Introduction
The words “intercession” and “intercessory” come from the Latin root intercedō which consists of inter (between) and cedo (give ground to, submit to, be inferior to). The function of the preposition inter is to facilitate “giving ground” through a negotiation process involving two or more persons. When a person intercedes for another, she acts as a go-between seeking concessions as part of the intercession. We can easily imagine a form of shuttle diplomacy in which the intercessor takes the concerns of one side to an opposing side, seeking the resolution of differences and an acceptable, agreed upon settlement. Usually there is intercession on someone’s behalf. If there is a dispute between parties, the intercessor takes the case of one and pleads the cause on his behalf to the other party. For example, if John threatens to bring a lawsuit against Sam, and Mary acts as the intercessor for Sam, she will take his cause to John, pleading for John to forego the suit in lieu of another form of satisfaction. In the end, both parties may well submit to the concerns of the other, but in any case, the intercessor is an essential third-party to bring about resolution of the dispute.

Ancient Israel had a well-developed law code, capable of handling a range of controversies among its people. Rooted in God’s covenant with Israel, Torah documented both principles and a process for resolving differences. Sometimes the plaintiff was God Himself who had a controversy with His own people. In the Hebrew language the disputed case was called the rîb (pronounced, rEEv), and those involved in resolving the case included prophets and priests who interceded on behalf of the people or on behalf of God. Evidence of such legal disputes appears throughout the Old Testament (see Exodus 18:22; Numbers 27:5; Deuteronomy 1:16-17; Job 13:3; and many others).

We have already noted in the present series, “The Way to Pray,” the connection between prayer and the legal process. Recall how Hannah brought her case of barrenness before Yahweh and offered her own intercession. She prayed for herself, but also for the greater good of God’s temple ministry, as she offered her hoped-for child to God, “all the days of his life.” She took up her own case and joined it with God’s best interests. This is one form of intercession.

However, we more commonly see a person praying for another person, and this practice is referred to with the phrase intercessory prayer — the title of this week’s study. Such praying broadens the perspective of the one offering the prayer and involves the larger community. Is this not the ultimate form of “love for neighbor”? Might we not say that to love others as we love ourselves deepens when we pray for them? As our study unfolds, we will consider this and other forms of intercessory prayer.

Old Testament Examples of Intercession: A Sampling of Texts

Abraham
He is considered the “father of faith” to the three great monotheistic religions. His story begins with a call and unfolds as a series of tests, proving and strengthening his trust in Yahweh, his covenant partner. Upon his arrival in Canaan, Abraham faces a significant challenge to his faith when God discloses His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family live in Sodom, and the threatened judgment calls
into question the extent of the covenant for Abraham’s relatives. Unwilling to allow this blanket indiscriminate judgment to take the lives of Lot’s household, Abraham engages in what we can only refer to as a prayer of intercession in Genesis 18:16-33. What Abraham does is horse-trade the future of Lot through a series of proposals to God. He sounds like a tribal chieftain engaged in a merchant’s bargaining process, trying to get the best price for his goods. Only in this case (and it is a case) the matter on the table is the life of Lot’s family. Central to Abraham’s intercession is a strong affirmation about God that begins in 18:23a, “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” It’s a rhetorical question that has the implied response, “Of course not!” Still, Abraham proceeds to narrow down the acceptable terms for a settlement of his dispute, starting with “What if there are fifty righteous persons…?” (18:23b) and ending with “ten” (18:32).

All throughout this process, Abraham is interceding on behalf of Lot, seeking favorable terms from Yahweh that will spare the life of his own kinfolk. He is unwilling to allow an unfair sentence sweep away persons who are “righteous,” even though their choice of a neighborhood might be dubious. That God is Himself righteous also lies at the very center of Abraham’s intercession as seen in this highly significant query:

“Will not Judge of all the earth do right?” (18:25)

Abraham prays with that great truth ever in view. “Far be it from you… Far be it from you” is the echo of these opening lines of his prayer. As he hammers away at the goal of his intercession, Abraham shows considerable deference to God with words like “May Yahweh not be angry, but let me speak. What if …” (18:30). That is most extraordinary! Here is God’s covenant partner, called to leave the land of his birth at God’s initiative — purely of grace! Here is Abraham appealing to the best in God’s judicial character as if to hold God to His own commitments. Abraham knows he runs a risk when he appeals to God’s forbearance of His anger. Yet we are moved by the words “but let me speak…” That is, let me speak anyway.

As if that isn’t sufficient, Abraham continues with “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to Adonai…(the Lord of the covenant)” (18:31). The Hebrew phrasing is interesting: “See here, please! Accept my invitation to speak to Adonai…” In his intercession to God, Abraham is at once both humble and bold; submissive and pushy; accepting and challenging. He will not take “no” for an answer while preserving a certain decorum and respect toward Yahweh, the superior partner in the relationship. Surely this is an amazing example of forthright and confident prayer.

