. And, as is so often the case, power led to wealth. Not only did all of Judah pay tribute to him but other nations brought such elaborate gifts to him that the writer would say not only in v.5 but also in v.1 of ch.18 that **“Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor.”**

But his strength was not just in worldly things. We also see that he was strong spiritually. He followed the positive example of David's early days, before the unfortunate episode with Bathsheba. But this wasn't just some kind of cold, distant, traditional faith of his fathers that he was trying to carry on; it was a living and vital thing for him. He really sought the God of his father. He pursued the Lord and he followed his commandments. I love what it says in v.6: **“He took great pride in the ways of the Lord.”** Another way of putting it is that **“his heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord.”** With that

came his commitment to ridding Judah of idols and specifically the Asherim, which was a wooden idol associated with the worship of a Caananite goddess.

So he was strong militarily, financially and spiritually. And the writer leaves no doubt that it was the Lord himself who had made Jehoshaphat strong. We're reminded of that in v.3 when he says, **“The Lord was with him.”** And then again in v.5 when he says, **“The Lord established the kingdom in his control.”** And finally again in v.10 when he says, **“The dread of the Lord was on all the kingdoms of the lands which were around Judah.”** In other words, it was the Lord they were afraid of. Even they knew Jehoshaphat's strength was not in himself, but in the Lord.

**B. Our strength comes from the Lord:** We're reminded here of the simple truth that there really is a kind of blessing and success and strength that comes from the Lord. Certainly, there is a kind of success that is gotten by the wrong means, but when you see a person that is enjoying a time of blessing in their life don't automatically assume that they have done something wrong to get it. Sometimes we think that the real spiritual people are those who are in the lowest state of life possible and walk around, hanging their head and singing the blues, and once in a while eek out a “praise the Lord.” But those who are happy and smiling and doing well must be rotten. Sometimes that's true, but not always.

The apostle Paul understood that. In his letter to the Philippians he wrote, **“I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live with prosperity...”** (Phil. 4:12). I have no question that in those times of prosperity Paul was grateful to the Lord and enjoyed the things the Lord provided for him. He wrote to Timothy and spoke of God as the One who **“richly supplies us with all things to enjoy”** (1Tim.6:17). I'm sure that Paul understood that we're tested not only in times of hardship and need but also in times of plenty. It's like a ship or a boat. How do you test the soundness of a vessel like that? How can you see if there is a leak? Not when it's empty, but when it's full. In the same way, the soundness of our spiritual life is oftentimes tested when we're full.

## **II. Weakness is often manifest in strength.**

**A. Jehoshaphat's weakness was manifested in his strength:** This was the case with Jehoshaphat. And we can see right at the outset of ch.18 that the fulness of his success and strength revealed a few leaks in the integrity of his life.

**1. A marriage alliance:** Look at v.1. **“Now Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor; and he allied himself by marriage with Ahab.”** The first mistake he made was making an alliance with Ahab by marriage. We know from 1 Kings that this involved the marriage of Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram, to Ahab and Jezebel's daughter. It was through marriages like this that the kings of

old made political alliances. Apparently Jehoshaphat felt this was a very astute thing to do. It would lay to rest the long-standing animosity between the two kingdoms. It would also make them stronger against the rising threat of the Assyrians. But spiritually this would have disastrous consequences. Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Phoenicia who was a high priest of Baal. The Phoenicians were known for their moral decadence. By marrying his son off to Jezebel's daughter he was bringing this corruption into his home and his nation.

**2. A military alliance:** This marriage alliance led to his second mistake some years later.

**“Some years later he went down to visit Ahab at Samaria. And Ahab slaughtered many sheep and oxen for him and the people who were with him, and induced him to go up against Ramoth-gilead. Ahab king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, ‘Will you go with me against Ramoth-gilead?’ And he said to him, ‘I am as you are, and my people as your people, and we will be with you in the battle’”** (vv. 2–3).

Ahab had a cause to pursue and he convinced Jehoshaphat to join him in it. He wanted to recapture Ramoth-gilead, a city that once belonged to Israel but now belonged to Syria. Notice how Ahab flattered Jehoshaphat by rolling out the red carpet for him and honoring him with a great feast. And so Jehoshaphat made a commitment and said, **“I am as you are, and my people as your people...”** It sounds good, doesn't it? “Hey man, we're one, we're brothers.” The rest of the chapter tells of how Jehoshaphat and Ahab went into battle and how Ahab was killed while Jehoshaphat missed getting killed by the skin of his teeth. He returned to Jerusalem with his tail between his legs.

**3. A commercial alliance:** I wish I could say that he learned his lesson, but it happened again later in his life. Skip over to 20:35. Jehoshaphat had just gotten over a tremendous military victory, one of the greatest in Israel's history, which we'll look at next week. Look what he does.

**“After this Jehoshaphat king of Judah allied himself with Ahaziah king of Israel. He acted wickedly in so doing. So he allied himself with him to make ships to go to Tarshish, and they made the ships in Ezion-geber. Then Eliezer the son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat saying, ‘Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, the LORD has destroyed your works.’ So the ships were broken and could not go to Tarshish”** (vv. 35–37).

Once again, just when everything was going so well, Jehoshaphat made a compromising alliance. This time it was not so much a military adventure but a business adventure. He and Ahab's son, Ahaziah, joined together to make ships that would sail to Tarshish. In 1 Kings it says very clearly that their motive was to find gold. Notice how

God sends a prophet to confront him. God is faithful to pursue him even in his sin. And notice how the whole enterprise fell apart. The ships broke down before they even set sail! It just says, **“The ships were broken.”** His business fell apart because the Lord wasn't in it.

