

STUDY FOUR

Ezekiel 22:23-31

Standing in the Gap

And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none.

—EZEKIEL 22:30

Our first three studies have taken a close look at prayer itself, examining truths that apply to many aspects of our relationship with the Lord. But God calls us in a particular way to become intercessors for our families and those dear to us, for the church, for the world.

What does it mean to be an intercessor?

Most obviously, intercession is prayer for others. We take our concern for other people directly to God, asking his help on their behalf. St. Paul urges us always to pray for one another: “Pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).

When we speak of intercession as a ministry, however, we generally mean something broader than just saying a prayer for someone else. An intercessor makes a long-term decision to plead with God on behalf of another person or group of people. As intercessors, we literally “go between” the Lord and those we are praying for, asking him to show them his mercy and blessing. Scripture uses the image of a person “standing in the gap” between God and

others to avert God's judgment and appeal for his compassion.

The one true intercessor for all humanity is Jesus himself, who "always lives to make intercession" (Heb 7:25). It is only with Jesus as our "go-between" that we ourselves can approach God. But Jesus invites us to become intercessors with him, to enter into his ministry of mercy and compassion for the world. The call to intercession is not just a duty for us as Christians, but a privileged opportunity to share in the Lord's own work.

There are mysteries involved in our understanding of intercession. There is the mystery of God's will: do our prayers actually influence God's decision? Can we somehow change God's mind—for example, by persuading him to show mercy to someone he had been determined to punish?

Scripture sometimes speaks in those terms, especially in the Old Testament, but these images are meant to be more figurative than literal. We know full well that God's will is the same in every age; he does not change his mind from one moment to the next. But in some way we do not fully understand, God does use our intercession to open the way for his true will to be done.

There is also the mystery of human freedom, especially when we are interceding for the conversion and salvation of those dear to us. Will God, in answer to our prayers, literally sweep someone off his feet and into the kingdom? What about that individual's freedom to say "no" to God?

The following study starts with God's call for someone to "stand in the gap" for ancient Israel. This is one of the most poignant moments in Scripture: the Lord looks for intercessors to invoke his mercy on his people, yet finds no one to intercede.

Step-by-step Study: Ezekiel 22

1. Read verses 23 to 29.

The prophet Ezekiel announced God's word during the time immediately surrounding the final destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. He warned his fellow Jews of the coming judgment of God. After the fall of Jerusalem, he also announced God's promise of eventual restoration.

Verses 23 to 29 of this reading speak of the sins that had brought God's judgment upon the nation. What parallels can you identify between the condition of God's people in Ezekiel's time and God's people today?

2. Read verses 30 to 31.

God had looked for someone to “stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it.” To understand what this means, read the following examples of intercessors who “stood in the gap” to ask the Lord's mercy for people who had sinned.

Numbers 17:6-15: Aaron offers atonement for the people, and God stops the scourge he had sent to punish them for their grumbling.

Reflect especially on the example of Moses and Aaron. They were personally innocent; in fact, they were the target of the people's grumbling. How did they respond when God told them, “Depart from this community, that I may consume them at once”? How does their example apply to us when we see sin and unfaithfulness among God's people today?

Aaron positioned himself directly in the path of God's punishment in order to offer atonement. Again, how does his example apply to us as intercessors for God's people today?

Genesis 18:16-32: Abraham intercedes with God for Sodom. Abraham is the most persistent intercessor in Scripture, keeping after God like a bargainer haggling down a high price. What does this episode show us about Abraham's relationship with God? Do you feel able to talk to God as directly and freely as Abraham does here?

Despite Abraham's intercession, the city of Sodom was destroyed, not because God refused to answer Abraham's prayer, but because Sodom could not produce even the minimal evidence of righteousness and repentance. What does this say to us about the balance of God's mercy and God's judgment in answering our prayers of intercession?

Jeremiah 5:1-3: The Lord searches his people for even one righteous person and cannot find one.

Abraham did not dare to ask God to spare Sodom for fewer than ten righteous persons. The prophet Jeremiah declares that God would spare Jerusalem for the sake of one! Yet that one righteous person cannot be found.

How does Jeremiah's prophecy shed light on what Ezekiel meant by someone to "stand in the gap" for all humanity? On whose righteousness does our own intercession rely? Why is this so?

3. Read Romans 5:18-19.

Who is the one righteous person who can “stand in the gap” for all humanity? Why is this so?

United to Christ and his perfect and acceptable sacrifice to the Father, how can you “stand in the gap” for those you regularly intercede for? Identify at least two of your regular prayer intentions and describe how you intend to “stand in the gap” for the people involved.

Summary

Look over your notes from this study. What was one key insight you can apply to yourself as an intercessor? How can you respond to that insight?

Tip for Intercession

When we consider the increase of sin and rebellion in our own society, even among God’s people, there is no question that today again we need intercessors to stand in the gap before God’s judgment.

Yet as we have seen from our study, “standing in the gap” means something more than only praying in intercession. It also refers to our personal righteousness: God will search a people for evidence of repentance, change, and righteousness.

