

“Standing in the Gap”

R. Stanley, 31 March 2020

The spread of Coronavirus has brought the nations to their wits' end. Hopelessness and despair fill the air. The virus has turned the world upside down. God has suddenly become popular! Folks are resorting to prayer whether or not they are religious. Worship places are closed, otherwise there would be overflowing crowds in times like these.

One of the Bible texts that stands out in Christian circles following calls for prayer is what God said in Ezekiel 22:30, “So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and **stand in the gap** before Me on behalf of the land that I should not destroy it; but I found none!” So many fasting prayers and chain prayers go up to the God of Heaven taking this word of His lamentation as the call. I thank God for my unusually-gifted friend, Brother Mohan C. Lazarus, who conducts Online Prayer Sessions, involving Tamil Christians from all over the world. His major programmes go by the name, “*Standing in the Gap Prayer*.” We need many more intercessors like him and after him, for other languages as well, especially for Hindi, our National language. If so many Conventions, Retreats and Prayer Programmes, as in Tamilnadu and other Southern States, had been conducted in North India, the Northerners would have “repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” As per God’s law of “Much-Received-Much-Required,” the judgment for Tamil Christians and other Southern Christians will be severer than that for the North Indians (Mt 11:21-24).

Let’s look at the context of the text in Ezekiel 22:30 to find out why God made a statement like this. His complaint is first against the Prophets, and then follow the Priests, Princes and the People (vv25-29). □ God’s complaint against the *Prophets* is, “They have seduced My people, saying, ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace — and one builds a boundary wall, and they plaster it with untempered mortar” (Ezek 13:4,5,10). He calls them “foxes.” We have too many such famous foxes in our midst. They are known for the “God-told-me” heresy (Ezek 22:28). Widows and the desperate folks are an easy prey to them (v25c; Mt 23:14). □ God’s charge against the *Priests* is, “They have violated My Law and profaned My holy things” (Ezek 22:26). They have replaced the Commandments of God with their traditions (Mt 15:6-9). Ritualism and ceremonialism are their substitutes for spirituality. Their eyes are on the “gold” in the temple and “gift” on the altar (Mt 23:16-19). Even while telecasting a Sunday Worship Service

online, the screen would flash their Bank account numbers! □ Next come the *Princes*. These are the national leaders who are corrupt, and God calls them “wolves” which strangle the throats of sheep (Ezek 22:27). □ Finally God speaks against the *People*. The main thing He has against them is that they “mistreat the **poor** and needy,” and “oppress the stranger” (v29).

After pointing out the failures and the misdeeds of the prophets, priests, princes and the people, God says, “THEREFORE I sought for a man among them to *stand in the gap*” (Ezek 22:30). The one sin that uniformly stands out among these four categories is lack of **charity**. If we don’t set this matter right, our prayers, however long, are unacceptable before God. Here is Prophet Isaiah with God’s forthright message: Isaiah 1:15-17, “When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil.” Then God goes on to say, “Learn to do good.” He explains what He means by doing good: “Seek justice, reprove the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” Everything has to do with the downtrodden, the marginalized, the underprivileged and the poorer sections of the society. Our failure in the matter of **charity** is what God calls as “sins like scarlet and red like crimson” (v18). Dear friend, have you ever heard this passage thus interpreted in its context? We are guilty of twisting the Scripture to suit our convenience. Many such things we do (Mk 7:13).

Praise God for the renewed interest in fasting prayers, especially during this crisis due to the pandemic of Coronavirus. Foregoing a meal or two, for one or more days, is only one side of Biblical fasting. God Himself defines His “chosen fast,” prescribing 7 things we must do: Isaiah 58:5-7, (1) “Loose the bonds of wickedness,” (2) “Undo the heavy burdens,” (3) “Let the oppressed go free,” (4) “Break every yoke,” (5) “Share your bread with the hungry,” (6) “Bring to your house the poor who are wandering,” and (7) “Cover the naked.” It is when we do these 7 things, we are not “hiding ourselves from our fellowmen.” Dear Brothers and Sisters, in which Fasting Prayer Programme did you hear the Preacher challenge the audience to do these things? Jesus spoke first about “**charity**” before He taught on “prayer” and “fasting” (Mt 6:1,5,16). Who has authorised us to change the order of priority set by our Lord and Master? When the Lord “saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor,” it was mainly to execute “justice” for the weaker sections for whom justice is generally denied (Isa 59:14-16).

