

THOUGHTS

OFF

DYING

WORSHIP

LEADER

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Thoughts of a Dying Worship Leader

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THE FRONTLINES

God usually breaks through my defenses when I'm not paying attention. Or better said, he triumphs when I'm not looking for God to speak, move, or do anything. That's usually where he ends up ambushing me and changing my life. God is funny like that. No one has a better sense of humor than God.

Have you ever heard the phrase, *praise precedes the victory*? It's usually mentioned in a context that sounds like *no matter what you're going through, you can still praise God because you know He's faithful*. It reminds me of when Paul encourages his readers in Philippians 4 to *rejoice* in the Lord always for the Lord is at hand.

In other words, it's the idea that no matter what season you're in, there's a reason to praise. Even before we see the victory, we can praise Him for it. I think this isn't only

true but demonstrated throughout scripture. God's people praise Him amid calamities, or when surrounded by insurmountable odds, and then see God perform the impossible.

Let me just say this publicly for once, I often have a hard time praising before the victory.

One morning as I was making time to read my Bible and hear from Jesus I came across 2 Chronicles 20. As I read, I quickly remembered the story and the tagline, *praise precedes the victory*. And during this mundane, routine, shallow reading of the scripture, the deep, powerful and loving presence of God showed me something else and brought me to a place of understanding as a worship leader, and as an artist who loves Jesus.

During this season of my life, I'd come to a crossroads as a worship leader. It was 2016, and I had just turned 30. I'd been in church for over 20 years and had been leading worship since I was 18 years old. I'd arrived at the place where I was flat out tired of watching people staring back blankly at me on Sunday mornings. Have you ever been there? It's like someone told you to go out and play music about Jesus and guaranteed everyone would be into it,

only to discover how everyone in the room wasn't especially fond of any of it.

I began to hurt over the lack of response I felt from people in worship. We'd be singing passionately about the goodness of God, but it seemed like it was falling on deaf ears. Or maybe after 20 minutes of *warm-up* music, they'd step into it during the last few minutes? Regardless, I was doing some soul searching about how to stay positive and even righteous through all of this.

I love to worship the Father, and I love music, so for me it's a passion.

But the reality is, some people attend church and don't listen to music at all and don't enjoy the music portion of the church service.

For example, my wife who loves worship music doesn't have the same love for music as I do. This was demonstrated one time as we were driving in the car back to our home. As we pulled into the driveway, I was crying because of the song that was playing. It wasn't a Christian song, I think it was some cover of *Let It Be* by The Beatles.

It was so good, my emotions just took over for a second. I didn't turn the car off because I didn't want the song to stop before it was over. I threw it into park in our driveway. My wife, realizing this, looks over at me and sees

a tear rolling down my face. After looking at me strangely, she asked me what was wrong.

I told her that the song was just so beautiful that it made me cry. Her response was amazing. She said she didn't realize that there was music on in the first place.

You can imagine how snotty I was with her for the next few moments. How could she not have realized there was music playing in the car while I was literally crying over the song? It's just the reality: some people aren't as into music as others are. So then what do we do, as worship leaders?



This was where I was: asking questions to God about whether or not this was the right thing to be doing in the church and with my life. Not every church looks like what they portray on social media, where the entire congregation is deeply into the service, like they're willing to pay money to be there.

In fact, there are some Sundays that I can remember where I would've contemplated paying people to just come and clap! I was asking God whether or not I was a failure when I looked out and saw a sea of blank faces.

Sometimes the thought of gathering into a room and going through the motions of worship music but not

engaging in Him would keep me up at night. It also tempted me to give up and just take the stance of *not my problem*. I knew that wasn't from the Lord and the truth was, I did care.

Worship through music is one of the most powerful things we can do together.

You can worship on your own and pray on your own wherever you are, but there's something special about gathering as God's people and together lifting our voices in praise.

It transcends music and it goes far beyond preference. It's something beautiful and eternal. I was asking God for a word, a sign so that I'd know that this was where He wanted me to be. I've learned over time, the hard way, that when I ask that question God usually answers in a way I wasn't expecting.