Abraham’s intercession of Lot runs its course, down the bargaining chain until the final bid is called, and “Yahweh finished speaking with Abraham.” Throughout the whole of the prayer, Yahweh does not censure Abraham for pressing the case and making the argument. God allows the pleading of a man, desperate to save his kinsman, to unfold without scolding. Both stay at the table until the last word has been spoken. This is how true intercession works. Boldness and submission co-exist in a single prayer without apology. However the matter is finally decided, Abraham will always remember that God listened and partnered with the intercessory process. God knew the man’s heart, and that his conscience was clear, and that he had Lot’s best interests in mind. Nothing was left to guesswork. Nothing remained unspoken. Everything was out in the open; all the cards were on the table.

How did things turn out for Abraham, for God, and Lot? From Genesis 19 we learn that God had more options than Abraham envisioned in his prayer. Whereas Abraham wanted God to spare the city for the sake of a magical minimum, God worked His purposes outside the human box and simply delivered Lot and his family from the city. The closing commentary in 19:29 sums it up: “God … remembered Abraham and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.” Our prayers on behalf of others often take the form of Abraham’s: we plead for the best interests of our loved ones — their health, their salvation, their safety, or their provision — and then wait for God to act. Our prayers may well be long and intense affairs, filled with arguments or justifications or deep concerns, and to all of these God pays attention, weighing His larger purposes alongside genuine heart-felt compassion. Then God “remembers,” in the sense that He faithfully sticks to the terms of His covenant with us, while pressing beyond the answers so obvious to us.
Moses
“Let 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” (Exodus 32:10; also, Deuteronomy 9:13-14). Those words came from God to Moses after Israel had made the golden calf and were worshipping it in the shadow of Mount Sinai where God just gave the Ten Commandments. To a man of lesser character, God’s proposal might have been the offer he could not refuse. Not a bad bargain, as bargains go: make Moses into a new Abraham, the father of his people — a whole new people. What God puts on the table sounds like the story of the Flood when humankind perishes except for Noah and his family who become the ancestors of the continuing human story. A new Abraham. A new Noah. Why wouldn’t Moses take God up on His generous proposition?

He didn’t. Instead Moses intercedes with God on behalf of Israel and flatly contradicts the offer God makes. What’s at stake, Moses points out to Yahweh, is nothing less than the honor of God Himself. Israel, he tells the Lord, is, after all, “your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand” (Exodus 32:11). Surrendering “your people” should seem absolutely self-injurious to God, and Moses reminds “Yahweh his God” of that fact. Furthermore, the reputation of Yahweh as Israel’s faithful God is definitely on the line. “Why should the Egyptians say…” (32:12), Moses begins his second argument, and then proceeds to outline a scenario in which the other nations will think that Yahweh engaged in a double-cross if the proposed plan goes into effect. Boldly Moses reminds the Lord that He made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and He can’t just renegade on that original agreement in a fit of present anger. Moses turns down the offer of a new covenant out of respect for the old one. We can almost hear Moses saying to God, “You can’t really mean that, O Lord!”

Moses intercedes for Israel by appealing to the highest qualities in God’s character. He recalls the ancient promises, believes that they are firmly established, and makes his case through prayer. In the Deuteronomy version of this story, Moses recounts how he “fell prostrate before Yahweh for forty days and forty nights,” fasting and praying, and that “Yahweh listened to” him because Moses prayer for Israel and for Aaron who mislead them (9:18-20). He cites further instances (9:22ff) of intercession for Israel, seeking release from God’s intention to judge them.

Habakkuk
Among the lesser known prophets in the Bible is a man whose encounter with God, interceding for Israel, prompts the giving of a prophetic utterance found in the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. The prophet doesn’t understand why God allows injustice to run rampant in Israel, and calls on God to make things right. In reply, God reveals His plans to raise up the Babylonian Empire as His way of chastening His people and settling the wrongs. Shocked at this proposal, Habakkuk asks how it is just for God to use a more wicked nation — a Gentile nation — to judge His chosen people. The dialog between the prophet and Yahweh comprises the opening verses of the book. Intercession, as we have noted, often takes the form of a two-way conversation in which a humanly skewed situation requires correction, and some human being sets that issue before God for adjudication. Through this give-and-take experience of prayer, the biblical characters work through with God how the matter finally gets settled.