To stand as intercessors between God's judgment and the sins of God's people, we must ourselves be living in freedom from serious sin. Our intercessory prayer should always include time for examination of our own consciences and repentance for our sins.

Fortunately, we do not depend on our own efforts to achieve the righteousness that enables us to stand in the gap before God. Our righteousness comes through our faith in Jesus. As we turn to Jesus with true conversion, true repentance, and true faith, he works in us to help us overcome sin and grow in holiness of life.

Optional Memory Verse

Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

—ROMANS 5:18-19

For Group Discussion

- In your own words, define what it means to be an intercessor.
- What makes our intercession particularly effective?
- Discuss Abraham's intercession with God for Sodom. How does he intercede for Sodom? Is his intercession effective?
- Share a story about a family member, a fellow parishioner, or a friend who stands out as an intercessor. What makes that person an effective intercessor?
- Is some obstacle holding you back from interceding effectively for others? What do you need to do about it?

STUDY FIVE

Exodus 32 and 33

Moses the Intercessor

So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.”

—EXODUS 32:31-32

If ever there was a man willing to “stand in the gap” on behalf of God’s people, it was Moses. For this reason, he stands as a type of Christ, the perfect intercessor who was to come and bear the punishment of sin for us all. The Old Testament remembers Moses as the great leader who confronted Pharaoh to free the Hebrews from Egypt, who led the people through the desert and brought them God’s law from Mount Sinai. Yet Scripture also remembers Moses as the great intercessor, who time and again pleaded for God’s forgiveness when his people had sinned.

In Moses we see the depth of commitment that binds an intercessor to those for whom he intercedes. When the people sinned by worshipping the golden calf, God was prepared to destroy them and save only Moses: “Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation” (Ex 32:10).

Yet Moses kept himself squarely between God and the people, insisting that he share any punishment that would befall them: “But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee,

out of thy book which thou hast written” (Ex 32:32). It is important to note that Moses prayed this way for those who belonged to God but had sinned. He did not pray in this manner for the pagan nations.

How many of us would have the selflessness and courage to pray such a prayer for God’s people? For our children or others very close to our hearts, perhaps. But to pray in this kind of way as an intercessor calls for a radical commitment to Christ and his people. It is impossible without the grace and strength of Christ, who is our mediator and intercessor before the Father.

Moses teaches us another lesson as well: The power of intercession depends on our remaining close to the Lord. The authors of the Old Testament were awestruck by the intimacy with which Moses could talk to God: “And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face” (Dt 34:10). They tell of Moses’ face shining with light after his encounters with the Lord, so that no one else could bear to see his unveiled face (Ex 34:34-35).

We are offered the privilege of knowing God even more intimately than Moses. As we have seen from our earlier studies, we can come to God as his own children, in the name of his beloved Son Jesus, with the help and intercession of the Holy Spirit.

In the following study, we will examine the intercessory prayers of Moses, the man who spoke with God face to face, asking what Moses teaches us about our own ministry of intercession.

Step-by-step Study: Exodus 32 and 33

1. Read chapter 32, verses 7 to 10.

Since we rarely encounter literal idol worship in our society, we may have trouble understanding why the Old Testament treated this as such a serious sin. Compare the study passage with Deuteronomy 8:11-20, especially verse 17. What was the basis for this sin of idol worship? What is God really concerned about in condemning idol worship so harshly?

What can you identify as expressions of this same basic sin in today's society? In today's church? In what ways do you yourself share, or are you tempted to share, in the same sin as the Hebrews who worshipped a golden calf?

2. Read verses 11 to 14.

Moses' prayer for God's mercy provides a model for our own intercession. Moses makes three appeals to the Lord, which are outlined below. As in our earlier study of "The Lord's Prayer," apply these same petitions both as a personal prayer for yourself and as a prayer of intercession for others.

For example: Moses recalled the Lord's past deeds on behalf of the Hebrews. What mercies and acts of power has the Lord done in your life? What past mercies has he shown to those for whom you are interceding?

MOSES' PRAYER	AS PERSONAL PRAYER	AS INTERCESSION FOR OTHERS
Verse 11: Moses recalls the Lord's past mercies and acts of power <i>Also: Psalm 143:5-6</i>		
Verse 12: Moses asks the Lord to protect the honor of his own name <i>Also: Isaiah 48:9-11</i>		
Verse 13: Moses recalls the Lord's covenant promises <i>Also: Psalm 89:35</i>		

3. Read chapter 32, verses 30 to 35.

In a second prayer of intercession, Moses offers to accept the punishment for the people's sin himself. He stands in the gap and risks his very life for their sake. What does this tell us about Moses' confidence in his relationship with God? Can we experience the same confidence?

In offering to bear the penalty for a sin he had not personally committed, Moses foreshadows the true intercessor who was to come—Jesus. What do the following verses tell us about Jesus as our intercessor? What do they tell us about our own call to follow in Jesus' footsteps?

Isaiah 53:4-5—"Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole."

2 Corinthians 5:19-21—"He made him to be sin who knew no sin."
