

## The Intercessor

A few years ago, a pastor, with a Bible Conference on prayer in view, asked me if I knew anyone who was an active “prayer warrior” and who also could preach and teach on the subject. The question caused me some thought, and my thinking raised other questions in my mind. I knew of a number of people who did a great deal of praying; and I knew of a number of preachers who did considerable preaching on prayer. But those who prayed did not do any teaching on the subject. And those who preached about it did very little of it themselves. Making a mental note of that, I put it on the shelf and pondered it from time to time.

More recently I have been asked a number of times if I knew anyone who was a “real intercessor,” or anyone who “had the gift of intercessory prayer.” There was a time when I thought I could answer that question with a positive yes. But observations over the years, a more careful study of the Scriptures, and considerable personal experience has caused me to examine that terminology a bit more carefully.

Our English word “intercession” comes from the Latin *intercedo*, meaning “to go or pass between.” That is generally what we have in mind when we use the word. The Hebrew and Greek words from which intercession is translated do not always mean exactly that.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew *paga* originally meant “to strike” or “to fall upon.” It is used ten times in the sense that men fell upon others to do them violence. Hence Doeg fell upon the priests of the Lord and slew them (1 Samuel 22:18). Later it came to be used in a good sense, as to “assail someone with petitions.” That is the sense in which it is generally translated “intercession” in the Old Testament.

The New Testament equivalent, *entygchano*, means “to meet,” or “to come between.” It is used twice of the ministry of the Lord Jesus, once of the Holy Spirit, and once describing Isaiah’s cries to Jehovah *against* Israel’s destruction of the prophets and altars (Romans 11:2-3). The only other time human intercession is mentioned in the New Testament is in 1 Timothy 2:1, in which we are enjoined to make intercession for rulers. But the word translated “intercession” there is also translated “prayer” in 1 Timothy 2:3 in respect to asking God’s blessings upon food.

Here, then, are some of the questions which arose in my mind: Did Jesus really teach His disciples *how* to pray? Or did He just teach them to *pray*? Is there an “art” or “skill” or special “spiritual gift” to pray or to intercede? Is there a valid ministry of intercession? Are there people who do nothing but pray for others and the ministry of others? If so, then are their prayers more acceptable than others? If their prayers are more acceptable than others, upon what grounds? Is it possible to appropriate those grounds in order to make our petitions more successful? Would it be expedient to seek out “intercessors” when we have a hard problem, a stubborn obstacle, a desperate need, a greatly desired object? And then could we have more confidence and faith in the success of such intercession?

Jesus exhorted, urged and encouraged his disciples to pray on a number of occasions. But it does not appear that He taught them very much on *how* to pray. Most of what may be regarded as teaching was in a corrective sense. Religious people pray as naturally as birds sing, dogs bark, and sheep bleat. The existence of a God demands that He be worshipped and petitioned. His disciples were warned against praying in the way religious people, ignorant of the true and living God, prayed. They were not to pray as the heathen, using vain repetitions. They thought the longer their prayers, the more effectual they were. They were to *believe* God when they prayed, otherwise their prayers were faithless, unacceptable to God, and only superstitious religious exercises. They were not to parade and display their prayers for the ears and admiration of men. Their prayers were to be a direct and intimate petition to their God. They were to pray to a loving Father, not an impersonal, uncaring God. They were to pray to the Almighty, the God of the universe, the High and Most Holy One, not a buddy-buddy or a “good old Joe.” They were to pray to an Omniscient God Who knew their needs before they asked them, and One Whose good pleasure it was to hear and answer their petitions. They were also taught that their prayers would be acceptable for Christ’s sake. That is, they were to pray in Jesus’ Name. So praying in His Name, they were taught that they always had immediate and unhindered access to God’s throne, and were so urged to come to God boldly, unhesitatingly.

All these teachings relevant to prayer are simple basic truths of which every Christian should be cognizant. They are truths in which he should be catechized early in his Christian experience. A lack of knowledge of these indicates, not only a person’s incapacity to pray properly, but a sad deficiency in the knowledge of God and the nature of true salvation. There seems, therefore, to be no particular art or skill to pray. It is the natural consequence of a person rightly related to God.

While all prayer is not intercession, intercession is most certainly a high form of prayer. It might be helpful for us to review some of the intercessions in the Scriptures.

One of the first recorded intercessions is found in Genesis 18:22-33, in which we find Abraham interceding for the wicked city of Sodom. His intercession must be considered a failure if we view the salvation of Sodom its objective. God destroyed Sodom.

