

A HOPELESS CASE OR A LOST CAUSE?

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 22

Extracts:

Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying; ... “The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So *I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.* Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them” [Ezek. 22: 1, 29-31]

In one of his classic sermons, R. W. Schambach [www.schambach.org] tells the story of a young man who was a member of a motorcycle gang. The members of the group enjoyed the ways of the world and did not want to hear anything about Jesus or salvation. His sister had fasted and prayed for him to give up his wayward life and surrender to Christ. It was all to no avail. Out of desperation, she approached the man of God for help. Brother Schambach joined her and they together fasted for another 21 days and nights for the young man. In fact, the young man got worse. They gave up what they saw as a hopeless case.

Then, one day, the young man stormed out of his sister's home in anger for “pestering” him about Christ. As he was going uphill, trying to overtake a slow-moving vehicle, he came face-to-face with an 18-wheeler truck. In a matter of seconds, he was crushed to death. At the funeral service that was attended by the other members of the gang, Schambach opened the dead man's casket to show his badly mangled body to his colleagues. At the altar call that followed, more than half of the gang members gave their lives to Christ!

The young man looked like a hopeless case to his sister and the pastor, but was he a lost cause to God? I doubt because through his death, more lives became saved! How often have you found yourself in the situation that the man of God faced? You have given up precious time and food praying and fasting for a dear family member or a close friend or even for your country. The more you pray, the more things get worse. You cannot see any change or improvement in them. Do you give up or continue? If you continue, for how much longer? If you give up, what is the alternative? Is a hopeless case necessarily a lost cause? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. Background: Where are the intercessors?

In Chapter 22 of the book of Ezekiel, we continue with the saga of the rebellious attitude of the children of Israel. They despised holy things and profaned God's Sabbaths [v. 8]. Their princes shed innocent blood, oppressed the stranger and mistreated the fatherless and the widow [vv. 6, 7]. The people were so morally bankrupt that they committed incest and adultery- even lying with women during their monthly period [vv. 10-11]. They had become so materialistic that bribery and cheating had become cultural norms [vv. 12, 20]. Yet, their prophets, priests and princes were critically loud by their acquiescence [vv. 25-28]!

In the midst of that decadence, God told the prophet Ezekiel, "I sought for a man among them who *would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land*, that I should not destroy it; *but I found none*. Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads" [vv. 30-31].

To make a wall and stand in the gap for other people is to intervene or intercede on their behalf until they receive a reprieve. In today's lesson, God was looking for a "gap-man" to intercede on behalf of the people of Israel but He could not find one. Since there was none, He was ready to mete out punishment and judgment on the offending nation. So, we get the impression here that God is willing to forgive offenders if there is a gap-man that can intercede on their behalf. That is good news!

Some of us may already be involved in the role of intercessors. It can be quite tasking and challenging. For example, it is now over several years that you have been praying and fasting for your parent's healing and things are getting worse, not better. Your sibling cannot find a steady job, in spite of good qualifications. Your wife cannot get pregnant even when the doctors say that there is nothing wrong with her. You have been praying for Mr. or Miss Right and only the wrong people keep coming your way. Your country appears to be under siege from terrorists or criminals or economic hardship. You have been to every crusade. You have prayed fervently. You have involved several prayer groups. There is no respite. Now, you are getting discouraged. The case is now hopeless. So, if God is looking for intercessors, why does it seem that He is sometimes not hearing us? There seems to be much more than meets the eye!

2. Let us dig beyond the surface!

God is not interested in the death of the wicked but that they should turn from their evil ways and live [Ezek. 33: 11]. The word of God also says, "This is the confidence that we have in (God), that if we ask anything *according to His will*, He hears us. ... If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin *which does not lead to death*, he will ask, and (God) will give him life for those who commit sin not

leading to death” [1 Jn 5: 14, 16]. In another place, we are told, “The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous” [Prov. 15: 29], and “the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” [Jam. 5: 16]. Taking all together, we can postulate that the ability of intercessors to successfully intercede with God on behalf of others depends on God’s will and the intercessor’s “righteousness.”

Let us consider the following scenarios, among others:

a) *A righteous intercessor asks for what God has purposed*

In this case, what the intercessor is asking for is already in the will of God by way of a promise or covenant or His purposes. Let us illustrate this case with two examples. When Moses went up to receive the Ten Commandments from God, he was absent from the congregation of Israel for 40 days and nights. They then turned to Aaron to make them a god. He made a molten calf and presented it to them as the god that delivered them out of the land of Egypt [Ex. 32: 1-4]. God was furious with the “stiff-necked people” who did not deserve to live [vv. 7-10]. However, Moses, the man of God, interceded on their behalf by reminding God of His promises, saying, “Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” The Lord relented and in the end, only three thousand [1 in 800] of the offending people died [vv. 12-14, 28]. Moses’ fervent prayers availed much.

