

Standing in the Gap

“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.” – Ezek. 22:30

Ezekiel wrote his book over a number of years, most likely the twenty-two years between 593-571 BC. He was already in exile in Babylon, having been carried off into captivity in 597 BC. His countrymen, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had already been exiled in 605 BC. The final assault would come in 586 BC when Jerusalem was ransacked and the temple was destroyed. The quotation from chapter 22 (above) was most likely penned by Ezekiel c. 591 BC., and it appears in the context of a severe warning.

At this time, the walls have not yet been destroyed. It seems likely that what the prophet is referring to is “walls of righteousness.” The sad state of affairs is simply that the religious leaders and the ruling authorities are all corrupt. God is looking for two things:

1. A faithful remnant of godly men and women, true followers, who will be united like a wall of righteousness in their efforts to resist evil and return to the Lord.
2. A righteous man who will stand in the gap by speaking God’s message to the people. Sadly, there is no such leader to be found in all of Judah!

Judah is living under a plague! It is not a plague of locusts or some other form of pestilence, but of godless rulers and religious leaders. The rulers have forsaken their trust in the Lord and relied on political alliances, notably with Egypt. But the Egyptians were crushed at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC. Judah’s hopes were dashed as the Babylonians gained absolute control over what had been a fading Assyrian-Egyptian power base.

Judah now has no-one to stand between them and the Babylonians except God – but they have forsaken God! The religious leaders have been no better than the political rulers. They have not been hearing from the Lord. Consequently their messages have been based on human opinion and wishful thinking. As for their rituals, well, they have been a poor covering for their spiritual bankruptcy.

How can any people be a wall of righteousness to their culture, and how can they stand in the gap for the Lord when they are not hearing from Him? The answer is devastatingly simple: they cannot! If we are to make a difference for God in this world we must build our lives on the sure foundation of Christ, we must listen to and obey His Word, and we must be sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

As for Ezekiel, during his ministry the Lord told him to illustrate his messages with some very dramatic object lessons. For example, at one point he was instructed to lie on his side for some 390 days during which he could eat only one eight-ounce meal a day cooked over manure (I think he would have done extremely well at our Tuesday “Weigh-Down” group). Then, Ezekiel was instructed to shave his head and beard. He was even told to show no sorrow when his wife died! In all of these things, Ezekiel obeyed and faithfully proclaimed God’s word.

Now, the Lord may never call upon us to do anything quite so dramatic, but He is calling us to stand together, to build a wall of righteousness, and to stand in the gap for each other and for those who are outside our church walls. I can think of some outstanding examples of individuals who have stood in the gap for the people of God. The first is Moses, undoubtedly the greatest leader in the Old Testament. We read in Numbers 14 how he stood in the gap for Israel before the Lord.

Moses Intercedes for the People

The twelve spies had been sent to into the Promised Land to begin preparations for the conquest. Ten returned with a negative report. They did not believe that the same God who had parted the waters of the Red Sea could now lead them to victory in Canaan. Only Joshua and Caleb had faith in God. The people grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and wanted to choose a leader to take them back to Egypt.

The Lord's anger at the people was kindled. He told Moses that he was prepared to strike down the people and that he would make Moses into a nation greater and stronger than they.

I love what Moses does in response. First, he shows concern for the name and reputation of the Lord. Surely God does not want the surrounding nations to think that he was unable to bring his own people into the land he had promised them. Then, Moses says this:

“Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ‘The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.’ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now” (Num. 14:17-19).

Moses passionately and prayerfully intercedes for the people. He stands in the gap between God and the people. And he is successful. Yes, there will be consequences for the people's rebellion, but they will not be destroyed.

Nehemiah Identifies With the People

Another great leader who stood in the gap for his people was Nehemiah. At the end of the exile in Babylon, he returned to Jerusalem with a remnant of the people. He is heart-broken when he sees the broken walls of the city, and he prays to the Lord:

“I confess the sins we Isrealites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses ... O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name” (Nehemiah 1:6b-7, 11).

Where Moses had interceded for the people, Nehemiah not only intercedes, but he identifies with the people. There is no standing above the people or apart from them with any aire of superiority. Not at all! It's not, “They have sinned,” but “We have sinned ... including myself and my father's house.” In his own eyes, Nehemiah is just as guilty and just as needful of forgiveness. He stands in the gap before God on behalf of the people.

