# Theology  

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## Intercession

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An eyewitness tells Luke what he recalls of the Last Supper

${ }^{1}$t was a night of mixed emotions I have to tell you, Lukethat Passover Meal. First of course there was a note of celebration in this annual reminder of Yahweh's Great Deliverance of us His people. But there was also a sense of unease in that upper room. It flowed back and forth among those who were gathered there, and kept surfacing. I knew Jesus was aware of it, too. Undoubtedly it was brought on to some extent by the tensions that were always simmering just below the surface in Israel. We knew we were slaves again-not in Egypt this time, but here in our own land. Not under Pharaoh, but now under Caesar.
"Our own personal well-being was also threatened. Pressure was building among the Temple leaders to squash the Master's influence. Much had occurred, even in just the last few weeks, that seemed to point to something quite dangerous. I've

[^0]already told you about some of these things, you'll remember, Luke. ${ }^{2}$
"There was something else too-an argumentativeness that was disturbing our time. In the squabbling and boasting in which we were caught up, our fellowship had suddenly become fragile. Jesus quite properly rebuked us, and we were all chastened-but the sour note lingered around the table. It was a somewhat 'uneasy truce' for a few of us who wanted to continue pushing our own claims to be considered 'the greatest.' I have to say that Peter was in this group! But so, I'm ashamed to admit, was I.
"Then we come to what is for me the most disturbing element of the entire meal. Simon was still urging his claim to the top spot in the list. He had stopped listening to what Jesus was saying. He was deaf to the Master's words-insensitive to the Lord's exhortation. He was ignoring Him. Then Jesus brings Peter, and the rest of us, up with a jolt. "Simon! Simon!" He doesn't shout, or even raise His voice. But we all hear him. The whole room is suddenly very, very still.
"Simon often talks more than he listens, I've noticed. But now, with everyone else around the table, he is most certainly in the 'listening mode.' And the chilling announcement falls from Jesus' lips that we are and will be in great spiritual dangerSatan's testing ('assault' might be a better term) is imminent!
"What is so terribly frightening is that Satan can challenge God, and that it will be up to us to stay faithful. Perhaps even more unnerving is that the main responsibility for holding us faithful will rest on Peter! Peter, for goodness' sake! Well, that certainly sobered him, I remember. The one thing that provided a glimmer of hope (a strong note of hope, actually) was Jesus' assurance that He had already interceded. Every single one of us knew that He would continue to do so.
"My throat was dry. I reached across to take a sip of wine. In my mind's eye I saw the winnower at work-the grain scooped

[^1]up and thrown into the air, and a strong wind separating forever the chaff from the grain. . ."

That is how I told Dr. Luke my version of what that last supper was like, when he was researching for his "orderly account." It is as vivid to me now as it was that night so long ago.

## A great promise

In this article I want to focus on Jesus' words to Peter (after He had gotten Peter's attention) and to the rest of us as well. Peter-who had lapsed into a "Simon" during the meal-is in effect designated the leader for at least the coming crisis. The ugly infighting prior to Jesus' rebuke was both so unnecessary and so demeaning. The Lord assured His disciples that He had interceded for Peter. They surely understood that He would continue to do so, and that by implication they too were included in this. For Peter specifically, His prayer of intercession was for "The Rock."

All this was surely of great encouragement to them (as it is for us) even though they all faltered shortly thereafter (as we often do). And of course the wonderful promise enshrined in Scripture ${ }^{3}$ remains certain for us that we might be courageous (given fresh 'heart') in the face of every trial, every temptation, every problem.

## Partnership

We often say, "I'll pray for you." At times that can be something of a "throw-away line"-a phrase of little substance and not much intentionality. However it is that we say the statement, what it needs to mean is, "I promise to allocate specific time(s) when I will pray earnestly for you in the matter of . . . ."