According to Jesus, there has been no prophet greater than John the Baptist (Mt 11:11). A true prophet will not be interested in trimming the trees to beautify the garden. He doesn't bring scissors but an axe. He will be bothered about the root problem (Lk 3:9). He is a radical who cannot be fooled by empty religiosity (v8b). John demanded "fruits" or "evidence" of repentance from his audience (v8a). When people asked him to be more specific, he laid the axe at the root: "He who has two dresses, let him give one to him who has none; he who has food, let him do likewise" (v11). Have you heard any preacher prescribe this before water baptism? This is the deficiency in our sermons. We deal with the branches unmindful of the root. Only if the root is made holy, the branches will be holy (Rom 11:16). The love of money is the "root of ALL kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10). Instead of running away from it, we run after it (v11). If John the Baptist's prescription of 50% is too much for us, why don't we set aside at least another 10% for the **poor**, after tithing to God's work? Like Prophet John, we must stand in the gap with the power of the Holy Spirit lest God strikes the earth with a curse (Mal 4:5,6; Mt 11:14).

We have too many Pastors and Preachers, at least in South India. But where are the Prophets? Pastors and Preachers are General Practitioners, but Prophets are Surgeons. What the Church needs is not change of medication. We need a radical surgery. Paracetamol does not cure cancer. We are sensually satisfied with synthetic revivals and cosmetic surgeries. The first person to be called a "Prophet," and that too by God Himself, was Abraham (Gen 20:7). God introduced him so to King Abimelech in order to save a "nation" (v4). We invariably quote Abraham while talking about intercessory prayer. He "stood before the Lord" on behalf of Sodom (18:22). The sin of Sodom was "very grievous" (v20). What was it? God Himself gives us the answer: Ezek 16:49, "Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the **poor** and needy!" Can words be clearer? Luxurious living and neglect of the poor was "the" sin of Sodom. It was Prophet Abraham who explained to the rich man why he landed in hell (Lk 16:25). The rich man was not charged with murder, theft or adultery. His failure was in **charity**. He should have built an outer house for the homeless Lazarus, sent him daily bread through one of his servants, and arranged with a Dermatologist to treat his sores. He should have at least chained his dogs which competed with Lazarus for the breadcrumbs! Beloved, listen, God views our sins of omission more seriously than our sins of commission. When Zacchaeus volunteered to give away 50% of all his belongings to the **poor**, Jesus called him the son of our Prophet "Abraham" (Lk 19:8,9).

Another outstanding Prophet of the Old Testament was Daniel. His intercessory prayer in Daniel 9 is unparalleled. After interpreting the dream for King Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel told him in conclusion, “Therefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the **poor**. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity” (Dan 4:27). We need Prophets to forthrightly speak thus to our national leaders. According to a report in *Indian Express* of 22 Jan 2019, 51.33% of India’s wealth is held by just 1% of the Country’s population. And on 18 Aug 2019 this Newspaper reported: “The have-not gap is expanding across social sectors. In 2018, Indian billionaires got richer by Rs. 2,200 crores a day, with the top 1% of the country’s richest getting richer by 39% as against just 3% increase in wealth for the bottom-half of the population. India has the highest number of Below-Poverty-Line (BPL) families. One in three Indian children are stunted. Over one lakh rural households are dependent on manual scavenging for income.” Dear friends, Do we expect the God of the Poor remain silent without ventilating His anger? “Dear Lord, raise in our midst holy Prophets like Daniel. Forgive us for fattening our Hollywood-style Preachers. Give us weeping Prophets like Jeremiah to warn us against the deadly disease of covetousness. Remove from our pulpits the laughing boys who entertain and entice our foolish congregations!” (Jer 6:13,14).

Moses was a Prophet par excellence (Dt 34:10-12). