

"Overwhelming Odds"

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[0 : 0 0] Would you turn with me to 2 Chronicles chapter 13. That's page 342 in the Pew Bible. I'm going to begin by reading verses just 1 through 3, and then what we're going to do is we're going to actually just walk through the passage step by step as we go. So as I read a passage, we'll put it up on the screens, and then she and we can take it down after I read it, and it'll be really clear how we go through. But we're going to start with verses 1 through 3, and we're going to dive in together. All right, 2 Chronicles chapter 13, page 342. In the 18th year of King Jeroboam, Abijah began to reign over Judah. He reigned three years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Micaiah, the daughter of Uriel of Gibeah. Now, there was war between Abijah and Jeroboam. Abijah went out to battle having an army of valiant men of war, 400,000 chosen men, and Jeroboam drew up his line of battle against him with 800,000 chosen mighty warriors. So have you ever felt like you were up against overwhelming odds? As parents, Beth and I have sometimes joked that having one kid is easy because you can always double team, right? But then having two kids, that's still manageable because you can always play man-to-man, right? But then when you have three kids, well, then you're outnumbered.

So you have to slip back into his own defense and just hope for the best. Even then, sometimes it feels like overwhelming odds. But on a serious note, on a serious note, isn't the spiritual life, the life of following Christ, a life that often feels like we're up against overwhelming odds?

Think of your workplace or your school or your neighborhood. How many genuine fellow followers of Jesus can you name? One, two, maybe three? You know, for us New Englanders, I think if you can name three or four in one of those spheres, it feels like a revival is happening, right?

But now in reality, this is the calling of the church to live as salt and light in the midst of overwhelming odds. You see, the church has been given this great mission to proclaim the gospel of grace and to make disciples of all nations. This commission, remember, was given to a handful of former fishermen, former prostitutes turned disciples.

Go, make disciples of all nations, he told that original group of men and women. Overwhelming odds. And this mission, as Jesus and His apostles taught us, would be a spiritual battle. But this battle is not against flesh and blood, as the Apostle Paul will say, but against spiritual forces in the heavenly places. In other words, we aren't fighting a culture war.

[3 : 1 4] We're in a much deeper spiritual battle, because the human heart is captive to sin, to Satan, to idolatry, to death. These are the great enemies arrayed against us.

And who would not feel overwhelmed and afraid against those overwhelming odds? You know, when Abijah stepped out onto the battleground that day, he knew right away that he was vastly outnumbered. The kingdom, you'll remember at this point in Israel's history, the kingdom was in the midst of a civil war. The ten tribes in the north had broken away, during the days of Abijah's father, Rehoboam. And now the king of those ten breakaway tribes, whose name was Jeroboam, was coming to attack the south. Jeroboam and the ten tribes were coming down to attack and take over the south to make one kingdom under his rule. And Abijah goes out to meet him. Abijah goes out to meet him with 400,000 chosen men. But as he looked out, he saw that his opponent, Jeroboam, had outnumbered him two to one with 800,000 chosen mighty warriors.

Now, if you're thinking that those numbers seem impossibly large, it's good to note that some Hebrew scholars think that the word thousand here may also have been used for a military unit of some kind. So it's likely that these numbers aren't a specific head count. Rather, it's saying that Abijah had 400,000, that is 400 units, 400 platoons of men. And Jeroboam, though, had 800,000, that is 800 units. But no matter how you interpret the numbers, either way, Abijah is, in the words of Hamilton, outgunned, outnumbered, and outplanned. He's up against overwhelming odds.

Have you been there? Have you been in the place where the fight seems overwhelming, like there's no way you're going to win the battle? You know, the people in the chronicler's day, when the chronicler was writing this in the fifth century, they must have felt outnumbered, end up against overwhelming odds. They were a fledgling people, embattled on all sides. You can read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to learn more about all that they faced in that time.

How could they possibly hope to succeed? And perhaps you feel similar today. When you consider the spiritual battle before you, perhaps you feel outnumbered by overwhelming odds.

[5 : 55] A relationship that's so broken, you've lost any hope that it could be restored. A habitual sin that's so ingrained, you don't think victory is a possibility.

A trial you're facing that's so great, there doesn't seem to be any way through to the other side. But what 2 Chronicles 13 shows us is that what may seem like overwhelming odds to us are not overwhelming for God. And the key to victory is not reliance on ourselves, but reliance on the Lord. We'll see, as the story goes on, that God saves Abijah and his men that day, even though they're outnumbered two to one. And God saves them because, as we'll read in verse 18, they relied on the Lord, the God of their fathers.