Moses was often driven to intercession on behalf of the rebellious and idolatrous Israel. One such occasion is found in Exodus 32:31-32, in which case he offered his own eternal salvation on behalf of them. In this case, God had mercy on the people, and we may regard this intercession to have achieved its desired end.

Samuel interceded for the rejected Saul all night long (1 Samuel 15:11), but failed to deter God from His purpose to take the kingdom from him.

Such weeping, mourning and intercessions the prophet Jeremiah made for apostate Israel has not been excelled. Yet we find God saying to him, "Pray not for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me; for I will not hear thee" (Jeremiah 7:16). "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go" (Jeremiah 15:1). Jeremiah's intercession failed. And God promised that Moses or Samuel could have done no better.

When the Apostle Peter was thrown into prison, intercession was made by the church for him day and night, and God miraculously set him free. Was there no one to intercede for John the Baptist when he was imprisoned and beheaded? Must we assume that the church did not likewise intercede for James when Herod imprisoned and slew him? Was there no intercessor for the Apostle Paul imprisoned in Rome awaiting execution? And how about the time Paul and Silas were set free from the Philippian jail, when we have no record of an interceding church?

If we are to learn anything from the testimony of these intercessions, it surely must be that men, the best of men, do not change the purpose of God by their intercessions, even when their hearts, and in their prayers, their motives are pure and their lives are right. If there is a peculiar gift of intercession, then either these men did not have it, or such a gift guarantees no success. Is there anyone alive today who would like to tackle what God said Moses and Samuel were unequal to?

The lists of gifts and ministries in the New Testament omit any mention of the gift or ministry of intercession. Such an omission does not at all preclude the existence of such a gift or ministry. Indeed, many gifts and ministries exercised today have no scriptural name. But other scriptural considerations cast serious doubt of the existence of a person who is peculiarly an intercessor in the vocational or calling sense, in a special way in which other Christians are not, and separated to that ministry alone.

The term "intercessor" occurs only once in the Bible. "And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor . . ." (Isaiah 59:16). This passage could be more accurately rendered, "that there was no one to intercede." The subsequent scripture indicates the setting forth of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Intercessor on the behalf of a fallen and ruined people. Indeed, we shall see that He alone is **The Intercessor**.

Every intercessory prayer made by men in the Bible is made by men actively engaged in another ministry. They were prophets, priests, patriarchs charged with the responsibility to watch over the souls of men. They came to intercede when their charges became embroiled in fearful and desperate circumstances, when they sinned, when their behaviour threatened the wrath of God. We have no record of someone cloistered away who did nothing but pray. It is true that there could have been such persons, but it is not likely that the Holy Scriptures should have kept us totally ignorant of such a thing, especially if such a ministry was to be a pattern among God's people on earth. We have no record of a child of God walking with God who had to seek out an intercessor to "pray a particular difficult matter through." Indeed, there is the case where the heathen Abimelech was told to seek the prayer of the God-fearing Abraham on his behalf (Genesis 20:7-17). The critical, arrogant and ignorant friends of Job were told that they would be forgiven their folly when the object of their tormenting accusations prayed for them (Job 42:8-10). And covetous Simon the sorcerer, still in the bonds of iniquity, cries out for Peter's intercession on his behalf (Acts 8:24).

But these cases give no precedent or warrant whatever for one Christian to seek out another Christian with the gift of intercession to do his praying for him.

There are other factors which render a human ministry of intercession capable of much mischief. Let us assume that such a ministry did exist. There are these people who can get prayers answered in a way that no one else can. There are people who can get ahold of God on our behalf and secure the petitions we desire of Him. Have we not then thrown out the exclusiveness of Christ's mediatorial ministry? ". . . One mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Will we not then idolize such an intercessor? Will we not superstitiously put our confidence in him and in his prayers to get us or our loved ones saved, to gain us the success or deliverance we seek? Will we not fear him in such a way as we should fear none but God? Is this not just another old humanistic dodge to find a gimmick which works, and thus circumvent the will of God? If we cannot get done what we wish done in any other way, we will do as foolish Balak thought to do and get someone who has the inside track with God to do it for us.

It is a mark of a foolish, irreligious, godless people who seek others to do their praying for them. Those who refused the command to come to the feast sought to have the servant "have them excused" (Luke 14:18-19), to intercede on their behalf and get them off the hook. Deluded Romanists hope in the intercession of the "Blessed Virgin." The wayward child hopes in the prayers of his godly mother back home. And the preacher who shirks his own responsibility to take his position as seeker at the throne of graces hopes to find an intercessor which will make his ministry spectacularly successful.