When I came to the book of 2 Chronicles, I wasn't thinking about or even searching for answers from God in regards to worship. In all honesty, I was merely checking a box that I'd read my scripture for the day. But even in that, God is gracious.

In 2 Chronicles 20 Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah, finds himself in a very dangerous situation. After defeating an enemy kingdom and restoring order to Judah, Jehoshaphat discovers himself surrounded by foreign armies who are hell-bent on destroying him and all the people of his kingdom. Scripture says that three separate foreign armies joined together to come and destroy Judah.

If you remember in *Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King* when all the evil armies from distant lands came to fight against the armies of Gondor for the right to rule, it would've looked a lot like that. Jehoshaphat doesn't have nearly enough troops or resources to win this battle, and the scripture indicates that King Jehoshaphat was afraid.

The king says...

2 Chron 20:12

We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You.

After calling the people together to fast and pray, a word from the Lord comes through a man named Jahaziel. Jahaziel tells the king and the people that God is with them and tomorrow will be a day of victory.

2 Chron 20:15-17

15 And he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the Lord to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s. **16** Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz. You will find them at the end of the valley, east of the wilderness of Jeruel. **17** You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the Lord will be with you.”

The people are encouraged and filled with hope. Scripture goes on to suggest that they rise early the next morning and begin to meet this enemy head-on. Imagine that for a minute. Talk about the edge of greatness. They’re totally outmanned and outgunned; and if this battle were to happen 100 separate times, they’d lose every time. But God was with them and had victory in store for them. But how?

God instructs, through His servant Jehaziel, that they *wouldn’t need to fight this battle*. How do you win a battle you’re not going to fight? Then something happened in scripture, between the king and the people, that shook me.

At this point in my life I’d read this story many times, but God refreshed my soul with something I hadn’t seen

before. The Bible says that King Jehoshaphat took counsel with the people and then made a surprising decision. Listen to this:

21 And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise Him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say,

“Give thanks to the Lord,
for His steadfast love endures forever.”

Have you ever been a part of something that was just a bad idea? I remember one-time leading worship at a college-age group, and we thought it would be so cool to play a Coldplay song to open up the service as people were entering. *I can see all of your eyes rolling as you read this, don't judge me.* We thought this was such a great idea.

To make this even better, the room we were playing in had really poor acoustics so the drummer was playing an electric drum set, which is like my kryptonite. Everybody was cool with the idea, which was mine, and we went for it. I can remember the countdown video hitting the last 10 seconds, and I realized deep down at that moment it might be stupid.

It was like my inner artist said to me right before we started, *you're so dumb*. Sure enough, it was a train wreck. Hilarious.

Now if you've been a part of a worship set before or played music live, then you know that there are two types of musical train wrecks. The first is when it's really bad, but you can still power through. There may be wrong chords, wrong notes, and wrong everything, but you can usually weather the storm and get to the next song. Your pride is shaken, but you tend to make it to the other side.

The second train wreck is the type where it gets so bad and so lost that the best and only option is to stop in the middle of the song and cut your losses. I can let you guess which type happened for us. I stopped the band, laughed in the microphone, and welcomed everyone to church. I laugh about it now, but not so much then.

To me, if I heard what King Jehoshaphat decided to do, if I interpreted his advice to put the singers and musicians, the artists, the worship leaders on the front line for battle, I would deem that he was making a mistake. It just seemed like a bad idea. Have you ever seen a movie or an image of the frontlines of a battle? Let's not try and help the story by not making it exactly what it is. These were the frontlines, an intense place of battle and death.

The frontlines are where the battle begins, and where the battle ends for many. Usually, the frontlines leave

behind a place that ends up being called *No man's land*. The frontlines should be filled with warriors and people shrouded in armor. But on this day, it was comprised of worship leaders.

For the first time in my life, as I read this, I saw a reality that I'd never seen before: God brought me to this passage not to show me what I'd already known, but something else.