Such intercession requires patience and persistence, both for God and for us. None of the biblical characters give up easily. They refused to accept cheap easy answers to tough human problems. Intercession meant going to the mat with God until a solution was in sight. Not always pleasant, these eventual outcomes still demonstrated that God is a reliable conversation partner, even when there is disagreement about how things should turn out. God does not want His people to hold back or suppress the passionate concerns they have about the well-being of others. He desires honesty and genuineness, even if it means sharp contention in the act of interceding. Ultimately, the intercessory prayer yields to the perfect will of God, worked out in the dialogic give and take.
Numerous examples of such intercessory prayer appear in the Old Testament. I have summarized a list of them in what follows. The reader is encouraged to use this material as a guide to further reading and study on this aspect of the topic.

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The Case of Ezra

At the end of the Old Testament period, the people of God experienced His mercy and a return to the land of promise. Their time of exile left them disoriented and in need of fresh leadership. Among those God raised up was a man named Ezra whose story appears in the book that bears his name. According to Ezra 7:1-6 he came up from Babylon to Israel during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes, around 458 BCE (7:8). The scribes who gave the final form to this book refer to him as one who devoted himself to the study and observance of Torah, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel (7:10). The Persian king recognize Ezra as a “priest and teacher of Torah” (7:11-21), and accorded him further authority to appoint necessary magistrates for the execution of Torah among the Jewish people (7:25). Later, in the companion book of Nehemiah, we learn that he was called “Ezra the scribe” (Nehemiah 8:1, 4, 9, 13; 12:26, 36), and that he carried both titles, “priest and scribe” in the performance of his commission in Israel after the exile.

It could be said of Ezra that his roles were both instructional and intercessory — a good combination of skills for a person charged with re-orienting an exiled people to their old homeland, and with renewing their identity as Jews in the midst of the Persian Empire. Ezra, in discharging these weighty duties, engaged in much teaching and in much prayer. As a priest, Ezra had many of the same responsibilities as fell to Moses after bringing Israel out of Egypt. The genealogy given in Ezra 7:1-5 traces his lineage all the way back to Aaron, Israel’s first High Priest line of Levi. Future priests within Israel would have this dual role also, serving as teachers and as mediators of God’s covenant through sacrifice and prayer.

Ezra took these responsibilities seriously as the chapters of Ezra, starting with 7:1, suggest. Early in his tenure, he faced the problem of maintaining Jewish identity, as 9:1-2 describes. The surrounding cultures in Canaan posed constant temptations to give up that identity just to fit in. One area of concern was Jewish family life, constantly under assault as a result of intermarriage with immigrants who did not share the Jewish covenant. This loss of uniqueness was not random: “And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness”
Ezra’s first-person account of his reaction to this crisis begins in 9:3 where he responds much as Moses did to the golden calf.

What follows in 9:6-15 is a lengthy prayer from Ezra. In it he reviews the history of Israel when their “guilt had been great” (9:7), and when their sins caused “sword, captivity, pillage, and humiliation” to come at the hands of “foreign kings as it is today.” This last remark underscores the Jewish belief that although Israel had come back from exile to their land, they yet remained subject to foreign rulers and were not yet quite “out of the woods.” Ezra further reflects in his prayer that the return from exile belongs to “a brief moment” (9:8) of Yahweh’s graciousness in “leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary.” Not wanting to presume on God’s long-term intentions, Ezra is grateful for “light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.” Strikingly, Ezra refers to his people, just returned from exile, as “slaves” (9:9) still “in our bondage.” Whatever respite Israel might have, it is entirely because God “has not deserted [them]” and “has shown [them] kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia.” Moreover, God has “granted [them] new life” so that the house of God and the ruins might be rebuilt.

What is missing from this prayer is the boldness and μπαχ found in Abraham and Moses. Broken by exile and the loss of national identity, the Jews under Ezra’s guidance live a tentative and uncertain existence at the behest of their foreign masters. More importantly, Israel was at the mercy of God whose honor they had offended and subjected to ridicule in the eyes of the surrounding nations. Whereas Moses feared for God’s reputation because of what God might do, Ezra clearly knew that any loss of prestige was due entirely to the failure of Israel and the resulting judgment of exile to Babylon.

To further underscore the precarious situation of Israel, Ezra confesses the sins of his people, using the first person pronoun “we,” thereby including himself. Put succinctly, “we have disregarded the commands you have through your servants the prophets…” (9:10-11). This intercession begins with real contrition. That’s a good word to use in conjunction with certain forms of intercession. To be contrite is to show remorse for sins committed. The Latin term contritus has to do with being “crushed or ground to pieces.” In Israel’s case, the people’s actions show how they were crushed by the load of sin and the lingering temptations presented by “a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples” whose detestable practices filled the land with impurity from one end to the other (9:11). Ezra recites this account in light of past experience when Israel faced the original Canaanites, who, Moses and Joshua warned, would become a snare if Israel made the least accommodation with them. Any concessions to the Canaanite culture would be ultimately disastrous for Israel. And history bore out that prediction.

