

A missionary on furlough told this true story while visiting his home church in Michigan.

“While serving at a small field hospital in Africa, every two weeks I traveled by bicycle through the jungle to a nearby city for supplies. It was a journey of two days and required camping overnight at the halfway point. On one of these journeys, I arrived in the city where I planned to collect money from a bank, purchase medicine and supplies, and begin my two-day journey back to the hospital.

Upon arriving at the city, two men were fighting, and one was seriously injured. I treated his injuries and told him about Jesus Christ. I then traveled two days, camped overnight, and arrived back home without incident. Two weeks later I repeated my journey. When I arrived back at the city, I was approached by the young man I had treated. He told me he knew I carried money and medicines. He said ‘Some friends and I followed you into the jungle, knowing you would camp overnight. We planned to kill you and take your money and drugs, but just as we were about to jump your camp, we saw that you were surrounded by 26 armed guards!’

At this I laughed and said that I certainly was all alone out in that jungle campsite. But the young man pressed the point, saying, ‘No Sir, I was not the only person to see the guards. My five friends also saw them, and we all counted them. It was because of those 26-armed guards that we were afraid and left you alone.’

At this point in his message, a man in the audience jumped to his feet, interrupted the missionary, and asked for the exact day that the incident occurred. The missionary told him – and the man excitedly told this story:

‘On the night of your incident in Africa, it was morning here, and I was preparing to play golf. I was about to tee off when I felt the urge to pray for you, in fact, the urging of the Holy Spirit was so strong, that I called men to meet me here at the church to pray for you. The man turned to the audience and said, ‘If you were here with me that day to pray, please stand up.’ The men who met together to pray stood up. The missionary wasn’t really concerned with who they were – but he wept as he counted their number – there were 26!’”

These 26 men stood in the gap for this missionary and interceded on his behalf before the Lord, and this morning, we are going to see something very similar

being done by Queen Esther as she stands in the gap and intercedes on behalf of her people before King Ahasuerus.

Last week, when we think about the wicked Haman, we might say “*what goes around comes around.*” In the story of Esther, the enemy of the Jews is now gone, impaled on the very wooden stake he had prepared for Mordecai the Jew, all because – behind the scenes, in His subtle ways, at just the right time, God intervened on behalf of His people.

Yes, there were some tense moments. Yes, there were times when all seemed lost, and yes, there were occasions where God appeared to be absent, but when looking back we can clearly see that all along, God was at work, skillfully weaving the decisions and the actions and the chaotic situations created by people – ordering and organizing every detail to accomplish His divine purposes for the greater good of His people.

God is always at work, and in this story – He’s still at it, which brings us to **Esther 8**, beginning with **verse 1**.

¹On that day King Ahasuerus gave the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had disclosed what he was to her. ²The king took off his signet ring which he had taken away from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

According to Persian law, when a person was convicted as a traitor and executed – his property, his possessions, and his wealth were confiscated by the king. Even his relatives became wards of the state, so to speak, so when Haman was executed, the entire estate of this extremely wealthy man was taken by the king, and then – maybe as a gesture of kindness or maybe as compensation for her emotional pain and suffering, the king gave the entire estate to his wife – Queen Esther.

We are also told in this passage, that King Ahasuerus now knows that Esther is a Jew and she lets the cat out of the bag and discloses that Mordecai the Jew is her older cousin. Esther probably told the king that her mother and father had died when she was a child and it was Mordecai who took her in and raised her as his own daughter. Mordecai was a father-figure to Esther, and so the guy who had saved the king’s life some five years earlier, is not only family to Esther, but now – surprise, surprise – he’s also family to the king by marriage.

Well, with this new information, Mordecai is summoned before the king and the **signet ring** once worn by Haman is given to Mordecai, which meant that Mordecai is now the number two man in the Persian Empire. Then on top of that, as a bonus, Esther gives Mordecai the vast estate of Haman. So, Mordecai gets fame from the king and he also gets fortune from the queen.

What a difference a day makes and I say that because just the day before, Haman was on top of the world. He had power, and prestige, and possessions beyond belief. He seemed to have all that the world had to offer – but that was yesterday. This day, Haman is gone, and Mordecai – the guy he was fixated on and wanted to kill, is given everything that Haman possessed. Ironically, in God’s divine providence, all the riches of the enemy of the Jews were given to a Jew.