This idea of Jehoshaphat was a *bad* idea. Now I know when I say that, it might be hard to agree with me, but that's because you know the end of the story.

But let me tell you, this is a bad idea, destined to fail, and doesn't make any logical sense, and yet it's what happened. Instead of putting soldiers at the front, the King places the worship leaders. How different do you think we are from them? Do you think the heart of the artist has changed over time? I bet we'd find brothers and sisters in the hearts of these men and women.

People with dreams, amazing talents, extraordinary abilities resonate among songwriters, fashion designers, painters, and poets. Some people could color the world with the gifts they've been given, and these were the people who would be on the frontlines on this early morning march.

I was gripped by this story in 2 Chronicles 20. God had said that the battle belonged to Him and that they *wouldn't* need to fight at all, but God didn't necessarily say *how*. The instruction was to take a position and stand your ground, but that was it. And I don't know about you, but I didn't hear Him say to put any guitarist up front. But one thing is for sure, the musicians were told that they'd be the leading force of this army that wasn't planning on doing any fighting.

They weren't marching with power; instead, they were marching with promise. But for those musicians, it was a one-way trip.

How many dads were in that marching worship band? How many moms? Do you think that there were families that hugged and kissed each other goodbye that morning, unsure of what the future would hold? I know we know the end of the story, *but they didn't*. In reality, they had to live on a faith not many of us have had to muster. Whatever needed to be said was stated. Whatever needed to be done was achieved.

The worship leaders of Judah were on the move, and I believe with a sense that they might not be coming back. Incredible. They were marching to their deaths, or so it may have seemed. It struck me that the Bible doesn't have any recorded dialogue between the musicians and the

king: it's just implied that the king said it was happening and so it occurred. I *need* to hear that dialogue, don't you?

Those musicians, those singers, those artists had to be the bravest people in all of Judah. To be able to take God at His word and fight a battle of swords with nothing more than a song must have taken an inner grit that could make the fiercest enemy tremble. It dawned on me that without complaint, without splitting the church, without rebelling against leadership, these worship leaders marched towards the battle that God promised to fight for them.

Maybe they'd die, maybe they wouldn't, but the battle wouldn't be fought by them; it'd be fought and *won* by God.

The first time back on stage after having read this passage of scripture and praying through it was an invigorating experience. Something had radically changed in me. I was eager for Sunday, and I was ready for each service. I looked at the people in the band through a different lens. I sensed God giving me a love for these people, and we were marching together, into something unknown.

I'd received a deeper level of appreciation for the opportunity and the unique time for which I was alive. Just 100 years earlier and things would've been so different!

The day in which we live is an amazing era to be an artist, and a worship leader.

The music was no longer just comprised of melodies, no longer simple verses, and choruses. Instead, we were announcing something: we'd become heralds.

Interestingly enough, the worship leaders on that day in 2 Chronicles weren't leading a service, instead, they were declaring who God was to the enemy.

I wonder if that struck fear into them? I looked out at the congregation not as people I needed to convince of something, but as people God loved and who were being drawn by His spirit.

Instead of worship leader, I became a messenger. I was a news carrier amid a beautiful army of worship. When the day came to a close, I was exhausted, but I'd never felt better. Worshipping like I wasn't coming back put a fire in my heart to make sure that with my last breath I declared who my Lord was and what He had done for me.

God had given me a gift that I didn't know I needed.

For so long I was wondering why people weren't worshipping; but instead of giving me an answer to that question, God showed me how He would like me to lead.

Death brings honesty. Every time. The statement being made by the worshipers in 2 Chronicles caused the deepest level of conviction in my heart like I'd never felt before. In my search for greatness and my struggle for meaning as an artist, I'd lost sight of what I'm here to do and what God wants to do through me. It was time to be honest. It was time to pick up my talents, my gifts, and put them into the hands of God and march.

When you don't plan on a return trip, you take what you need and you leave what doesn't matter.

For too long I've carried the weight of things that God has never asked me to transport.

