

Intercessory Prayer: A Leader's Most Important Task Exodus 32 – 34

As men, there is nothing more important that we can do for the people under our care than **stand in the gap** for them. As fathers, as brothers, and as ministry leaders this is our highest calling and the source of our greatest influence! Prayer does not prepare us for the battle. Prayer **is the battle**.

Prayer does not fit us for the greater works; prayer is the greater work. (My Utmost for His Highest. Oswald Chambers. P. 291.)

In the Bible there are numerous examples of intercessory prayer:

- Abraham intercedes for Sodom (Genesis 18:16-33).
- Moses intercedes for the Israelites who are under attack (Exodus 17:8-16).
- Aaron stands in the gap (literally!) to stop a plague (Numbers 16:46-50).
- Jesus intercedes for His disciples... and future disciples (John 17).
- Paul intercedes for his people, the Jews (Romans 9:1-5).

But perhaps no passage in all the Bible sets forth the full dynamics of intercessory prayer like Exodus 32-34.

Around us is a world lost in sin, above us is a God willing and able to save; it is ours to build the bridge that links heaven and earth, and prayer is the mighty instrument that does the work. (Purpose in Prayer. E. M. Bounds. P. 155.)

As men, if we fail to pray... we fail... both God and man. Samuel understood the importance of prayer when he said: *As for me, far be it from me that I should **sin against the Lord** by failing to pray for you (1 Samuel 12:23).*

TABLE TALK

1. *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:16).* If prayer has such power, why do so few people pray?
2. Share with each other some of your own experiences with intercessory prayer.
3. Honestly, tell the truth: Do you really believe that if one of you learned how to intercede that it could actually change something God was intending (or not intending) to do?
4. What would it take to make you mighty in intercessory prayer?



I. The Cause/Need for Intercession.

A. Read Exodus 32:1-35.

B. Backsliding.... A broken relationship with God.

At heart, intercession is not just asking God to do something good for someone else (that is petition), but rather seeking to bring reconciliation where there is a rupture in someone's relationship with God. It is standing in the gap between a holy God and a sinful people until that relationship is restored.

Less than five months have passed since the people of Israel were redeemed from bondage in Egypt by blood (Passover) and water (Red Sea). Only a few weeks have passed since the covenant was sealed (19:1-8; 24:3). Yet all too quickly they backslide and fall into a "great sin" (v. 21, 30, 31). The people have been taken out of Egypt... but Egypt has not yet been taken out of them!

C. Three characteristics of a backslidden condition.

1. The clergy follow the people rather than lead the people.

The people were weary of following the invisible God who demanded so much. They preferred a god (a golden calf) who was more:

- Culturally relevant.
- User friendly.
- Seeker-sensitive.
- Responsive to our needs.
- Politically correct.
- Understandable.... accessible.... tangible....
- Able to be worshiped in a "contemporary" manner.

Tragically, Aaron believed that his job was to reflect public opinion rather than shape it. Even though the people share guilt in this sad story, God holds Aaron responsible.

What did these people do to you, that you led them into such a great sin? (v. 21).

Bottom line: God wants His spiritual leaders to be thermostats, not thermometers.



2. Trying to make God in our image... rather than Him making us in His!

The golden calf violates the second commandment (no idols) more than the first (no other gods). Their sin is not so much worshipping another god as it is wanting to worship the true God in an inappropriate manner.

The people are not worshipping another god (Ra, Isis, Ishtar, Osiris, Baal) but rather are worshipping the god (elohim) who brought them up out of Egypt (v. 4) in the form of a calf. The worship service is a "festival to the LORD (Yahweh)" (v. 5). Thus, they were not really worshipping God but rather their image of God (i.e. what they want God to be).

Bottom line: If we are going to have a relationship with the true God, we will meet Him on His terms or not at all.

3. Backsliding is what happens when we begin to forget that the goal of redemption is holiness not happiness (Leviticus 19:2, etc.).