What Ezra tells the Lord is that Israel has slipped back into the old ways which threatened Jewish identity. Of special significance was the old command not “to seek a treaty of friendship” with the non-Jews on non-Jewish terms, thus surrendering that holiness — that uniqueness — that belonged to Jewish identity as God’s chosen people (9:12).

Then, in 9:13, Ezra connects the historical dots for the recently returned exiles. Ancient Israel and contemporary Israel, he confesses, share a common road into crisis. By marrying their immigrant neighbors, post-exile Israel has, in effect, made a treaty with the very cultures that led God’s people into exile in the first place! And whatever happened to Israel in exile they “deserved,” even though God punished them “less than [their] sins have deserved.” How so? Because, in this way, God had allowed a remnant to return from exile. Yet it is this remnant that has returned to the old ways and is now at risk once more! Ezra’s fear echoes the same threats God made to Moses centuries before:

“Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?” (9:14)

Then, with words reminiscent of Abraham’s dialog in Genesis 18, Ezra cries out:

“O Yahweh, God of Israel, you are righteous!” (9:15)
His prayer of intercession appeals to the righteousness of God — that dynamic quality in God that wants to make things right once again, and not leave, in this case, His broken people, yet a broken people. Or, as Ezra continues in his prayer, “We are left this day as a remnant.” That is, Israel is a small, highly fragile shadow of its former self, back in the land wholly by the mercy and grace of God. Ezra intercedes for God’s people solely on the basis of that righteous mercy, since otherwise “Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.” That is yet another remarkable observation! Ezra means that by all accounts Israel has no legal ground to stand on at all, since Israel stands before God in its guilt. Yet — and this is crucial — Israel does, in fact, stands before God by His loving permission. “We shouldn’t be standing here,” Ezra concedes, “But we are standing here! Can you believe it?” Actually, he does believe it, since Yahweh is that kind of God, who is slow to anger, full of compassion, and showing mercy (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; and elsewhere).

When the scribes narrate this account of Ezra’s prayer in 10:1, they refer to him as “praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God….” This is a moving portrait of a faithful high priest, interceding for God’s people. Yet it is also a picture of a man who does not receive a revelation from God. Nowhere in the text do we hear it said, “And Yahweh spoke to Ezra, and said…” Unlike the voice of God to Abraham or Moses, we have no word from the Lord except what Ezra reads from Torah. The dialog is between the God who spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets and Ezra in his prayer. Still, the message of the biblical text was sufficient to bolster Ezra’s confidence in the God who was able to forgive His people.

One immediate consequence of Ezra’s intercessory prayer was the response of the priestly community who supported a public act of confession and urged concrete steps to undo the foreign marriages (10:2-4). While Ezra continued to pray and “mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles” (10:5-6), the religious leadership issued a national call for all Israel to gather in solemn assembly (10:7-8). Ezra addressed the gathering and called for confession and “separation from the peoples around…” (10:9-11). Such an action required considerable time to implement, since the marriages had been extensive (10:12-14). These events took place during the ninth month (10:9), at the end of the period known as “Early Rains.” In order to fulfill the requirements Ezra laid down, the people would need to interrupt the normal cycle of grain planting. Their acts of contrition, therefore, came at significant cost to the people.

Judging from the language of 10:9, the rains brought further distress to the people who seemed to have interpreted them as a sign of “the fierce anger of our God in this matter” (10:14). Although God did not directly speak to Ezra, the people seemed to infer His displeasure from the rains. Not everyone agreed with this interpretation of events. Some refused to join in the confession ritual according to 10:15. Ezra did not specify the manner of Israel’s separation, only the need for it. Perhaps Jonathan son of Asahel and his colleagues took issue with the severity of the action. After all, the abandonment of wives and children was no small matter. What followed was an organized investigation of each case (10:16), rather than a mass action, led by the heads of families chosen by the priests. By delegating the task to others, the priests allowed for an individual assessment. When the scribes finished the book of Ezra, they decided to include a list documenting the extent of the marriages and the names of “the descendents of the priests” involved (10:18-43), no doubt to document their handling of the matter.

One result of Ezra’s intercessory prayer was not only the recognition of the problem of Jewish identity, but also the special issues involved in reversing the earlier marriages. This was no small problem to solve. After all, how does a priest dismiss the children he fathered? Those involved would need wisdom to decide when “putting away foreign wives” would have a negative effect on children. Perhaps this is why the scribes make a point of saying that “some of them” had children by these wives, implying that attention was paid to those cases. Only a prayerful consideration of each case would result in a just resolution of all the issues involved. What Ezra did through his intercessory prayer was set in motion a series of life-changing consequences.
throughout the Israelite community following the exile. Certainly difficult times require intentional intercession.