**B. Our weakness is often manifest in strength:** So we see here in Jehoshaphat's life the weakness of strength.

**1. Our unholy alliances:** And notice the particular kind of weakness he showed. Each time he fell, he did so by the same means—an unholy alliance. I'm sure that each time he felt there was a good reason to do it. When we're strong, this is often how we fall as well. Perhaps we think we can get away with it; that it really won't effect us. In 2 Cor. 6:14 Paul says, **“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship have light with darkness?”** There is a lot of confusion about what it means to be “bound together.” Some Christians have misunderstood this to mean that we're to withdraw from the world and stay out of friendships of any kind with unbelievers, staying in our Christian ghetto from womb to tomb. But, we know that's not true. Jesus was called “a friend of sinners.” He didn't withdraw from them; he loved them.

So what does this mean? This phrase “bound together literally means to be “unequally yoked.” A yoke is a wooden frame placed over the heads of animals so they could pull a wagon or a plow. The Israelites were prohibited from yoking together two kinds of animals because it was so cruel. A friend of mine tells a story about traveling in the Middle East and seeing a farmer plowing his field with a camel and a donkey yoked together. It was ridiculous to watch! The camel with legs three times as long as the donkey was just striding along at a leisurely pace while the little donkey was running as fast as he could to keep up. The farmer kept beating the donkey and both animals were miserable. You see, this command reflects God's concern for both the Christian and the non-Christian. An unequal yoke causes distress in both.

There are two ways to identify an unequal yoke. One is that they're not easily broken. A relationship that is somehow very difficult to get out of or free yourself from is an unequal yoke. Another thing is that they're constraining; in other words, you're forced to do what the other person does whether you like it or not. If one animal goes to the left, the other is forced to as well, whether she likes it or not. In an unequal yoke we're forced to do things or act in ways we know are wrong; we're not free to follow the Lord because of the connection.

The specific nature of each of Jehoshaphat's alliances correspond with the three areas we're most often tempted. The first is in the area of love and

marriage. This is the most common area where believers fall. We allow ourselves to develop a love relationship with an unbeliever of the opposite sex and whether or not it turns into marriage, it's wrong. It always results in pain and heartache on the part of both parties. As a young Christian I spent a year trying to convince myself and my friends that I could have this kind of relationship. I lived under the illusion that I would change her rather than she change me. And the longer I held on the more miserable we both became and yet, strangely, the harder it became to break it off.

The second area is a cause. Jehoshaphat joined Ahab in a cause to capture Ramoth-gilead. Now there are a lot of good causes to get involved in. Many times we might find ourselves on the same side of a cause as unbelievers. It isn't wrong in itself to join with them, but we have to be careful. So often, the assumptions they have about how we're to achieve that cause are inconsistent with scripture. Or, often times we make a commitment to a cause that we can't get out of later on. This applies as well to the third area, which is a business agreement bound by contract. Not all business agreements with unbelievers are wrong. But when we're not free to leave them, and when we're forced to act or to associate with actions that are wrong, then we're on shaky ground. So beware of these three areas: love, a cause, and a business venture. Beware of rationalization in these three areas that slowly nibbles away at previously held standards: "It's no big deal. God will forgive me. What harm is in it? God wants me to be happy, doesn't he? It turned out okay for others. I'll be careful. Perhaps I can have an impact there." On and on it goes, but it's never right.

**2. When we are strong, we are weak:** And just like Jehoshaphat, it's in those times of strength that our weakness will most often play itself out. Each of his three compromises took place at the most successful times in his life. Why is that? What are some of the "leaks" that success might reveal in our lives? The most obvious one is pride. In our success we can forget how desperately we need God. Though we go through the motions of our Christianity, deep in our heart we get along just fine without him. The pain that once drove us to God is gone. We're left with the head knowledge that we need him but in our actual experience we've forgotten why. That's why we can thank God for those trials in our lives that keep us seeking him, needy and humble.

Another "leak" that success might reveal is laziness. Most of us work as hard in our faith as we

have to. When the pressure's not on, we relax. The things we used to guard against so carefully no longer concern us. Every good football coach knows that the time your team is most likely to let down is not after a great loss but after a great win. So if you are enjoying life these days, that's great. Some of you have careers that are going well. You're financially more secure than ever before. Spiritually you may feel pretty much on top of things. There is nothing wrong with all of that. But, just be extra careful; you have to work harder in those times to stay faithful to the Lord and not to slip.

## CONCLUSION

World-acclaimed illusionist Roy Horn went to work on Friday evening, October 3, 2003. It was a big night for him. For one thing it was his 59th birthday, and more than a thousand friends had thrown him a party hours before. For another, a huge audience waited inside the Mirage Hotel for a show Horn and his fellow illusionist were about to put on. Since the late sixties Siegfried and Roy's performances with wild animals were known all over the world.

About halfway into the performance, Roy appeared in the spotlight with a six-year-old white male tiger. It was a routine he had done hundreds of times. But for some reason, he slipped on stage, which startled the 600 pound animal, who proceeded to lunge at him. In self-defense, Roy tried to beat the animal off with his hand-held microphone. The tiger then grabbed Roy by the neck, and dragged him offstage like a limp rag doll. Crew members had to use fire extinguishers to distract the animal and free Roy. He was rushed to a local hospital, where he underwent emergency surgery to save his life. In thousands of acts over 35 years, Horn had never been hurt. But in one unexpected loss of balance, he almost lost his life. A few nights after the tragic accident, Larry King interviewed Siegfried. As he tried to explain what went wrong, all he could say was, "Roy slipped."

The life of Jehoshaphat warns those of us who think we can't be taken down by the "tigers" in our lives. It tells us that the times we are most likely to slip, the times we are at our weakest, are when we think we're at our strongest. "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."

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