But what does this reliance look like? We're told so often to just trust in ourselves, right? Look to yourself, improve yourself, you can do it, find the strength within yourself.

That is the message we hear so much around us. So where do we begin to learn something radical and countercultural reliance on God? Well, let's take a look at our passage and let's see.

I think the first thing that we see here is that reliance on God in the midst of being spiritually outnumbered, reliance on God looks like prioritizing the right things. It looks like prioritizing the right things. In verse 4, Abijah gets up on the hillside and calls out to Jeroboam and his army.

[7 : 54] Now, remember, at this point in Old Testament history, Israel often refers just to the northern kingdom with its capital in Samaria, but Israel can also refer to the entire people of God in both the north and the south. The context usually makes it clear. So keep that in mind as we walk through the story. Let's pick it up. Let's pick it up in verse 4. And we're going to read through verse 12.

Then Abijah stood up on Mount Zemarlah, that is, in the hill country of Ephraim, and said, Hear me, O Jeroboam and all Israel. Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt? Yet Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, a servant of Solomon, the son of David, rose up and rebelled against his Lord, and certain worthless scoundrels gathered about him and defied Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, when Rehoboam was young and irresolute and could not withstand them. And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord in the hand of the sons of David, because you are a great multitude and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made you for gods? Have you not driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands? Whoever comes for ordination with a young bull or seven rams becomes a priest of what are not gods. But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken Him. We have priests ministering to the Lord who are sons of Aaron and Levites for their service. They offer to the Lord every morning and every evening burn offerings and incense of sweet spices. They set out the showbread on the table of pure gold and care for the golden lampstand that its lamps may burn every evening, for we keep the charge of the Lord our

God, but you have forsaken Him. Behold, God is with us at our head, and His priests with their battle trumpets to sound the call to battle against you. O sons of Israel, do not fight against the Lord, the God of your fathers, for you cannot succeed.

Now, notice what Abijah prioritizes in his speech to Jeroboam. He prioritizes the promise of God and the worship of God. We see the promise of God in verses 4 through 7. Abijah reminds everyone listening that God gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt.

Now, you think, what in the world is a covenant of salt? That seems really strange, right? But think of it this way. Salt in the ancient world was a preservative, right? So, salt became a metaphor for something that was enduring, something that was perpetual. So, a covenant of salt was a way of saying that it was a covenant that was perpetual and enduring, a binding commitment that could not be broken, a promise that would last. So, there's Abijah staring at 800,000 troops, a great multitude, as verse 8 says. And instead of turning around and counting his men and then recounting them and wondering if he's got enough, what does he do? He goes back to God's promise. God promised that David's sons would hold the kingship forever. So, it doesn't matter how great Jeroboam's multitude is. God's Word is more enduring and more sure than a million mighty warriors. God fashioned the stars. God dug out the oceans.

[11 : 53] God's presence melts the mountains like wax. If God has promised it, how could it not be true?

God's presence. This is what reliance on God looks like, friends. It looks like taking the promises of God and reminding ourselves of them in the face of the circumstances. Yes, the odds look overwhelming, but what has God, the Lord of heaven and earth, said?

If you are in Christ this morning, if you are His son, His daughter through faith in Jesus, this is what God has said. He has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

God has promised to work all things for your good so that you might be conformed to the image of Christ. God has promised. God has promised that nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God has promised that these light and momentary afflictions are preparing for you an eternal weight of glory. God has promised that if we run the race with endurance and share in His sufferings, we will also certainly share in His glory. Think about what that means. Consider, friends, the glory of the glory of the risen and ascended Christ, sovereign over the nations at the Father's right hand, you will share His glory. Peter is even so bold as to say that through faith you've become a partaker of the divine nature. Can you contain these promises that God has given you?

Reliance on God looks like prioritizing the promises of God in our minds, in our hearts, in our speech throughout our days, holding them, meditating on them, running them through our hearts, memorizing them. And then in the moment of trial, that's what will come out when we're on the mountain staring at the multitudes. But reliance on God also looks like prioritizing the worship of God.