- ...they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry (v. 6).
- ... the people were running wild... out of control... (v. 25).
- Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint (Prov. 29:18).

Don't be naïve! Bad theology always (?) leads to immorality and permission to be involved in all manner of self-centered activities.

Beware of what J. I. Packer calls "hot tub religion." This is a form of spirituality that measures all doctrines and worship styles by their ability to make us happy.

Bottom line: God is more interested in our long-term joy than in our short-term happiness. *Without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).*

D. Moses shows us the cure for backsliding.

1. The idol must be destroyed.

Moses took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it (v. 20).



B. Wrestling with God.

- 1) God says: *Go down, Moses... because **your** people whom **you** brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt... They are a stiff-necked people. Now **leave me alone** so that my anger may burn against them and that **I may destroy them**. Then I will make you into a great nation (vv. 7, 9-10).*

How would you have responded if God had spoken to you in those terms?

- 2) Moses says: *O Lord, why should your anger burn against **your** people, whom **you** brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?... Turn from your fierce anger; relent (KJV – repent) and do not bring disaster on your people.... (vv. 11-12). (The argument continues in chapter 33:1, 13).*

This does not sound like a prayer meeting. It sounds more like a shouting match! True intercession is not piously, quietly, passively, acquiescing to the sovereign will of God. It is not weakly asking if perhaps God might intervene in some situation... and piously adding of course, "if it be Thy will." Submission to the will of God often sounds pious and holy.

Actually, it is many times a cover-up for **laziness, timidity** and **lack of love**.

*We say too soon, "Thy will be done"; and too ready acceptance of a situation as His will often means feebleness or sloth. It may be His will that we surmount His will. It may be His higher will that we resist His lower.... Let us submit when we **must**, but let us keep the submission in reserve rather than in action, as a ground tone rather than the sole effort. Prayer with us has largely ceased to be **wrestling**. But is that not the dominant scriptural idea? It is not the sole idea, but is it not the dominant? (*The Soul of Prayer*. P. T. Forsyth. p. 82. Emphasis in the original).*

Intercessory prayer reveals a person's **true theology**! It shows clearly what a person really thinks about: God, man, sin, sovereignty, the will of God, the possibilities of grace, faith, prayer, etc.

SUMMARY: The nature of intercession is **wrestling with God**.



III. The Power of Intercession.

A. The will of God.

*Now **leave me alone** so that... I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation (v. 10).* It sounds like God has announced His plans, revealed His will. Isn't this the place to say, "OK. I surrender. Your will be done"? Not for Moses!

B. Does God Change His Mind?

Moses did not passively acquiesce. Rather, he stood in the gap and boldly challenged God. *Turn from your fierce anger; **relent (repent)** and do not bring disaster on your people. (v. 12).* Surprisingly, God changed His mind! *Then the Lord **relented (repented)** and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened (v. 14).*

Does God repent? How does this square with His omniscience? Immutability?

1. On the one hand the Bible tells us that *God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should **change his mind** (literally, repent). (Numbers 23:19).*
2. But on the other hand, there are several examples illustrating that God does indeed repent.
 - Genesis 6:6.
 - 1 Samuel 15:11, 35 (contrast v. 29).
 - Jonah 3:9-10.

SUMMARY: The power of intercession is that it can **change** God's mind and thus **human history**.

Blaise Pascal said it powerfully: *Why has God instituted prayer? To impart to His creatures the dignity of **causality**. (Pensees. #930).*

IV. The Content of Intercession.

A. Don't confuse intercession with **petition**.

Much prayer that goes under the name "intercession" is actually petitionary prayer. We are asking God to do something: healing, financial



success, a job, stop the war, a promotion at work, save someone, etc. This is good, but true intercession gets at something much deeper.

B. Moses' prayer reveals two basic parts to authentic intercessory prayer:

1) The **glory** of God.

Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?" (v. 12).

Lord, your reputation is at stake in this matter. If you don't answer my prayer, then people are going to have a poor opinion of you! This is **not about me**. It is about you!

2) The **promises** of God.

Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever" (v. 13).

Lord, I'm basing my prayer on promises that have already been given! I'm not making this up. Have you lied to us? Show us how you **keep your Word**.

V. The Cost of Intercession.

A. Moses' example.... and Paul's.

- *Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then **blot me out** of the book you have written (v. 31-32).*
- *I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were **cursed and cut off** from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.... (Rom. 9:2-3).*



B. Before you intercede... consider the cost.

1. The relational cost.

Shuttle diplomacy is costly. Talking to God about men and talking to men about God may leave you feeling **caught in the middle!** You may find that God and man are both upset at you!

2. The cost of love (agape).

In intercession we enter into the pains, suffering and even the sin (?) of those for whom we pray (e.g. Nehemiah 1, Daniel 9). We **identify** so deeply with them that their reality becomes our reality. Therefore, only those who walk in love (agape) will ever be motivated to pray! This explains why there are so few intercessors!

*Perfect prayer is only another name for **love**. (Francois Fenelon).*

C. Moses can intercede... but only God can **save**.

God listens to Moses' plea but reserves for Himself the right to save or destroy.

The Lord replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin." And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made (vv. 33-35).

Though Moses was willing to pay the ultimate price for the redemption of his people... he couldn't. He could only intercede. God alone can make atonement for sin. Moses may share in Christ's agony for sin but his pain is not redemptive. Only Christ's suffering can save!

I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regards to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).

SUMMARY: The cost of intercessory prayer is the readiness to **lay down my life** out of love for those I pray for.



VI. The Rarity of Intercession.

A. Look again at our study of intercession.

- 1) The cause/need for intercession: a broken relationship with God, a backslidden condition.
- 2) The nature of intercession: wrestling with God.
- 3) The power of intercession: God may change His mind, His plans, and the history of the world may be different!
- 4) The content of intercession: the glory of God among the nations and the promises of God.
- 5) The cost of intercession: agape-love... identifying with the pain and the sin of others.

No wonder intercessors are rare!

B. Where are the intercessors?

- *The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene... (Isaiah 59:15-16).*
- *I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.... (Ezekiel 22:30).*

TABLE TALK

1. Look again at the six points about intercessory prayer:
 - a. The cause – backsliding.
 - b. The nature – wrestling with God.
 - c. The power – causing God to change his mind.
 - d. The content – God's glory... God's promises.
 - e. The cost – identification with the pains of others... agape love.
 - f. The rarity – Where are the intercessors?

What have you learned about intercessory prayer today?

2. With God's help, what do you intend to do differently now in terms of your own prayer life?
3. If time permits, share a need (someone you know who has a broken relationship with God) and together stand in the gap for this person in prayer.



What is an Intercessor? By Norman Grubb

That God seeks intercessors, but seldom finds them, is plain from the pain of His exclamation through Isaiah: "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor"; and His protest of disappointment through Ezekiel: "I sought a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before Me for the land . . . but I found none."

Perhaps believers in general have regarded intercession as just some form of rather intensified prayer. It is, so long there is great emphasis on the word, "intensified"; for there are three things to be seen in an intercessor, which are not necessarily found in an ordinary prayer: identification, agony, and authority.

1. Identification

The identification of the intercessor with the ones for whom he intercedes is perfectly seen in the Savior. Of Him it was said that He poured out His soul unto death: and He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sin of many, and *made intercession* from the transgressors. As the Divine Intercessor, interceding for the lost world, He drained the cup of our lost condition to its last drop, He "tasted death for every man". To do that, in the fullest possible sense, He sat where we sit. By taking our nature upon Himself, by learning obedience through the things which He suffered, by being tempted in all points like as we are, by becoming poor for our sakes, and finally by being made sin for us, He gained the position in which, with the fullest authority as the captain of our salvation made perfect through sufferings, and the fullest understanding of all we go through He can ever live to make intercession for us, and by effective pleadings with the Father "is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him." Identification is thus the first law of the intercessor. He pleads effectively because he gives his life for those he pleads for, he is their genuine representative; he has submerged his self-interest in their needs and sufferings, and as far as possible has literally taken their place.