**The New Testament and Intercessory Prayer**

The early stories in the New Testament place the coming of Jesus in similarly difficult times. Among the first accounts, chronologically, are Luke’s narratives about Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Anna. We hear in those texts about those who were “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25) and “looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). In some of these cases, a poetic form of prayer, similar to the *Psalms*, offers intercession on behalf of the whole nation of Israel. This is especially true for Zechariah (1:68-79, known as the *Benedictus*) and Mary (1:46-53, known as the *Magnificat*). The most common form of their intercession is an expectant hope that what God did in the past He would do once more in the present and future. These prayers are less about asking for things and more about affirming that many good things await Israel because His Messiah is coming. Certain phrases in the Greek text are attempts to import ideas from the Hebrew Bible. As a result, phrases like “to show mercy” or “to rescue us” may actually be petitions to God: “Show mercy” and “Rescue us.” Indicatives become imperatives.

In the case of Simeon, his prayers took the form of “waiting for the consolation of Israel,” a generalized intercession which sought from God His intervention so that Israel’s exile would finally come to an end (1:25). We even have intercession in the case of the angels who greeted the shepherds (2:13-14) asking that the glory of God in the highest become “peace on earth” for those living under God’s favor!

A well-established prayer community grew up in Israel, made up of those who looked forward to God’s deliverance of His people and an end to the long exile. Evidence of the special problems facing the nation appeared in the *Ezra* text, as we have already noted. Another example appears later (2nd century B.C.E.) when the scribal community compiles the stories of the Babylonian exile into the book of *Daniel*. In Daniel 9 we hear Daniel praying in intercessory ways similar to Ezra, but with the difference that an angel brings Daniel the answer to his pleas. The New Testament has *Daniel* in the background when it tells the story of Jesus’ arrival, citing nearly seventy passages from that book. The truly devout in Israel prayed for the whole nation, asking God to be faithful to His promise and covenant. The fullest response to this intercession is the coming of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah of Israel and Lord of the world.

Once Jesus comes, he urges his followers to engage in intercessory prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28). Along with praying for one’s enemies, Jesus exemplified prayer for the youngest and most vulnerable in society, even when his own disciples objected; he prayed for the little ones (Matthew 19:13).

The clearest case of intercessory prayer is John 17, generally called “Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer,” because in it he takes on the role of the ancient priests who offered prayers *on behalf of the whole nation*, as did the High Priest on *Yom Kippur*. A few general comments about this prayer are in order.

1. It is common to outline John 17 in three sections:
   a. Jesus prays for himself (17:1-5)
   b. Jesus prays for present disciples (17:6-19)
   c. Jesus prays for future disciples (17:20-26)

2. What is the scope of this prayer? Jesus sees his entire earthly work as belonging to a larger purpose, conceived in the loving councils of the God-head. The moment of the prayer is the moment of the great climax of that purpose. In some ways, Jesus sees the events he describes, including his obedience to the Father's will in dying on the cross, as already finished. This alone, makes the prayer a source of great wonder and majesty.

3. Lying at the center of the purpose is the familiar theme: Jesus is the revealer of God. John 17 is no exception:
a. "This is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (17:3).
b. "I have glorified you on earth" (17:4).
c. "I have manifested your name to the people you gave me out of the world" (17:6).
d. "They have come to know the truth that I came from you" (17:8).
e. "I have given them your word" (17:14).
f. "The glory that you have given me I have given to them" (17:22).
g. "I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me" (17:24).
h. "I have made known your name, and I will continue to make it known" (17:26).

4. Further, this revelation of God's true nature to the disciples was to become for them a transforming experience, not leaving them untouched, but wonderfully united with the Father and the Son:
a. "To give eternal life to all whom you have given him" (17:2).
b. "All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them" (17:10).
c. "Protect them in your name, which you have given me" (17:11).
d. "That they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves" (17:13).
e. "Sanctify ("make holy") them through your truth. Your Word (logos=Jesus) is truth" (17:17).
f. "That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26).

Perhaps the simplest single expression of the sort of Jesus' intercessory prayer comes in 17:9:

**"I pray for them".**

Jesus prays for their mission in the world, and he asks the Father not to take the disciples out of the world but instead to protect them for the Evil One (17:15). One reason Jesus intercedes for his original disciples is to ensure that their mission will succeed so that yet another generation of disciples will come after them. That is, Jesus prays for generational succession. Earlier he prayed that "none be lost" (17:12). Here he prays that no generation be lost. We believe Jesus continues to pray this prayer; otherwise the continuity of his people would be lost in succeeding generations. His prayer reaches into the future when a united people of God will finally reflect the glory of God throughout His whole creation.

