In the history of Christian mission there are many gripping stories of a direct relationship between intercessory prayer and the safety and success of God’s people in mission. This brief article looks at biblical examples of intercessory prayer, biblical narratives of intercession, and examples from mission history to emphasize the importance of mission personnel recruiting and being supported by intercessors in their mission.

**Definitions**

The *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 3rd college edition, says that intercede is from two Latin root words, *inter*, indicating “between” and *cedere*, meaning, “to go.” To intercede is “to plead or make request in behalf of another or others.” An intercessor is one who prays or pleads for others, asking God to intervene in a situation or in a person’s life in a particular way.

An intercessor is a person who by calling or by nature chooses to be a mediator on behalf of those who cannot intervene for themselves. Intercessors make requests, urge, plead, beg, counsel, discuss, risk, sacrifice, and make war on issues relating to the weaker ones, and thus they have an impact on the final outcomes for those they serve. (Warner n.d.)

Ezekiel 22:30 expresses the concept of intercession very well. It says, “I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall so I wouldn’t have to destroy the land, but I found no one” (NLT).

What does it mean to stand in the gap? In the cultural setting where these words were written walled cities were the norm. Protection from one’s enemies came from massive walls and guarded gates. Whenever walls were broken down or gaps remained in the defenses danger...
increased. Strong and skilled warriors were assigned to stand in the gap to defend the city from attack and to fight off those trying to destroy the people. These strong warriors were actually, by their presence and activity, building a hedge of protection around the city.

The text suggests that God is looking for someone, for spiritual people, to stand in the gap, to fight on behalf of others, to build up a hedge of protection around the weak and defenseless, to seek the destruction of the strongholds of the evil one, to set people free from fear and bondage. Standing in the gap through intercessory prayer is as much a part of mission and ministry as is giving and going.

There are many examples of leaders in the Bible interceding and pleading for God to intervene in situations, to help avert calamities or threats against the nation of Israel, to request God to reveal himself to people, or to protect the name and honor of God. Notice the following examples.

**Three Intercessory Prayers**

**Daniel’s Prayer for His People and the Restoration of Jerusalem**

It was the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede, the son of Ahasuerus, who became king of the Babylonians. During the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, learned from reading the word of the Lord, as revealed to Jeremiah the prophet, that Jerusalem must lie desolate for seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and fasting. I also wore rough burlap and sprinkled myself with ashes. (Dan 9:1–3)

> O my God, lean down and listen to me. Open your eyes and see our despair. See how your city—the city that bears your name—lies in ruins. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of your mercy.

> O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, do not delay, O my God, for your people and your city bear your name. (vv. 17–19)

**Paul’s Prayer for the Colossians**

So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.

> We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with Joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled
you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. (Col 1:9–14)

Joshua’s Prayer for Israel after the Defeat at Ai

Joshua and the elders of Israel tore their clothing in dismay, threw dust on their heads, and bowed face down to the ground before the Ark of the Lord until evening. Then Joshua cried out, “Oh, Sovereign Lord, why did you bring us across the Jordan River if you are going to let the Ammonites kill us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side! Lord, what can I say now that Israel has fled from its enemies? For when the Canaanites and all the other people living in the land hear about it, then will surround us and wipe our name off the face of the earth. And then what will happen to the honor of your great name?” (Josh 7:6–9)

These three examples of intercessory prayer should offer hope that an intercessor’s prayers will also result in God working on behalf of those engaged in mission and ministry today. The next section looks at biblical narratives that reinforce the idea that intercession is a vital part of mission.

Biblical Narratives of Intercession

Exodus 32 records the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Moses is away from the camp so long that the people talk Aaron into making a golden calf as a representative of the God who brought them out of Egypt. “Then the Lord said, ‘I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these people are. Now leave me alone so my fierce anger can blaze against them, and I will destroy them. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation’” (vv. 9, 10). It is instructive to notice Moses’ response:

But Moses tried to pacify the Lord his God. “O Lord!” he said. “Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such power and such a strong hand? Why let the Egyptians say, “Their God rescued them with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the mountains and wiping them from the face of the earth”? Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people! Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.”

So the Lord changed his mind about the terrible disaster he had threatened to bring on his people. (vv. 11–14)
Moses pleads with God to change his mind, to remember his promises, to not do to the people what they deserved. As a result of Moses’ intercession, God spared the people. Is it possible that intercessory prayer could not only move God to refrain from destroying those deserving of destruction, but also that intercessory prayer could bring about the conversion of those in contemporary societies hell-bent on destroying Christians?