We are told in **Proverbs 37:34-36**,

Wait for the LORD, and keep His way, And He will exalt you to inherit the land; When the wicked are cut off, you will see it. I have seen a violent, wicked man spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil. Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more; I sought for him, but he could not be found.

Haman cannot be found, for he is dead – but the trouble he created is still very much alive, so let’s continue beginning with **verse 3**.

³ Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept and implored him to avert the evil scheme of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews. ⁴ The king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king. ⁵ Then she said, “If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter seems proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king’s provinces. ⁶ For how can I endure to see the calamity which will befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?”

This appears to be a separate occurrence, maybe on the same day, where once again Esther comes before the king uninvited, falling at his feet, weeping, in great humility. The king is moved with mercy and he extends his **golden scepter** towards her, which is his way of saying, “*Speak to me, I’m listening.*”

Then Queen Esther rises to her feet, and she appeals to the heart of the king, she appeals to his affection for her as his wife, and she explains her dire concern that unless something is done by him, unless the extermination order prepared by Haman is revoked – on the thirteenth day of the last month of the year, the people in the Persian Empire, will rise up and attack the Jews and wipe them off the face of the earth as ordered. At that time, there were about 15 million Jews among the estimated 100 million people in the empire; so, from a human perspective, the odds were stacked against them.

For Esther, the most important thing was the deliverance of her people and she could not rest until the matter was resolved. Esther could not be happy, she could not live her life in pampered luxury as the queen knowing that others were condemned, and so she felt compelled to stand in the gap and do something – something she could do, and that's what she did.

She approached the king uninvited and we know this because he extended his golden scepter towards her, and if you recall, according to Persian law, she could have been killed on the spot for approaching him without a summons, but she did it anyway. She asked of nothing for herself, except that the king might save her people and lift the heavy burden for them that was placed on her heart.

Esther's willingness to stand in the gap for others speak volumes to me and it is my hope this morning to take what she did and apply it to our lives today.

Esther had a burden on her heart for a condemned people. She wanted that burden lifted by the king, but ironically, I think we need to come before the King of Kings and pray that He would do just the opposite and place a burden on our hearts for the condemned, for the lost, and give us the courage of Esther to do our part – to share our faith – something we can do – something we know we should do.

Someone once said that sharing one's faith is like one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. That's a great description. The reason we can call ourselves Christians today is because someone shared their faith with us – someone told us beggars where to find bread. Christianity has grown because someone told someone else who told someone else, and so on and so on. This is how the Christian faith has spread all over the world, from the early church until today, and this practice of sharing one's faith should include you and me as well. Just like Esther played her part in God's plan of standing in the gap for the condemned, we too have a part to play by sharing our faith, by sharing what we know.

Now some of you might be saying to yourself, “*I agree with you pastor, but I just don’t like speaking.*” I hear you, but you and I both know that’s not entirely true. We will talk about, and even start conversations, about kids, sports, the weather, a TV show, politics, vacations, and any else under the sun – heck, we can talk all day about people we don’t even like without the slightest hint of having a single problem with speaking. You know I am right.

If the truth be told, we will go out of our way to tell anyone about anything we consider interesting or important – that’s what we do – but for some reason we get tongue-tied, and tight-lipped, and anxious when it comes to sharing good news to people really who need to hear it – to people who are often times dealing with bad news.

So, if speaking really isn’t the problem – and it really isn’t the problem, **then what is the problem?** Most likely, it’s fear – a fear of rejection, a fear of offending someone. I can understand that. We all want to be liked, we want to be accepted, we don’t want to be unpopular, we don’t want to come across as appearing weird, but in all honestly, the fact is – you and I can’t control what other people think.

Consider about this for a moment – Jesus was perfect in all His ways, He loved everyone perfectly, He made no mistakes, and still He offended people and was rejected by many.

I want to share something with you that might surprise you: People who don’t know Jesus are more *amazed* at our silence than they are *offended* by our message. They are amazed that we believe Jesus is the answer, we believe Jesus loves them and wants His love to be made known to them, and yet – we who claim to be graciously loved and forgiven by the Lord are unwilling to say anything about Him. Try to wrap your minds around that.

Maybe I am just reaching here, and I could be completely off base, and what I am going to say is not meant to pressure or heap guilt on anyone – but in my opinion, the problem for every one of us when it comes to sharing our faith ultimately boils down to one thing – “*Not my will, but Yours’ be done.*” That’s it. We have allowed our fears, our negative assumptions about people, our insecurities, our over-thinking, and our lack of experience to influence our obedience.

