

STANDING IN THE GAP

Today's text: Ex. 32: 7-14; Ezek. 22:1-31

Extracts:

1. **“Moreover, the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, I sought for a man among them, that he should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none” [Ezek. 22: 1, 30]**
2. **“And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let Me alone, that I may consume them... And Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, Lord, why doth Thy wrath wax hot against Thy people, which Thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? ... Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants, to whom Thou swarest by Thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever. And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do unto His people” [Ex. 32: 9-11, 13-14]**

Between June 1994 and October 1995, O. J. Simpson, a famous American football hero, was on trial for the murder of his ex-wife and her boyfriend. The trial was beamed by CNN everyday to a worldwide audience. Most people believed that he did it and that he would surely be found guilty. However, he hired a team of lawyers, led by Johnnie Cochran, Jr., who was voted as one of the best trial lawyers in America in 1994. Cochran did such a powerful defence of Simpson that the jury found him not guilty!

Before he was hired, Cochran had confided in a friend off camera, “O.J. is in massive denial, he obviously did it.”¹ However, when he stood in the gap for him, to fight for his life, he saw O.J. Simpson differently. Everyday, God is looking for believers who will stand in the gap for His erring children. Around us, we have family members, friends, colleagues, etc, who are passing through physical, psychological or spiritual problems. They are hurting, and so are we. But, what have we done about it? God complained to Ezekiel that He looked for a man to stand before Him in the gap on behalf of the land that He had planned to destroy but there was none [Ezek. 22: 30]. Are we ready to take up His challenge? That is the subject that we shall take up in today's lesson.

¹ Johnnie Cochran Biography, O.J. Simpson Trial,
<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Simpson/Cochran.htm>

1. Let's begin by auditing our prayer content!

An 80-year old widow kept pouring out her heart's desires in fervent prayers during one evening service to the hearing of her pastor. "O God, bless me. Please, Lord, don't forget to wake me up at 11 o'clock each morning so that I don't miss my favourite TV soap opera, *As the World Turns*." Then, the pastor got closer and whispered to her to also pray for others. "Oh, lest I forget. Lord, bless also my dog, Skippy. Keep him awake every night while I sleep."

If we would take time to evaluate the content of our prayer petitions, we would be shocked to know that we are not better than that old woman! We spend over 90% of the time praying for ourselves, mostly for our earthly/material needs, and hardly for others. How did I know that? Look at God's reply to Solomon when he asked for wisdom and understanding to be able to rule over the people with justice:

And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said unto him, because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked for riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; behold, I have done according to thy word [1 Kgs 3: 10-12]

Yet, out there, there are people who face a very immediate judgment by God. Nevertheless, He is patient, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" [2 Pet. 3:9]. Your spouse is refusing to accept Jesus fully. Instead, he/she is starving you, economically or emotionally, to give up your true worship. Your teenage and only child has suddenly turned wayward. He/she has moved out into a life of drugs and prostitution. Your pastor and mentor has divorced his wife of 20 years, and is planning to marry one of the girls in the choir. He is quoting Scripture to defend his actions. Your best friend has just won an election the state assembly. Suddenly, he/she is exhibiting a lifestyle far beyond his/her legitimate earnings. All around us, we can see family, friends or colleagues who need spiritual help. What are we doing about it?

2. Why should we stand in the gap for others?

To "stand in the gap" means to intervene or intercede on behalf of another person *until* he/she gets a reprieve. The emphasis is on "until" because we are not talking about the one-shot occasional prayer for another person. We are talking about a persistent petition for another until you get the answer that you want for "the effectual [i.e., unceasing] prayer of a righteous man availeth much" [Jam. 5:16]. But you may ask, "Why me? Why can't the offender do it himself/herself?" Here are some reasons why you should do it:

a) *God asks for it*

In the whole of the Bible, the expression, to stand in the gap, is used in only one place, **Ezekiel 22: 30**, and it was God Himself who used it. He was complaining to the prophet, Ezekiel, that He was expecting a man that “should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none.” When the Lord was determined to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, He said, “Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?” and we know the powerful intervention that Abraham put up thereafter [**Gen. 18:16-33**]. Therefore, God certainly desires our intervention on behalf of those He is determined to judge.

b) *The offender has already lost standing with the Judge*

In most cases, the offender may not have the grace or privilege to stand before God to defend himself/herself, for “the Lord is far from the wicked; but He heareth the prayer of the righteous” [**Prov. 15:29**].

Moses was the great intercessor on behalf of the people that he led for forty years through the wilderness. Yet, when he disobeyed God by striking the rock twice, instead of speaking to it the second time, God told him firmly that he would not enter the Promised Land [**Num. 20:7-12**]. Now, when Moses tried to intercede for himself on this matter, it was a different story. Let us hear it from the horse’s mouth:

*And I besought the Lord at that time saying, O Lord God, Thou hast begun to shew Thy servant Thy greatness, and Thy mighty hand: for what God is there in heaven or in earth, that can do according to Thy works, and according to Thy might? I pray Thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon. But the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me; and the Lord said unto me, let it suffice thee; **speak no more unto Me of this matter** [**Deut. 3: 23-26**]*

Moses had lost the *locus standi* to speak to God on the matter. Perhaps, somebody else should have stood in the gap for him.

c) *The offender may complicate matters by trying to defend himself/herself*

The advice that most lawyers give to their clients is not to answer questions, especially from the police, unless their attorneys are

around. This is because of the possibility that the accused could implicate himself/herself on substantive or technical matters of law, and they need those who are professionally competent to represent them. In like manner, we may make things worse by trying to represent ourselves before God, as we saw in the case of Moses above.

Adam and Eve faced God's judgment in the Garden of Eden after disobeying Him by eating the forbidden fruit. In their defence, Adam blamed his wife and his wife blamed Satan! That made things worse for both of them [**Gen. 3: 8-13**].

d) *We may actually be helping ourselves in the end!*

When we support others with our intercessory prayers, we may actually be helping ourselves because, "he that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will He pay him again" [**Prov. 19:17**]. We are all poor in our areas of lack. For example, a person who may be material-rich may be spirit-poor. So, when believers who are spirit-rich intercede on behalf of such people, the Lord will pay them back materially.

Solomon asked for wisdom to rule his people well. In addition to granting him his prayer, God granted him wealth and honour [**1 Kgs 3: 12-13**]. Job recovered from his afflictions after he had prayed for his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, "and the Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends; also, the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before" [**Job 42: 7-10**]. Therefore, the more we pray for others, the more our own prayers are answered.

3. Two case studies

a) *Moses and the children of Israel* [**Ex. 32: 1-14**]

The children of Israel had seriously offended God. Moses was up on Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God. In his absence, the children of Israel prevailed on Aaron to make them a god to worship. He took their golden earrings and other jewelry and made them a molten calf, saying, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" [**v. 4**]. Then, Aaron built an altar before the graven image and said, "tomorrow is a feast to the Lord" [**v. 5**]. The next day, the people brought burnt and peace offerings before the idol, eating, dancing and rejoicing [**v. 6**].

Coming soon after He had given the Ten Commandments to Moses for the people, God was obviously angry with this “stiff-necked people” who did not deserve to live [vv. 7-10]. However, Moses stood in the gap on their behalf, and reminded God of His promises:

Turn from Thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, thy servants, to whom Thou swarest by Thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever [vv. 11-13]

In response to Moses’ plea, God spared the people [v. 14]. However, three thousand of the people who refused to repent of their idolatry were destroyed [v. 28], that is a paltry 0.12% [or one in every eight hundred] of the population. Even Aaron was spared. In deed, the unceasing prayer of a righteous person avails much.

b) *Peter escapes death from Herod’s jail [Acts 12: 1-25]*

The disciples faced persecution from Herod the king. To please the people, he killed James, one of the Apostles, and put Peter in jail, hoping to kill him after Easter [vv. 1-4]. To prevent him from escaping, Peter was double-chained and placed between two soldiers, “but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” [v.v. 5-6].

The content of the intercession is not disclosed, but we can infer it from an earlier prayer that the disciples made after Peter and John had been released from prison [Acts 4: 5-31]. For sure, they asked for Peter’s freedom. More importantly, they reminded God of His promises:

And when they heard that [Peter and John’s report], they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is; ...for of a truth against Thy holy Child Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings, and grant unto us Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy word [vv.24-29]

You know what followed after that prayer? The place shook and everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit! [v. 31]. In like manner, in response to the prayers of the church which stood in the gap for Peter, an angel of the Lord descended on the prison and set Peter free, with the jailers all fast asleep! [Acts 12: 7-11]. Herod himself was later struck dead by an angel

of the Lord when he tried to behave like a god, “but the word of God grew and multiplied” [vv. 21-24].

4. Today’s problems that are in need of intercessory prayers

Ideally, we are to intercede for people that the Holy Spirit has ministered to our hearts. However, we are commanded to pray for our enemies and persecutors [Matt. 5:44], kings, the state and people in authority [1 Tim. 2: 1-2; Ps. 72], the land or country [Ezek. 22:30], sinners [Is. 53:12] and family [1 Pet. 3: 7-8]. In those areas, we need urgent intercessory prayers as per the following examples:

- ❑ *Growing corruption among politicians and corporate executives*
National development has been arrested in Africa and the Caribbean as politicians steal and flaunt public funds almost uncontrollably. Big corporations in America are doctoring their books with the active connivance of external auditors. Unfortunately, most of the perpetrators are Christians!
- ❑ *HIV/AIDS Pandemic*
The energy of whole nations is being sapped with the death of the working age population due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There is as yet no known cure
- ❑ *Sex scandals in the church*
Ardent worshippers are being discouraged on account of the amorous activities of some priests.
- ❑ *Inter-ethnic/inter-racial/inter-religious violence*
With dwindling economic opportunities, inter-ethnic or inter-racial or inter-religious relations have been strained. Terrorist attacks by fundamental religious groups are becoming a global menace.
- ❑ *Family under siege*
Young people are afraid to marry, and the divorce rate has skyrocketed. Domestic violence, same-sex marriages, confirmed bachelorhood and single parenting are all threatening the Christian family, the very nucleus of the church.

We need to stand in the gap before God on all or any of the above urgent material or spiritual crises. Are you among those that God can count on? Jesus is our intercessor before His Father [Heb. 7:25]. Can we cooperate with Him on earth? That is the challenge that I am leaving with you today.