

## Standing in the Breach

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Ezekiel and Jeremiah both ministered during the final years of Judah's life as a nation, and both were carried away into Babylonian exile after Jerusalem fell.

Both called for Israel to repent and turn away from their wickedness. The primary focus of their denunciation was corruption in leadership: priests; merchants; teachers of the law. Their specific wickedness—the sin that brought Israel down: injustice and the oppression of the poor and needy.

Now, personal morality is not unimportant; but, it is the collective, established and sanctioned abuse of power that, throughout Scripture, is offensive to God, and eventually is what brought Israel down. It was not a new thing:

Two centuries earlier, Amos had bellowed, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24) (Justice and righteousness: from the same root word; essentially the same thing.)

Ezekiel spoke of Sodom—a story dating back 1,500 years. The sins of Sodom: "pride, excess of food (the KJV translates it, "gluttony"), and prosperous ease, and not aiding the poor and needy" (16:49). The examples go on and on.

So, as Babylonian forces drew the noose tighter and tighter around Jerusalem, Ezekiel spoke for the Lord: "*The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one*" (EZEKIEL 22:29-30).

"...so that I would not destroy it..." What we've learned since the time of Ezekiel, both from Scripture and from God's ongoing relationship and self-disclosure with God's people, is that it's not God that destroys a sinful people. God is creator, sustainer, redeemer. God does not destroy, nor wish the destruction of, any of God's creation: Isaiah said of God's servant, "... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice." (42:3)

The breach Ezekiel names is a natural, predictable consequence of sin. And, he offers the familiar litany of sins: extortion and robbery, oppressing the poor and the needy, extorting from the alien—the immigrant—without redress...

150 years before Ezekiel came along, Assyria was threatening Judah, and King Hezekiah was seeking an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. Isaiah counseled Hezekiah, "Don't do it! Put your trust in God. Don't despise God's word and trust in oppression and perverseness instead."

But Hezekiah went ahead and sealed the alliance with Egypt, and Isaiah said, "*Therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly and in an instant*" (ISAIAH 30:13).

Gary Peluso-Verdend, President of Phillips Graduate Seminary, wrote a recent blog which he titled, "The Hole in America's Soul." His point is that "We Americans are a violent people. (We create) systems of power and influence that benefit some people and disadvantage or abuse others—sometimes violently." He says we were born in violent revolution, and we have progressed from one violent stepping stone to another. And he builds his case, one violence at a time:

- violence against Africans, stolen from their homelands, de-humanized, violated in every way.
- The violence of war against the interests that would preserve the slave system.
- Jim Crow.
- The disenfranchisement of Native Americans.
- A tradition of violence against any persons the Anglo-elite considered to be unacceptable:
  - Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the Irish and the Italians—Catholics. Now, they're "acceptable."
  - Today it includes immigrants from Mexico; and Muslims. Many of these immigrants have suffered violence in coal mines, sweat shops, and railroad construction.
- He includes the Poor, the aged, the unemployed and unemployable, the sick, the differently abled...
- Bullying...

Now, Gary paints with a wide brush. There may be some specifics here with which you disagree, and which may even offend you. And there's more: in fact, I've been rather selective in what I present here; but it would be difficult for me to take seriously any suggestion that he is totally wrong in every aspect of his blog.

There is a Hole in America's Soul. That's Ezekiel's breach; and God is looking for someone to stand in the breach. Now, what does that mean?

During the exodus, the people turned away from God—totally rejected God, more than once. "Therefore (God) told Moses, "I will destroy them!" But Moses, God's chosen one, stood in the breach before God, to turn away (God's) wrath from destroying them" (Psalms 106:23).

Standing in the breach is a reference to intercessory prayer; but not just "thoughts and prayers." It goes beyond sentimentality and even empathy. God is looking for someone, not only to stand in the breach—but also to repair the breach!

Hezekiah sealed his alliance with Egypt, and then was killed at the Battle of Carchemish. The Israelite troops hunkered behind the walls of Jerusalem; but

there was a breach: there was a hole in Israel's soul.

Isaiah then describes those people who not only can stand in the breach, but who also can repair the wall (ISAIAH 58:6-8 NRSV):

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?  
7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
8Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

And his sermon culminates with this promise: <sup>12</sup>... *you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*"

Intercessory prayer is a powerful force that has been trivialized in recent months into "Thoughts and Prayers". Intercessory prayer is not just "sending 'happy thoughts'," it's the act of Standing in the Breach; making oneself vulnerable; offering oneself to stand between, to expose oneself to the dangers created by the breach; and then to repair the breach!

- Prayer, first, aligns us with God's will and nature. Typically, we humans reverse that: we want to use prayer to bring God in line with our needs; our desires. At its base that approach is a failure to trust that God's will for us is better than what we will for ourselves; it's better than we can even imagine for ourselves. So, standing in the breach first of all is an act of trust and surrender: do with me as you will, God. Make your will my will.
- Prayer makes us an open channel through which God can act. It probably will appear to most people that it is us doing the acting—and, essentially, that's the reality; but, it's unlikely that we would be so acting had we not prayed.
- Prayer becomes a link between God and the subject of our intercession. There's a connection. It's not magic; and, it can be missed (and too often it is missed); but, a link to wholeness is created when we pray.
- Prayer puts us—and the subject of our intercession—in touch with a power—an ability to respond. Through prayer, we don't get God to do stuff. Through prayer, we discover what God wants done (which is always better than what we would ask for, anyway); and then, we are enabled to act: to do what God wills to be done. We are enabled. We are empowered.

So, here's the thing: Which power do you trust? Like Hezekiah, do you trust the power of the sword? (or the gun?) Military Power? Political power? The power of "common sense"? (Fifteen minutes on Facebook will wipe out any trace of that trust!). There is a hole in America's soul, and God is seeking someone to *repair the wall and stand in the breach before God on behalf of the land*. Which power do you trust?