In another example, King Herod had begun to persecute the early church by killing James, one of the apostles, and putting Peter in jail, hoping to also kill him soon after the Passover. In fact, to prevent Peter’s escape, Herod put four quads of soldiers (i.e., 16 soldiers) to guard him [Acts 12: 1-4]! But before His ascension, Jesus had promised His disciples that they would receive power through the Holy Spirit that would enable them to “be witnesses to (Him) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the earth” [Acts 1: 8]. So, as Peter was kept in prison, “constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” [Acts 12: 5]. The night before Peter’s planned execution, an angel of God appeared in the prison and set him free! Again, the prayer of the righteous ones (the church in this case) availed much because the matter was in line with God’s purpose.

b) *A righteous intercessor asks for what God has refused*

However, the righteousness of the intercessor will not avail where God has put down His foot. For example, He had told Ezekiel on another occasion that when a land sinned against Him by “persistent unfaithfulness,” He

would not listen to them “even if these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job, were in (that land)” [Ezek. 14: 14]. Persistent unfaithfulness is like blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven either in this world or hereafter [Matt. 12: 32]. However, it may not necessarily be only sins against the Holy Spirit. All that matters is that God has taken a stand on the matter.

Take the case of David whose first son by Bathsheba had fallen sick. After the king had repented his adultery with the lady whose husband he had also murdered, God told David through prophet Nathan that He had forgiven him his sins but added, “Because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die” [2 Sam. 12: 1-14]. So, when the child fell ill, David “fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground,” hoping “whether the Lord will be gracious to (him) that the child may live.” On the seventh day, the child died [vv. 15-18; 22]. His prayer could not avail anything because it was against God’s stand on the matter.

c) *An unrighteous intercessor asks for what God has refused*

In this case, the intercessor is not in good standing with God and what s(he) is asking for is what God has refused. For example, I have heard of a pastor who was praying for a barren female member of his congregation to become fruitful. She was not married and he was having a secret affair with her- apparently to get her pregnant! After several years of “fervent prayers,” nothing happened. How did you expect God to answer such a prayer?

A good example from the Scriptures is Balak, king of the Moabites. Fearing that he could lose his territory to the children of Israel who were on their way to the Promised Land, he hired Balaam to curse them [Num. Chaps. 22-24]. The king was evil-minded and the ‘intercessor’ that he hired to do his dirty job was a soothsayer [Josh. 13: 22]. However, God intervened and used Balaam to achieve the direct opposite because he could not curse whom God had blessed [Num. 23: 8, 19-20]! But from Balak’s perspective, Balaam’s intercession availed him nothing.

d) *An unrighteous intercessor asks for what God has justified*

In this case, somebody who is not in good standing with God intercedes on behalf of somebody that God wants to bless. This can happen, for example, with unbelieving parents praying to their idols or a non-Christian God to save from danger their yet to be saved children. Since God knows the end from the beginning, He may answer such prayers if He has a mission for such children in the future. In some cases, an unbelieving intercessor may be praying to the believer’s God. For example, when

Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, King Darius "spent the night fasting." Then early in the morning, he hastened to the den and "cried out with a lamenting voice to Daniel...saying, 'Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?'" [Dan. 6: 18-20]. It looks obvious that the king had spent the night praying to Daniel's God on his behalf.

From the forgoing analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

- *Knowing God's will is the key to effective intercession.* When you are not conformed to the world but are transformed by the renewing of your mind, then you may be able to prove "what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" [Rom. 12: 2]. If you have the mind of Christ, you may know the mind of the Lord [1 Cor. 2: 15-16].
- In truth, *no human intercessor can be righteous before God* for "there is none righteous, no, not one" [Ps. 14: 1-3; Ps. 53: 1-3] and "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" [Rom. 3: 23]. That is why the Psalmist has said, "Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them and I will praise the Lord. *This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous shall enter*" [Ps. 118: 19-20].
- When God told Ezekiel, "I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found no one" [Ezek. 22: 30], it was righteousness by faith, not by works, that He was addressing. This point is underlined in the 59th chapter of the book of Isaiah. In reviewing the backsliding and wickedness of the children of Israel, the prophet wrote [Is. 59: 14-16]:

*Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; ...
Then the Lord saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him.*

- *The righteousness of God comes to us through Jesus Christ* [1 Cor. 1: 30] "for He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" [2 Cor. 5: 21]. Writing on the same subject, John affirmed, "If anyone sins, we have an *Advocate* with the Father, *Jesus Christ the righteous*, and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" [1 Jn 2: 1,2].

3. Conclusion: Only faith in Jesus can make you a successful intercessor!

Just before His Passion, in His classic intercessory prayer on behalf of His disciples and future followers, Jesus said to His Father, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. ... I do not pray for these alone,

but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” [Jn 17: 18, 20, 21]. Earlier, He had assured His followers, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it will be done for you” [Jn 15: 7] and without Him, they could do *nothing* [v. 5]. Therefore, only faith in Christ Jesus can make you a successful intercessor.

To be on the road to such success, try the following steps:

- Audit your relationship with the Lord. Have you truly given your life to Christ or are you merely making motions, just to be in the good books of your parents or spouse, church or pastor, friends or colleagues? Jesus reminds you, “You are My friends if you do *whatever* I command you to do” [v. 14]. Remember, the fact that you can dream profound dreams or see clear visions or speak in fluent tongues is no evidence of your spirituality. Rather, it is by your spiritual fruits [Gal. 5: 22-23] that you shall be known [Matt. 7: 16-23]. One outcome of this quest is that you will come to have the mind of Christ, the key to knowing the will of God on your petitions on behalf of others.
- Go back and re-examine the prayer petitions on your table right now. The likelihood is that you may now easily know those to knock off!

You do not have a hopeless case. You are not interceding over a lost cause. Your problem is knowing what to ask for. With God, nothing is impossible!