Another New Testament text confirms this understanding of Jesus’ ongoing prayer life.

> 23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; 24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:23-25).

> Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Romans 8:34).

As noted in our comments on John 17 above, Jesus is the High Priest of the renewed people of God. His place of ministry is not the earthly sanctuary in Jerusalem but the heavenly sanctuary where he sits at the right hand of God. Because he rose from the dead, Jesus has no term limitation imposed by death, and therefore his priestly service continues uninterrupted throughout all eternity. Or, as this text teaches, “he always lives to intercede for them.” The Greek word for “intercede” is *entugchanō* which has as its most basic meanings, “to meet with, converse with, or entreat.” When Jesus prays for his disciples, he and the Father have a “meeting of minds” about the present and future needs of his followers. His intercession is reliable and serves as a wonderful model for self-less prayer directed toward the needs of other people.

Intercessory prayer, as exemplified in John 17, helps us to establish the discipline of seeking the interests of others above our own. While on the cross, Jesus most perfectly displayed this self-less regard when he said:

> Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

So powerful is this account that Luke redeployes the spirit of it when he tells of Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 7:

> "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).
Jesus and Stephen regarded the long-term spiritual condition of their accusers as of greater importance than their own sense of safety, and they prayed to that end. This sort of intercessory prayer is truly unique and belongs to the heart of the Gospel. By praying this way, we love our neighbor more than we love ourselves.

The ongoing prayer ministry of Jesus for his followers resides in the present work of the Holy Spirit.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. 28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:26-28).

Previous studies included comments on this passage, and we review its teaching here in terms of intercessory prayer. What Paul tells us is that life on the ground can become so painfully perplexing that no ordinary words are able to tell God about it. Many of us relate to that circumstance. This belongs to “our weakness” — that inability which accompanies our humanity and which requires help from God. Not knowing “what we ought to pray for,” potentially launches us into periods of doubt and fear. Paul here assures his audience that the indwelling Spirit of God carries out on earth the work of intercession much the same way as Jesus does in heaven. As the “Our Father” reminds us to pray: “Your will be done on earth as in heaven.”

The Spirit speaks for us with the language of prayer when words fail us. His language sounds to us more like “groans” than words, even though to God the Spirit’s language is completely intelligible. We might reverently acknowledge the Spirit’s special intercession by simply saying to him, “We’re glad you understand, because we surely don’t!” Since the Spirit lives within us, he closely tracks our spiritual movements and our life circumstances and our development. The Spirit knows us, and He also knows the will of God. Bringing these realities together is the fundamental role of our Holy Spirit intercessor. From time to time, we ought to pray, “Thank-you, Holy Spirit, for knowing us better than we know ourselves. Thank-you, Holy Spirit, for knowing the Father’s will better than we do. Thank-you, Holy Spirit, for integrating our lives with God’s will. Amen.”

We come, then, to the matter of praying for other people. An unusual story of such prayer is found in Acts 8:22-24 where Peter encounters a self-serving and wicked man in Samaria who preyed on the fears of others by engaging in feats of magic. Simon Magus — “the Magician” — was stunned by the miracles performed by the followers of Jesus. When he saw Peter and John lay on hands for new believers to receive the Holy Spirit, he saw dollar signs (8:19). Simon tries to buy this ability, and Peter scolds him, sternly reminding him that he cannot buy the gracious gift of God.

20 Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. 23 For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” 24 Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me” (Acts 8:20-24).

If Simon is truly “captive to sin,” he will find it hard to repent, that is, “to change his mind,” without the prevenient grace of God. Peter urges him to pray for forgiveness. Simon, sensing the depth of his need, then asks Peter to “Pray to the Lord for me,” in an effort to avert coming judgment for his sins. Here is yet another form of intercession in which Christ followers pray for those who are “in bondage” and need God’s special acts of deliverance. What intercessory prayer seeks, in this case, is the loosing of what has been bound on earth so that sinners may freely open their hearts to the grace from heaven. When witnessing to others, such prayer is necessary. On “binding and loosing,” see the following texts: Matthew 16:19; 18:18.

When Paul faces the Roman and Jewish authorities in Acts 26, he bears full testimony to his own conversion and then appeals to them to accept the Gospel. Sarcastically the Jewish king Agrippa replies with “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian” (26:28). The phrase “short time” implies that Agrippa needed to wade through considerable objections before he would be ready to respond to Jesus Christ. Paul does not think that “time” is an insurmountable barrier, and responds this way:
"Short time or long-- I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:29).

For Agrippa to become “what [Paul is]” depends, in part, on the prayers of Paul for him. All who hear Paul’s witness become the subject of the same prayers. Paul prays for the salvation of his audience, and we might well call this the intercessory prayer for salvation.