Barnabas Befriends Paul

Finally, I think of Barnabas, whose name means, “Son of Encouragement.” You remember the crucial role he played during those early days when the fledgling church was just getting to her feet. Paul had been gloriously converted on the road to Damascus. He had subsequently begun to preach the Gospel in the synagogues. He had grown powerful in his testimony, proving that Jesus is the Christ.

But there was a problem. When Paul came to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples, they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. After all, was this not the fire-breathing dragon who had tried to destroy them?

Enter Barnabas. He befriended Paul. He took him to the apostles and vouched for him. He stood in the gap for Paul when none of the others would take a chance. Many have wondered how the subsequent course of history might have been altered if not for this ministry of encouragement by Barnabas. What might have happened if Barnabas had not befriended Paul and had not stood in the gap for Paul and if Paul had never been accepted by the other apostles? What a crucial role played by this big-hearted man, Barnabas! He did not preach a great sermon. Neither did he perform a never-to-be-forgotten miracle. There is no book in the Bible with his name on it. No, we remember him because he stood shoulder to shoulder with Paul; together they formed a wall of righteousness as Barnabas stood in the gap.

What a source of encouragement Barnabas continues to be. He can encourage us all by showing us that we do not have to be great preachers, neither do we have to perform miraculous signs and wonders or possess great charisma. Not at all! But we may help change the course of history by our willingness to come alongside one another and stand in the gap. We will certainly change the course of history when we are willing to stand shoulder to shoulder and form a wall of righteousness. And what excites me about this is that there are potentially a thousand simple ways we can do this:

- A phone call to someone who is discouraged
- A card or a visit to someone who is ill
- A prayer offered on behalf of one who is anxious
- A word of truth on behalf of one falsely accused
- A good deed done unto one in need
- An offer of help to one who is overwhelmed

One of the best things we can do as a congregation is to pray for each other. Imagine! A congregation of prayer intercessors! Moses interceded for his people! Nehemiah identified with his people! Imagine the impact if every member of our congregation prayed their way through the church directory on a regular basis. Imagine the impact this would have on us internally.

Then imagine the impact we could have on those outside our fellowship if we prayerwalked the halls at the Victorian, and prayerwalked the surrounding neighborhood. Imagine the impact if we just went to people all around us for no other reason than to encourage them. The best way I know to do that is by simply doing something to help meet their needs – and telling them that Jesus is our source of inspiration and power. What if instead of relying on all the canned approaches and rehearsed formulas usually associated with evangelism, we simply told people what difference Jesus is making in our lives?

Some of us have been guilty of turning Christianity into a head-trip. Jesus wants us to turn it into a heart trip. The head is more than welcome to come along – and it needs to come along - but not without the heart! My uncle Gordon was an alcoholic and an unbeliever for many years. During that time I had numerous conversations with him about the Lord. He rejected all of my theology. I got nowhere with him. Then, on a certain day when he was lying in the hospital approaching the end of his earthly life, I sat by his bed and told him that I loved him and that Jesus loved him too. The tears that flowed between us were worth more by far than all the fruitless arguments exchanged without love.

I will always be grateful for another fine Christian gentleman who, not long before my hospital visit, had also shared the love of God with Gordon. In fact, he led him to faith in Christ. This is what can happen when we are willing to stand in the gap for the lost and for each other.

Points to Ponder

Standing in the Gap For One Another

Ezekiel 22:30

So often we fool ourselves into imagining that in order to be useful in God's Kingdom we must have charisma, possess outstanding gifts, and be able to perform great deeds. The truth is that our God wants us to simply stand shoulder to shoulder, form a wall of righteousness, and stand in the gap for one another. This will have a profound impact on our congregation – and ultimately on our community.

A useful exercise is for every member of the congregation to take a few minutes and try to list simple ways that they can stand in the gap for someone else, either in the congregation or in the community.

Please take some time this week, pray for guidance from the Lord, and then list a few simple ways that you think you can come alongside someone to make a difference in their life. Write your ideas in the spaces below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

May the Lord amaze us all as we look for opportunities and as He open doors.