It is the same in Khmer as in English, I suppose, that the meanings of words change over time. This is no surprise, and we ought to use words in the way that everyone else uses them. However, it is equally important on occasion for us to go back to what words originally meant. For example, to "comfort" is often

[^2]used nowadays to mean something like giving a person a brief pat on the head or a hand on the arm and saying, "There, there; never mind. You'll be OK!" and then walking away. So it has a soft meaning. Originally it meant to do something that would be genuinely empowering for a person. The other became strong (Latin: fortis) by our being with (Latin: com) him or her in some positive, purposeful, and supportive way. It is an ongoing, unflagging thing. The com-fort-er doesn't lose interest after a few minutes; the com-fort-er doesn't say or do something once and then withdraw; the com-fort-er doesn't give up.

And inevitably a com-fort-er is an intercessor. So what is the original meaning of intercession? And what are its characteristics and purpose?

## Context and content

Basically, interceding is acting between and on behalf of people. That means acting between and on behalf of their situations, conflicts, difficulties, relationships, meetings. It is usually a case of assisting, facilitating, linking, connecting people-being a go-between for them. Sometimes it means doing for people what they cannot at the time do for themselves. It means to act on behalf of one or more parties for the sake of justice or mercy or healing or reconciliation or forgiveness.

It can also mean acting to dis-connect! For example an intercessor will sometimes act to prevent a crisis, danger, pain, stress, depression, or fear.

Different contexts define the content and the nature of our interceding. And the above cluster of descriptions implies that it is not something we do casually or off-handedly. It is much more than, "Let's have a word [!] of prayer about. . . ." It is, and is meant to be, sustained work.

## Biblical contexts guide our thinking

When the purpose of our intercession is that of connecting, we will be taking people-in our minds-into the presence of God
and up to the throne of His grace, and asking on their behalf for something. We can intercede for others when we are physically with them, although much of our interceding is done in their absence.

In the days after Hannah's impassioned petition to the Lord for a son, it is surely possible that Eli interceded for her beyond what is highlighted in 1 Samuel 1:17 and 2:20.. Prayer is a key role for a priest-to intercede is part of his ministry. That, by the way, is true for us all. It is part of what is meant when we talk of the priesthood of all believers.

There are examples of intercession in Solomon's great prayer at the dedication of the Temple. ${ }^{4}$ On the other hand there is no evidence in the Book of Jonah that the prophet made intercession for Nineveh. God is bigger than our interceding, of course, but Jonah "short-changed" himself by failing to intercede. Matthew's account of the storm ${ }^{5}$ certainly sounds like a cry of urgent intercession for their comrades. It was surely an individual petition as well, we have to say.

When the purpose of our intercession in to prevent links, to block connections, then we plead with the Sovereign Lord on behalf of afflicted ones. We stand against those things that take hold of people and threaten their safety, or their sanity, or their ministry, or their health-whatever has the affect (or "intention") of dulling God's love, impeding God's grace, weakening someone's hope, or reducing their trust, joy, or faith.

## Summary

Intercession is a gift that is given to us, and a ministry that is stirred up within us. It is the "scenery" for God's "theater." It is-if we continue to use the imagery of theater-one of the "backdrops" for the drama of God's saving, healing, forgiving, enabling work. Our intercession is included as part of the Lord's processes that make up the work of God among people. It is one of

[^3]the tools by which God loosens the hold of a hard heart and an unbelieving spirit; by which He weakens sin's grip. It attacks fear and operates to take some of the deep pain out of the natural consequences of tragedy; psychological distress, emotional damage, mental anguish, relationship breakdown, etc. It is one of the great bulwarks against all such troubles.

So our intercession is an act of great love. When we engage in the priestly ministry of intercession we enter into a project that applies a spiritual balm-a gentle, soothing, healing ointment-to the heart, mind, body, soul, spirit of needy people.
















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[^0]:    'Exodus 3:7.

[^1]:    ${ }^{2}$ Luke 22:15; 21:12; 20:46a; 19:41; 17:24; 14:24; 13:31, 17; etc.

[^2]:    ${ }^{3}$ Hebrews 7:24a, 25b.

[^3]:    ${ }^{4}$ See 1 Kings $8: 30,34,38-39,45,49$.
    ${ }^{5}$ Matt 8:25.

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