Paul was not in the least hesitant to ask others to pray for him, as these passages attest.

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I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ (Philemon 1:6).

Prayers for safety, healing, protection, and effective witness are also intercessory in nature.

3 John 1:2 2 Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.

1 John 5:16 16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life.

James 5:13-16 13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Hebrews 13:19 19 I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-3  Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. 2 And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

Colossians 4:3-4  And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

Ephesians 6:19-20 19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Romans 15:31-32 31 Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, 32 so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.

A Nation of Priests

Ancient Israel received many names from their God, Yahweh. One of those names was specifically geared toward Israel’s special role in the world as an advocate for God among the nations. The phrase “light of the world” means “light for the world on God’s behalf.” The text I have in mind comes from Exodus 19:

5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites” (Exodus 19:5-6).

The phrase “priestly kingdom” comes from the Hebrew m'leket-kōhanîm, “kingdom of priests.” Later, in the prophecy of Isaiah, Yahweh promises to make the whole nation into the “priests of Yahweh” (Isaiah 61:6). This theme reappears in the New Testament where it becomes a description for the ministry of the body of Christ. From 1 Peter 2 comes the fullest explanation of the church’s priestly role:

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. 12 Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge (1 Peter 2:9-12).

In this case, the operative phrase is “royal priesthood,” and the primary emphasis is on the role of Christians as proclaimers of light in the midst of darkness. We are to be proof positive that God can create a people out of nothing because He is merciful. Living the light of Jesus before the world —“honorably among the Gentiles” — defines the essence of this priesthood.
In one sense, we belong to what theologians sometimes call “the priesthood of all believers.” That phrase grew out of the controversies of the 16th century when Martin Luther criticized the monopoly of ministry by the professional priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Only priests, according to official church teaching, were authorized to represent the people before God, including the authority to forgive sins as part of the confessional. Luther argued that all believers were priests in the sense that they were called to intercede on behalf of others by praying for others. In his words, “In this way we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians.”1 Empowered by this idea, the churches of the Reformation encouraged laypersons to actively share in the ministry, while still recognizing the importance of ordained priests as gifted persons for special ministries: teachers, preachers, pastors, and keepers of the faith.

In keeping with this belief, the evangelical churches encourage all their members to pray for one another and for the world, and in so doing, fulfill their ministry as priests. Each time we lift each other up in prayer, we are doing what the priests of Israel did when they bore the needs of the people on their hearts, much as the High Priest carried on his chest the breastplate with precious stones symbolizing each of the twelve tribes (see Exodus 28). Each time we pray for the salvation of the world, we are a light for the nations, appealing to our heavenly Father to show his mercy and send the Holy Spirit to convict the world of its need for a Savior. In so doing, our prayers are intercessory in a missional sense.

**Conclusion**

When we pray for other people, we become their advocates, taking up their cause before the Lord of the world. Just as an earthly advocate feels deeply the unjust condition of another human being and acts on her behalf, so also followers of Jesus ought to identify with such persons through acts of intercessory prayer. The church, as well as individuals, is called upon to pray in this way. Love for God and love for neighbor includes such prayers.

Oswald Chambers, in his devotional reading for December 13 in *My Utmost for His Highest*, gives us serious food for thought as we learn to pray for others.

You cannot truly intercede through prayer if you do not believe in the reality of redemption. Instead, you will simply be turning intercession into useless sympathy for others, which will serve only to increase the contentment they have for remaining out of touch with God. True intercession involves bringing the person, or the circumstance that seems to be crashing in on you, before God, until you are changed by His attitude toward that person or circumstance. Intercession means to “fill up . . . [with] what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ” (Colossians 1:24), and this is precisely why there are so few intercessors. People describe intercession by saying, “It is putting yourself in someone else’s place.” That is not true! Intercession is putting yourself in God’s place; it is having His mind and His perspective.

As an intercessor, be careful not to seek too much information from God regarding the situation you are praying about, because you may be overwhelmed. If you know too much, more than God has ordained for you to know, you can’t pray; the circumstances of the people become so overpowering that you are no longer able to get to the underlying truth.

Our work is to be in such close contact with God that we may have His mind about everything, but we shirk that responsibility by substituting doing for interceding. And yet intercession is the only thing that has no drawbacks, because it keeps our relationship completely open with God.

What we must avoid in intercession is praying for someone to be simply “patched up.” We must pray that person completely through into contact with the very life of God. Think of the number of people God has brought across our path, only to see us drop them! When we pray on the basis of redemption, God creates something He can create in no other way than through intercessory prayer.