[14:27] In verses 8 through 12, Abijah reminds Jeroboam and all the troops that are gathered that their gods are not gods and that their priests are not the priests that God had instituted. You see, after the ten northern tribes broke away from Judah and Benjamin in the south, Jeroboam immediately made two golden calves and set them up in the northern kingdom for the people to worship. That way, the people in the north wouldn't be tempted to go back down south to the temple in Jerusalem. They could just stay up in the north and worship the idols, and their allegiance wouldn't take them back to the kings of David. But these gods, of course, that Jeroboam fashioned, as verse 9 says, are not gods.

They're empty idols. And Abijah goes on to say that the priests and the practices of the temple in Jerusalem, that's what the Lord has set up. The priests in the north are illegitimate imposters and hucksters who've bought their priesthood in the north just to have a position of authority.

But Abijah says, no, our priests are the real ones, the right ones, in the line of Aaron, in the line of the Levitical priests. Now, you have to admit that on the surface, this is a bit of a strange thing to be talking about on the verge of war, right? I mean, compare Abijah's speech here to Winston Churchill's speech in the midst of World War II, right?

We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender. That rouses your spirits, right? But here's Abijah facing down an army twice his size, and he's talking about lampstands and showbread.

That doesn't really get your blood pumping for battle, does it? What is he doing? But then again, consider how Abijah ends his speech. He says, That's a pretty rousing conclusion. How does Abijah get from the particularities of the priesthood and the nuances of temple worship to confidence that God is with them in the battle?

[17:12] Well, on the one hand, these particular practices are what God commanded His people to do under the Old Covenant. And by forsaking those practices, the people in the north had forsaken the Lord.

That's how verse 11 ends. Abijah says to Jeroboam, When we keep the charge of the Lord our God, you have forsaken Him. So you see, great assurance of God's presence comes when we worship and obey God as He commands.

Walking with God in His ways does not guarantee an easy life or a trouble-free life. Here is Abijah, after all, taking on an army twice the size of his.

But walking with God in His ways does bring assurance of God's presence. If you want courage for the battle, if you're feeling weak and afraid, friend, then lift your eyes up from the battlefield.

Lift your eyes up from the armies and from the odds, and take in a fresh vision of God. Exalt Him in His holiness and in His majesty.

[18:28] Lift up your heart and walk in His ways. And you see, what happens then is that prioritizing the worship of God begins to then magnify the reality of God in our hearts.

And when the reality of God is then heavy upon us, then the promises of God are more powerful and more weighty than anything that might stand against us.

That's how we get from worship to confidence in the battle. Because it brings us again face to face with the awesome reality of who God is.

This was the message that the chronicler wanted His people in the 5th century B.C. to really glean from this episode about Abijah, which was taking place in the late 10th century B.C., almost 500 years before.

He's telling them, prioritize the worship of God in the midst of your spiritual battles. Yes, the temple worship might seem irrelevant to the outside observer. Why would you come to church on a Sunday morning?

[19 : 39] Aren't there better things you can do with your time? Why not rest? Why not spend time with your family and friends? Why not at least catch up on some chores? Right?

Surely singing songs and praying prayers and reading a centuries-old book can't be the most important thing you can use your time for, can it? Ah. But friends, song and prayer and proclamation and the Scriptures read and understood, what are these things?

These practices are meant to realign our hearts to God. We spend all week contending with things that are not gods, but those non-gods can grow bigger and bigger in our vision, can't they?

We need to be reminded week after week that God is God, the maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen, and that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Not the petty kings and rulers and politicians of this passing moment. And we need to be reminded that the Holy Spirit is the giver of life.

[21 : 00] The Holy Spirit is the giver of life, not money, not power, not human approval. The most important thing you can do every week is gather in person with God's people around God's Word and encounter Him and give Him the praise He is due.

And then here again, His great and precious promises, as the Apostle Peter puts it. You know, gathering as the church on Sunday is at one and the same time the most soul-restoring act a human being can participate in because it's realigning us to who God really is and who we really are.

It's at once the most soul-restoring act, and it's at the same time the most publicly revolutionary act a human being can participate in.

The church gathering for worship is a public demonstration of the supreme worth of the triune God above all other gods, above all other goods, above all other kingdoms, above all other aims.

Here we are at the corner of State and Grove staging a demonstration about what's really real and what really matters through our gathered worship.

[22 : 31] So in the midst of our spiritual battles, when the odds seem overwhelming, what does reliance on God look like? Well, the first thing we see is that reliance on God looks like prioritizing the right things, the promise of God and the worship of God.

But then the story goes on, and next we see that reliance on God doesn't just look like prioritizing the right things. The reliance on God is even more than that. Reliance on God also looks like a heart that cries out to the Lord in times of trouble.