2. Agony

There is another Intercessor, and in Him we see the agony of the ministry; for He, the Holy Spirit, "maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." This One, the only present Intercessor on earth, has no hearts upon which He can lay His burdens, and no bodies through which He can suffer and work, except the hearts and bodies of those who are His dwelling place. Through them He does His intercessory work on earth, and they become intercessors by reason of the Intercessor within them. It is the real life to which He calls them, and the very same kind of life, in lesser measure which the Saviour Himself lived on earth.

But before He can lead the chosen vessel in to such a life of intercession, He first has to deal to the bottom with all that is natural. Love of money, personal ambition, natural affection for parents and loved ones, the appetites of the body, the love of life itself all that makes even a converted man live unto himself, for his own comfort and advantage, for his own advancement, even for own circle of friends, has to go to the cross. It is no theoretical death, but a real crucifixion with Christ, such as only the Holy Ghost Himself can make actual in



the experience of His servant. Both as a crisis and a process, Paul's testimony must be made ours: "I have been and still am crucified with Christ." The self must be released from itself to become and agent of the Holy Ghost.

As crucifixion proceeds, intercession begins. By inner burdens, by calls to outward obediences, the Spirit begins to live His own life of love and sacrifice for a lost world through His cleansed channel.... Watch Moses, the young intercessor, leaving the palace by free choice to identify himself with his slave-brethren. See him accompanying them through "the waste and howling wilderness". See him reach the very summit of intercession, when the wrath of God was upon them for their idolatry, and their destruction was imminent. It is not his body he now offers them as intercessor, but his immortal soul: "If Thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee out of Thy Book"; and he actually called this "making an atonement" for them.

See the Apostle Paul, the greatest man of the new dispensation as Moses was of old. For years, his body, through the Holy Ghost, is a living sacrifice, that Gentiles might have the Gospel; finally, his immortal soul is offered on the altar. The very one who was just rejoicing with the Romans that nothing could separate him and them from the love of God (Rom. 8), says a moments later, the Spirit bearing him witness, that he could wish himself "accursed (separated) from Christ for my brethren my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9). This is the intercessor in action. When the Holy Ghost really lives His life in a chosen vessel, there is no limit to the extremes to which He will take him, in His passion to warn and save the lost. Isaiah, that aristocrat, had to go "naked and bare-footed" for three years as a warning to Israel. We can hardly credit such a thing! Hosea had to marry a harlot, to show his people that the heavenly Husband was willing to take back His adulterous bride. Jeremiah was not allowed to marry, as a warning to Israel against the terrors and tragedies of captivity. Ezekiel was not allowed to shed one tear for the death of his wife, "the desire of eyes". And so the list might be continued. Every greatly used instrument of God has been, in his measure, an intercessor: Wesley for backsliding England; Booth for the down-and-outs; Hudson Taylor for China; C.T. Studd for the unevangelized world.

3. Authority

But intercession is more than the Spirit sharing His groanings with us, and living His life of sacrifice for the world through us. It is the Spirit gaining His ends of abundant grace. If the intercessor knows identification and agony, he also knows authority. It is the law of the corn of wheat and the harvest: "if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit". Intercession is not substitution for sin. There has only ever been one substitute for a world of sinners, Jesus the Son of God. But intercession so identifies the intercessor with the sufferer that it gives him a prevailing place with God. He moves God. He even causes Him to change His mind. He gains his objective, or rather the Spirit gains it through him. Thus Moses, by intercession, became the savior of Israel and prevented their destruction; and we can have little doubt that Paul's supreme act of intercession for God's chosen people resulted in that great revelation given him at that time, of world-wide evangelization and the final salvation of Israel (Romans 10 and 11), and is enabling God to bring it about....

Excerpts taken from:

Rees Howells Intercessor, by Norman Grubb, Christian Literature Crusade, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, 1973.