These worship leaders didn't know if they were coming back. They couldn't have, but they knew who they were and what God had called them to. Do I? Do you? A group of musicians, singers, and worship leaders, leads an army toward the promise and presence of God.

How would they gauge success?

How would they feel about their dreams perhaps not coming true?

The assignment was crazy, the task was impossible, but the invitation to be a part of something great must have been irresistible. I wonder if any of them thought of it as the *front row* instead of the *frontlines*?

Sunday worship is the day we get to go before the army. As worship leaders, we get to move into position and declare the praises of His deeds and the truths about who He is. We do this because we've been anointed for this task, and we've been called to it.

If we merely rely on our gifts and talents for something spiritual to happen, it's never going to work and we'll always be left dissatisfied. First, because gifts and talents aren't spiritual, everybody has them. But when we hand those gifts over to God, He gives them back, but He adds His anointing.

God never called us to be the reason people start giving their lives to Jesus or decide to worship Him, even on a Sunday. God has asked us to take a position, to be obedient, and to believe in Him for the life change both in them and in us.

Can you imagine what would happen next Sunday if worship leaders all over the world went on to that stage, from the largest to the smallest, confident that God was going to take who they were and use it for His glory? What would result if instead of focusing on how impossible this

task may seem, we decided to make every worship set a one-way trip?

Let's praise like it was the last time we were going to be able to, and lead people to see a move of God. If our music brings people closer to anything but Him, there's an issue. There isn't a song that changes people, only Jesus.

Remember, the only thing the army of the Lord did that day was simply worship. Not a sword was raised, not an arrow was shot.

I love that the only people who had to do anything was the worship team. But what if they hadn't shown up? What if they didn't go? What if they decided that enough was enough? I don't know what would've happened, but I'm glad they chose to sing.

Being an artist and a Christian can be interesting. Being a worship leader has its challenges, but there's something special about being on the *frontlines* of what God is doing. It's dangerous. God makes it that way; it's a chase after eternity. I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. But I'm going. I'm going to do this, even if it kills me. I don't have any other choice: this is who I am. I hear the echo of the Father's voice bidding me come.

There's something wild about having to reconcile the artist inside with the Spirit of God.

The sparks that come from the struggle are flickers that can ignite a fire around the world.

Who knows the works you'll see happen around you when you decide to lead worship from the frontlines, fully invested, and fully present?

There may be people who don't understand, and there may be those who don't *ever* engage, but that isn't your job. You cannot change people. We can pray for change, we can pray for growth, we can lead people into an opportunity for growth, but the Spirit of the living God is the only One who can change someone's heart. There should be a wildness in our eyes when we get to lead worship because we must be crazy to do it.



It's an honor to walk with you, my kin, towards the frontlines of the move of God, as we approach an impossible promise of lives changed. We journey toward the answer to how deep the love of God *really* is and move towards a life that only comes through death. We've stayed on the sidelines long enough, guessing about how deep God is. We've hoped and craved for something more

from our lives, something of meaning, something that only God can do.

We've been waiting for the invitation that God has already given us: to follow Him by His Spirit, and to let Him fight the battle that we were never meant to fight, but always meant to win.

This book and the words in it will echo some of my thoughts as we journey closer to the battle. As I said before, death brings honesty. When we face incredible odds, often truth and honesty are two mysteries that become crystal clear. Can you imagine *our* conversation the morning of this battle? From my short time here on Earth I've experienced things, I never thought I could. I've experienced times in worship and in life that have changed me forever.

From all the experiences, I still come back to the mystery of God and the way He moves.

He found me when I was against Him, and by His grace showed me something greater.

Maybe as we walk towards this army, instruments in hand, we would've talked about our time as worship leaders, as artists. We'd share stories of when our story intersected with His story.

In fact, it was this passage of scripture that sparked this entire book. These next chapters are some of the stories I'd share with you as we walked toward the miracle. They span over years and often feel disconnected, but they aren't, because they all happened to *me*. And they all were drenched in *Him*. I look forward to journeying with you and sharing my story as a worship leader...

...so far.