In obedience, we just need to talk *to* people not *at* them, and in the context of a normal natural conversation – conversations we have all the time with other people, when the opportunity presents itself, when the thought comes to mind to

talk about Jesus and the truths of the gospel – then just do it. And also let me say, there is no need to awkwardly force the gospel into a conversation – just listen, because often times it’s the other person who actually opens the door for you. You just need to be obedient and step in to stand in the gap.

Now, maybe you won’t see an opportunity to share your faith during a normal natural conversation, but as someone shares their needs with you, maybe there is an opportunity to pray for that person, and that leads me to another way that Esther’s willingness to stand in the gap before the king applies to you and me today.

As we study the Bible, there are countless numbers of instances where God’s people interceded for others. In his letter to Timothy, the young pastor in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul wrote this,

¹First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, ²for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. ³This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Paul told Timothy that the first order of the church was to intercede in prayer on behalf of other people. Prayer is a privilege given to us by God, it’s an avenue by which we may look upward and communicate with God at any time, it reminds us that God is in charge, it’s an act that highlights our dependency upon Him, and it’s a way that God has hard-wired us to move heaven and earth according to His will. In His wisdom, far beyond my feeble comprehension, God has chosen, He has determined to use the prayers of His people to accomplish His purposes.

Everything that’s worth doing, everything that God wants to do in His church, everything that God wants to do in your life and my life – all of it – is to be handled with prayer. Prayer is the link between the resources of God and the needs of people, and for the believer who prays for someone, they get to stand in the gap between those resources and those needs, and when we see ourselves in that kind of role, we can’t help but understand the importance of unwavering prayer for others. It may be our greatest work – maybe our greatest act of love.

In his book “Stories for the Journey”, William White tells of a European seminary professor and his wife, Hans and Enid. During WWII, they escaped to America, where Hans began teaching in a seminary. Students loved this Bible teacher, and

they enjoyed observing the tender love that Hans and Enid displayed as the couple often walked hand in hand around campus.

Enid's unexpected death sent Hans into a pit of sorrow. The seminary president and three other friends began visiting Hans, but he remained lonely and depressed. Hans confided to them and said, "I'm no longer able to pray to God, in fact, I'm not certain I believe in God anymore."

After an awkward moment of silence, the seminary president responded, "Then we will believe for you. We will pray for you."

In the following weeks the four men met daily to pray with Hans, asking God to help Hans experience God's presence and healing. Months later, as the four men gathered again, Hans greeted them with a smile and said, "It is no longer necessary for you to pray for me, instead, I would like you to pray with me."

Intercessory prayer is one of those subjects that the more we think about it, the more we might have to rethink what it means to really pray for others. From what I have learned from people much smarter than me like Charles Stanley, when standing in the gap for someone through prayer, it may be helpful, it may be necessary that we somehow, someway identify with the needs and the burdens of those we pray for.

When Jesus looked out over the crowd, we are told He had compassion for them. He felt what they felt, and this may be a reason why God allows us to suffer so that we can identify with others who also suffer. The Apostle Paul told us in **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Through our own experiences of suffering, in many respects, to some degree, we are able to feel what others feel and share in their burden and pain, and when we can do this, surely it will impact how we pray for them.

When we pray for others, it is helpful that we identify with them, but we must also seek God's best for them – in other words, we must seek God's will for them. That is the main focus in this kind of prayer. Quite often, we may think there is only

one possible course of action – only one answer to a problem, but in the role of praying for others, we have to accept that God knows the situation better than we do and we must seek His will first and foremost.

Many years ago, when my son was heavily involved with drugs, I met with a pastor and we prayed for God to do whatever it takes to remove my son from his environment. Weeks later, God did not bring my son home, instead, my son was incarcerated. That was God's will and I had to be settled with that.

Lastly, when we pray for others, I have to ask this question: **Would you be willing to be part of the answer, if necessary?** If we are not willing to be part of the answer to our own prayers for another person, **then are we really standing in the gap for them?** So yes, when it comes to intercessory prayer, your hands as well as your knees might actually get dirty – but that's okay.

I know I have given you a few things to think about this morning, so I want to close with this one verse found in **Ezekiel 22:30**, where we are told,

I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one.

In Ezekiel's day, God looked for a person to stand in the gap, but He found no one. **Today, are you willing to be that person who stands in the gap by sharing your faith and praying for others?**

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