There is a curious text in the book of *Job*, near the end of some incredibly dense dialog. Everyone knows about the trials of Job, seen in devastating loss of possessions, family, and health. All of which led to an ever greater loss of reputation and status within his community. His well-meaning but hasty friends figured Job had sinned

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1 Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520).
badly and wasn’t admitting it. Job protested vigorously against their accusations, and the ensuing conversations fill most of the book. Then we come to this passage:

“And the Yahweh restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends.”

Through his prayer for those who ill-used him, Job received his own recovery. What might we learn from this experience? Is it possible that the dryness in our own lives arises from failing to intercede for others? Might the lack of concern for others spring from neglecting to pray for them? Is it not the case that when we pray for others, as Chambers suggests, we are put ourselves alongside the great heart of God Himself whose Son constantly prays for us?

When Charles Spurgeon preached on this text (August 11, 1861), he concluded his remarks this way:

Let us be Christians; let us have expanded souls and minds that can feel for others. Let us weep with them that weep, and rejoice with them that rejoice; and as a Church and as private persons, we shall find the Lord will turn our captivity when we pray for our friends. God help us to plead for others! And as for you that have never prayed for yourselves, God help you to believe in the Lord Jesus! Amen.

Pray for our friends! And our enemies! And for the world!

Glory to God! Amen.
Digger Deeper: Intercessory Prayer: The Way We Pray
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of Intercessory Prayer: The Way We Pray, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at http://www.chicagofirstnaz.org, click on Resources, click the tab Series, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the Background Notes link at the lower left. Or pick up a copy of the Background Notes at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our focus this week is on a special form of prayer known as intercession or intercessory prayer. Using an ordinary dictionary, research the different meanings for the word “intercede.” Also, examine these texts from the Old Testament that illustrate how intercession worked in legal disputes: Exodus 18:22; Numbers 27:5; Deuteronomy 1:16-17; Job 13:3.

2. Carefully read Abraham’s intercessory prayer in Genesis 18:16-33, and then describe the way Abraham prayed. To what would you compare this type of conversation? How do you feel about praying that way? Explain your response, mentioning personal examples. Why is 18:25 an especially important verse?

3. Moses faced a major crisis after God gave him the Ten Commandments. Read about it in Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9. Describe the crisis, and then discuss God’s response and His proposal to Moses. What do you think of the proposal, and how does Moses respond to it? How is Moses “interceding” for the Israelites? In what sense does Moses’ prayer take the form of an argument?

4. Ezra is a priest and scribe who lived during the time Israel returned from exile in Babylon. Read Ezra 9, taking note of the problem facing Ezra and of the prayer he offers to God. How is this a good example of an intercessory prayer? What fears does Ezra have, and how does he seek to resolve them? Does God speak directly to Ezra in response to his prayers? If not, how does God speak to him? Now read Ezra 10. What actions follow the prayer, and what do you think of them?

5. What sorts of intercessory prayers did Jesus encourage in his teaching, as illustrated by these texts: Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28; Matthew 19:13? What role does prayer have for Jesus during the final hours of his life: Luke 23:34? What other follower of Jesus imitated this prayer in Acts 7:60, and what were the circumstances of his prayer? Discuss the implications of this.

6. Jesus’ longest prayer of intercession appears in John 17. As you read this passage, identify the portions of his prayer that are clearly “for others.” For whom does he pray? Use this as an outline: 1) 17:1-5; 2) 17:6-19; 3) 17:20-26. What does he ask on behalf of other people? How does the prayer reflect Jesus’ role as our Great High Priest? Compare Hebrews 7:23-25 and Romans 8:34. What do they teach about this priestly ministry of Jesus for us?

7. Describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit as our intercessor in Romans 8:26-28. How does his ministry seem to be different, in this regard, than that of Jesus? Where is the Spirit as he prays for us? What does he pray for on our behalf?

8. What does Paul teach us about asking others to pray for us? Use the following passages to resource your answer: 1 Thessalonians 5:25; Romans 15:31-33; Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2.

9. When we pray for other people, what kinds of requests are we encouraged to make? You may these texts helpful in responding: 2 Corinthians 13:7; Ephesians 1:18-19; Ephesians 3:16-19; Colossians 1:10-11; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12; Philemon 1:6.

10. How important are our prayers for other people’s safety, healing, and effective witness. Read these passages as you respond: 3 John 1:2; 1 John 5:16; James 5:13-16; James 5:13-16; Hebrews 13:19; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-3; Colossians 4:3-4; Ephesians 6:19-20; Romans 15:31-32.

11. Respond to this statement: “As Christians, we are all priests who pray for others, interceding to God on their behalf.” Refer to Exodus 19:5-6 and 1 Peter 2:9-12. How does this ministry apply to the life of the local church? What new forms of intercessory prayer might the church encourage?