One other heresy is implied in the idea of a special gift of intercession among men. If we are to believe that one Christian is to be received by God in such a way that others are not, then he must have some special standing which makes him and his prayers more acceptable than the rest of us. Upon what ground do I expect to be received by God? The Person and imputed righteousness of the Son, Jesus Christ. Do you expect to be received on any other grounds? I hope not. Then, upon what more excellent grounds is the intercessor to be received? That we think some men are received more readily is proof that we do not have full and ultimate confidence in Christ alone. We imagine some peculiar gift, or some superior level of sanctification, sacrifice or other goodness on our behalf will gain us something Christ cannot. Do we not depreciate the excellence of our dear Lord and count His blood inferior to other attainment? God forbid such blasphemous thoughts!

In the understood sense of "intercessor" as one who stands between and pleads the case on another's behalf, only one person can properly be regarded as such: The Lord Jesus Christ. He is God's Lamb, the Elect, the appointed Substitute Who took our place under the wrath of God at the Cross, and Whose righteous obedience now represents us before the throne of God. It is in this imputed righteousness that we have access to that throne. His Name is our credentials of hearing, His Blood presents us blameless without spot or blemish of any sort, and His Wounds plead our cause.

We should not consider Christ's intercession as a forensic activity. He is not occupied with arguing our case before the court of heaven in an attempt to influence the Father to be favorable to us. Rather, His personal intercession is effected by His mediatorial presence. He represents us in His very being. It is not what He *says* that secures us favor, but what and Whom He *is*. "He ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). As long as He stands, we stand righteous and acceptable before God. And He so stands forever.

But Christ is our intercessor in another sense, through the Holy Spirit. Thus He not only presents us acceptable to God, but sends the Holy Spirit to enable and help us to rightly present our petitions to Him. Man, of himself, is poorly able to discern the will of God and so pray in God's will. But "he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:27). He also helps us to pray with unutterable groanings (Romans 8:26).

Therefore, when we seek human intercessors, and put confidence in the gifts, abilities, or ministries of others, we are despising the full and perfect intercession of Jesus Christ on our behalf, and putting an idolatrous faith in man.

Now, we must quickly state that we are to desire, seek and solicit the prayers of others on our behalf. The New Testament is filled with requests of prayer from one Christian to others, not only for prayer in a general sense, but specific requests. But this is not an idolatrous transference of faith in the Lord Jesus. It is simply an application of the means whereby God has ordained that His grace be ordinarily bestowed upon His people and their labours. No special gift or ministry is thereby suggested, but what is altogether common among the saints.

We are also admonished to pray and to intercede for others. The bounds of our responsibility to intercede knows no ends. We are to pray for our ministers, our brothers and sisters in Christ, for the salvation of loved ones, for rulers, even and especially for our enemies and persecutors (Matthew 5:44). These prayers will arise from duty, obedience and from heart. They must not be meaningless mouthings, but sincere cries to our heavenly Father.

Of all these petitions, God may give us assurance that He has heard some and will answer as we have prayed. Other He will not, since, although it is His will for us to pray for all, it is not always His will to do all we pray for. Such unfulfilled intercessions should not be considered failures, however, or displeasing to God. Abraham's petition on behalf of Sodom, Samuel's for Saul, and Jeremiah's for Israel must not be considered useless failures. They brought these men into harmony with the will of God. Likewise, our sincere intercessions will also bring us into a more perfect harmony with the nature of a gracious and compassionate God, Who, having not *willed* the salvation of all men, yet desires the salvation of all. Such a paradox is displayed as Jesus wept over Jerusalem, yearning in His soul for its salvation, yet knowing even His intercession could not forestall its destruction. We are told to love and pray for even our enemies "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."

Finally, we might ask the question: Could we ever say of any one at any time that this particular person is an intercessor? Most certainly, yes! Any Christian becomes an intercessor as soon as a desperate need appears concerning anyone or any situation to which his ministry applies. When such happens, his heart is pricked and bleeds, his soul bows in anguish, he enters into the suffering with the object of his petition, and as naturally and spontaneously as breathing, he assails the throne of God on behalf of his charge. We are all of a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5-9) to offer up spiritual sacrifices unto God. The principal occupation of priests is intercession. We need no special gift or skill to do this. The nature of Christ by the Holy Spirit within us immediately responds to need with intercessory prayer. These prayers are then made acceptable to God before the throne by our faithful eternal High Priest the Lord Jesus Christ.

- C. M.