It's not just right priorities, but it's desperate, dependent prayer. Dependent prayer.

Let's pick up the story in verse 13 through verse 19. Verse 13, And Abijah and his people struck them with the sword.

And when the men of Judah shouted, God defeated Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. The men of Israel fled before Judah, and God gave them into their hand.

[23 : 51] And Abijah and his people struck them with a great force. So there fell slain of Israel 500,000 chosen men. Thus, the men of Israel were subdued at that time, and the men of Judah prevailed, because they relied on the Lord, the God of their fathers.

In the moment of battle, when you're surrounded, when the enemies feel like they're in front and behind, who do you cry out to? Whether it's at work or at home, whether it's a besetting sin that's plagued you for years, or a physical affliction you know will be with you your whole life, who do you cry out to?

Some of us haven't reached the place where we cry out at all. We're still trying to fix ourselves, and we're still trying to muster the strength, the inner resources to conquer without any help.

And, you know, that's just as true for us Christians as it is for those outside the faith. You know, we can worship on Sundays, but then on Mondays act as if the battle belongs to us.

But what does Jesus Himself say? Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[25 : 13] What does it mean to be poor in spirit? It means to know that you don't have the resources, you don't have the inner strength, you don't have the natural capacities to face the battle before you.

It means admitting that you're powerless. And then you do what the people did in verse 4.

Verse 4 says, they cried out to the Lord. They came to see that the Lord was the only one who could save them. Pressed in front and behind, they had no other option.

How about us? Are we still trying to figure out things in our own strength? Or have we achieved the poverty of spirit that Jesus talks about, realizing that we have no other option but to cry out to the Lord who alone can save us?

Whether it's in the midst of your broken marriage, or in your toxic workplace, or in just the meaningless day-to-day that leaves you on the brink of despair, reliance on the Lord looks like, genuine humility before Him and crying out to Him that His will would be done and that His kingdom would come and that He would get all the glory for any victory that's won.

[26 : 50] Notice in verses 15 and 16, then the men of Judah raised the battle shout and when the men of Judah shouted, God defeated Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. Then the men of Israel fled before Judah and God gave them into their hand.

You see, God wins the battles, not us. And He gets the credit and the praise. You see, friends, any endeavor that we pursue as a church for the advance of His kingdom and His gospel must, at the end of the day, be His work.

And He will get the glory. That's why fervent, dependent prayer must be at the center of a church's life.

Why do we pray so much in our Sunday gatherings? Why do we have monthly prayer meetings? Why do our small groups devote so much time to prayer? Not because it's a religious thing to do, but because it's what reliance on the Lord looks like.

Hearts that say, not to us, O Lord, but to Your name be the glory. We are weak, but You are strong. We are pressed before and behind, but You are sovereign over all.

[28 : 11] So, this is what reliance on God looks like. Right priorities and dependent, yes, even desperate prayer.

But there's one more thing. And this last thing is a bit more subtle in our passage, and it helps to see and know the context to really kind of see it and get it.

But the last thing to realize about reliance on God is this. Reliance on God is not about perfect people trusting God.

Reliance on God is about imperfect people receiving grace. It's about imperfect people receiving grace.

Let's read verses 19 through 22, and then I'll show you what I mean. Verse 19, And Abijah pursued Jeroboam and took cities from him, Bethel with its villages, and Jeshunneh with its villages, and Ephron with its villages.

[29 : 17] Jeroboam did not recover his power in the days of Abijah, and the Lord struck him down, and he died. But Abijah grew mighty, and he took fourteen wives and had twenty-two sons and sixteen daughters.

The rest of the acts of Abijah, his ways and his sayings, are written in the story of the prophet Idu. Now, we don't have the writings of this Idu or Idu.

They haven't come down to us. But we do have another work that describes Abijah's reign in character. In the book of 1 Kings, chapter 15, verses 1 through 8, we're given an earlier account of Abijah's reign.

And there he's called Abijam. It's the same person with a slightly different spelling to the name. Now, if you were to go back and read 1 Kings 15, what would you notice right away? You would notice that Abijah was not a good king.

1 Kings 15, 3 says, And he walked in all the sins that his father did before him. And his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God as the heart of David his father.

[30 : 27] And here in 2 Chronicles, if we were to go on and start reading the next chapter, chapter 14, we see that Abijah's son, Asa, who was a good king, Asa had to remove from the land a whole host of foreign altars and high places and idols and false gods, presumably Abijah didn't care enough to remove those things during his reign, so his son had to do it.