Another narrative in Genesis 18 tells the story of the Lord’s visit to the camp where Abraham was living. The Lord tells Abraham, “I have heard a great outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah, because their sin is so flagrant. I am going down to see if their actions are as wicked as I have heard. If not, I want to know” (vv. 20, 21). Abraham begins to intercede for the people in the two cities. He asks God to spare the cities if there are 50 righteous people, for surely God would not treat the righteous and wicked in the same way. Abraham continues to plead for the people, reducing the number from 50 to 45, to 40, to 30, to 20, and finally to 10. “And the Lord replied, ‘Then I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten’” (v. 32b).

In this situation, Abraham pleads for a wicked city that God would spare the city if even 10 righteous people were found there. This again emphasizes the importance of God’s people pleading for mercy and for a delay in judgment.

Some may ask why intercession is so important. After all, God knows everything, so why should he wait to get involved until his people ask or invite him to be active in a situation. Surely God is going to do what he wants to do whether or not his people are faithful in intercession. In answer to that line of reasoning I would like to share my favorite biblical narrative on intercession as found in Exodus 17. This is the account of the battle of Rephidim in which Joshua defeated Amalek. Joshua was the general that led Israel into battle, but the Bible takes us behind the scenes and gives us insight as to the importance of intercessory prayer.

Moses and Joshua developed a strategy for Joshua to lead the troops into battle while Moses would stand on a nearby hill to intercede for the troops and to hold out the staff of God. I do not know how long you can hold out your hands with them weighed down by a wooden staff. It is also possible that Moses, who had been trained in Egypt to lead troops into battle became preoccupied with the twists and turns of battle. Regardless, Moses soon found that as long as his hands were raised in prayer that Joshua was winning, but when his hands tired and he stopped praying, the tide of battle turned and the Amalekites began to chase the Israelites from the field. It did not take Moses long to realize that the most important thing he could do that day was to pray with outstretched hands. Aaron and Hur pushed some stones together for Moses to sit on while they held up Moses’ hands. “As a result, Joshua overwhelmed the army of Amalek
in battle.” (Exod 17:13). Joshua and his troops were victorious, but the person most responsible for the victory that day was the intercessor, Moses.

This is a simple story that illustrates a great spiritual principle that is vital for mission today. Joshua fights while Moses prays. Joshua is listed as the victorious general, but the Bible reveals that it was God’s power released through intercessory prayer that was the deciding factor. Joshua was too busy during that day fighting the Amalekites to spend extended time in prayer, yet the battle was ultimately won by prayer—the prayers of the intercessor, Moses.

What does this say to us about our ministries and our mission to unreached or unchurched people? The lesson of this Bible story says to me that our church schools, our pathfinder clubs, our Bible classes, our missions to unreached peoples would be much more effective if those who were doing the actual ministry would be teamed with intercessors who would be faithful in praying for those entering the battle. Mission and ministry is a spiritual endeavor and as such must be surrounded and supported by faithful prayer. Reaching out to people in the world religions and in the secular and postmodern world is a spiritual work. It is not just a program or a plan or a strategy; rather, it is a spiritual battle against the strongholds of evil, a commitment to reach out to lost and hurting people who need to hear the good news.

If you were the enemy, what would you do to cause problems? Get those involved in leading God’s work to neglect prayer? Get them too busy to pray? Help them to rush off to work each morning with no Bible reading, no prayer time? Then when they come home at night get them interested in TV, sports, eating out, or working in the yard—anything to keep them from spending time interceding for the lost.

The three biblical narratives above suggest that intercession speaks to God’s heart to encourage him to extend mercy and delay judgement. They also inform God’s people that in addition to gifted doers, committed praying people are also important to the outcome of mission. In the next section this connection between intercession and successful mission is illustrated in several stories from mission history.

**Examples from Mission History**

**William Carey**

William Carey has correctly been called the “father of modern mission.” He was born in England in 1761 and lived until 1834. His work in India was marked with hardship, tragedy, pain, and countless obstacles. He buried a wife and son in India and never returned to England. In total he spent 40 years working to share the gospel with the Indian people.
His accomplishments are staggering. He was an evangelist who worked tirelessly to stamp out the cultural practices of *suttee* (in which a widow was burned alive with the body of her husband) and infanticide. He was an educator who established Serampore College and who was involved in agricultural research. However, his skills as a linguist sets Cary apart from most missionaries. During his lifetime in India he translated and printed six complete Bibles, developed translations for an additional 24 New Testaments, and 10 additional portions of scriptures in the various Indian languages (Pierson 2009:203, 204).