Unless we just skip over verse 21 in our passage, Abijah having 14 wives is not a good thing. Polygamy in the Bible always leads to bad consequences, even if God in His sovereign grace is able to bring about His purposes through human folly and sinfulness.

So what's the point? The point is that reliance on God is not just for people who have it all together. We can think that, can't we?

We can think that God hears the prayers of good people, of faithful people, but we're not so sure if He hears my prayers because I know my heart. And I know my own failings.

But 2 Chronicles wants to show us that reliance on God isn't for perfect people. Reliance on God is about receiving God's undeserved grace.

[31 : 53] Abijah in the kingdom of Judah didn't deserve to win the battle that day. They threw themselves upon God, and God rescued them by His grace. You know, in all of human history, there was only one human and one king who deserved to be victorious.

There was only one king who deserved to triumph over His enemies. Only one who was righteous and good in all His ways. And that one was the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what did that king do? That king actually became weak and suffered and died. The one who deserved to conquer was conquered.

Why? Why? So that by dying, He might defeat the greater enemies of sin and death on behalf of everyone who cries out to Him and relies on Him and not on themselves.

And three days later, Jesus was raised from the grave as proof that the battle had been won, that sins had been forgiven, that death had been swallowed up in victory, that through His death, the devil had been silenced, that condemnation had been overturned, that the curse had been lifted.

[33 : 18] You see, for all who cry out to Jesus as Lord and rely on His record and not their own, His perfection and not yours, that's what's now true of you.

Your greatest enemies are conquered and your victory has been won not because of what you've done, but because of what He's done. Now, friends, the truth is, if you are not in Christ, the battle that is arrayed against you is actually greater than you can withstand.

Because the spiritual truth is, your sins outnumber you, not just two to one. but a million to one. Christ entered the field on your behalf.

He waged a war with sin and death, defeated them through His own death for sinners, rose again in triumph, and He offers eternal life for all who come to Him.

The question is, will you face the battle alone, or will you face it under the banner of the victorious King Jesus? That's the choice before all of us.

[34 : 39] And the good news is, today, you can receive this King. You can put yourself under His banner, and His victory will be yours. Just cry out to Him.

A simple prayer from the heart. Remember, reliance on God is not about perfect people trusting perfectly. It's about imperfect people receiving grace.

Acknowledge Him as King, confess your helplessness, and receive the salvation that He offers through His death and resurrection. That offer is not for perfect people.

It's for sinners like you and me. And if you call on Him, He will answer. He will save. His covenant is more sure than any promise you've ever heard.

And for Christians, if you've come under this banner, friend, are you still living as if reliance on God is only for perfect people? Or are you living as if it's also for sinners like you and me?

[35 : 43] You know, you may have drawn near to Him for salvation, but are you crying out to Him for all your needs? You see, becoming a Christian and growing as a Christian, growing as a Christian, it happens in the same way through utter reliance on the Lord, taking hold of His promises, worshiping Him above all other gods, crying out to Him in prayer.

But brother, sister, you cannot do this alone. Perhaps the reason the battle seems to be so overwhelming is because you're trying to fight this fight by yourself.

You can't do it alone. You must join with others. That's part of what church membership is all about, is joining together, formally, with a body of believers to fight the good fight together, arm in arm.

Are you welcoming others into your fight? Are you sharing your struggles? Are you joining with others in prayer for their battles and for yours?

The odds may seem overwhelming, but when we join together, when we share our struggles, then the Lord's power begins to work in fresh ways because we are united to Christ and we are united to one another in Christ.

[37 : 04] Friends, that's how the kingdom of God advances in our lives and in our communities. Reliance on God, not alone, but together.

Let's pray. Oh Lord, we pray that we would learn this reliance by your Spirit.

Jesus, you said that we have a good Father and if we give good gifts to our children, how much more will our Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?

So we ask for a fresh pouring out of your Spirit and a filling of your Spirit that would teach us this deep dependence on you, a deep trust in your promises, a deeper worship of you and acknowledgement of you as God, a deeper life of prayer and intimacy with you, and a deeper awe and wonder at the beauty of your grace.

God, for those who are not yet Christians, I pray that you would help them to take the step towards trusting in you and entrusting their lives to you.

[38 : 28] Spirit, call them and would they respond. And for us, your church, would we rise and join the fray confident that we serve a risen King and the victory is sure because He's gone before us.

Pray this in His mighty name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.