But William Carey didn’t do all of these things through his own power. While he labored in the distant land of India, back in England, William Carey had a sister whom he affectionately called Polly—Polly was bedridden and almost completely paralyzed for 52 years. William wrote to Polly all about the details of his struggle to create primers and dictionaries in the various Indian dialects, as well as the difficulty of figuring out how to get those books typed and printed. And with every letter from William that she received, Polly lifted these needs up before the Throne. Every day for 52 years, she faithfully prayed for her brother. (Tada 2011)

Very few people know about William Carey’s praying sister. I believe that much of his success in India was dependent on his bed-ridden sister’s prayers back in England. This story should be an encouragement to those who are too old, too sick, or too scared to go as missionaries, for it should help them realize that they can still have an incredible impact of what God is doing on the other side of the world. Intercession is an enabling power for mission.

**Young Missionary with the China Inland Mission**

Another story is told of a young missionary from the China Inland Mission who was convicted that he should take the gospel to a very neglected region of China’s interior where there were no Christians. The reason why this area was neglected was that it was known for its ruthless bandits who attacked and often killed outsiders who ventured into their territory. In spite of the obvious danger the young missionary still felt God’s call to go evangelize the people in that area of China. So, against the advice of his colleagues, he set out.

He went, he preached, he shared the good news and wonder of wonders he never even saw a bandit and never felt threatened. When he returned from his trip his fellow missionaries were amazed as he shared about his trip and the fact that he had never been in danger.

Soon a rumor began to circulate throughout the province, apparently started by the bandits themselves. According to the rumor, the young
missionary had escaped attack because he was the only foreigner who had visited that region with his own entourage of soldiers. The rumor even mentioned the exact number of soldiers guarding him—precisely eleven.

The missionary and his friends were stunned for he had done all his travel alone. They realized that God must have sent angels to protect him in his work, but why eleven? The answer to that question came several weeks later after he had written a letter to his home church in England reporting on his trip and the rumor circulating about his armed guards.

His pastor wrote to inquire as to the exact date of the trip into the bandit-infested region. After writing again to give his home church those details he received another letter from the pastor saying how just a few days before the young missionary had started out on his dangerous trip the pastor had called his church members to join him at the church for an evening of special prayer for this particular missionary. The pastor had been terribly disappointed at the poor attendance. He wrote that, including himself, there were exactly eleven people praying for him that evening (Eastman and Hayford 1988:13, 14).

Japan

I also had an experience towards the end of my work in Japan that demonstrated the effectiveness and importance of intercessory prayer. I had held a month-long evangelistic series in Osaka that resulted in 28 decisions to follow Jesus. The whole series had attempted to present enough information for the Japanese to understand who Jesus was, why he was important in the salvation process, and why it was important for them to make a commitment to him.

Immediately after the series Elder Kamoda, the pastor of the Osaka Center Church, studied with the group each Sunday and I studied with them each Wednesday evening. But we also did something new for this group of baby Christians. We typed up a list of their names and asked the church members and the student missionaries to pray for them on a daily basis. The results were much different than we had ever experienced in many previous series of meetings.

Over the next two and a half years all 28 of the people on that list were baptized. I attribute those results to two factors: the many intercessory prayers offered in their behalf as they faced challenges in being able to receive Sabbath off from work or school and in other areas of their lives, and the fact that we kept the group together, picnicked together, went on outings together, as well as studied the Bible together.

I believe that these stories from Scripture and from mission history confirm the fact that intercessory prayer makes a difference. Joshua would have lost his battle that day if it had not been for the prayers of Moses. The
young missionary would have most likely lost his life if it had not been for eleven faithful praying people back in his home church. William Carey would never have accomplished all that he did were it not for his praying sister. And the ministries you will be involved in and the work for unreached and the unchurched peoples will be of much less worth without your prayers and mine.

In a nutshell my philosophy of prayer goes something like this: I believe that this world has been captured by the evil one. I believe that because the battle between Christ and Satan is not yet finished that God’s power and interaction in human affairs is often limited to those circumstances where through the petitions and prayers of God’s people God is invited to intervene in the affairs of this world. I believe that God desires to be much more active in our lives, but we receive little because we ask for little. I strongly believe that our intercessory prayers invite and then permit God to do much more than he can do if we do not pray.

Works Cited


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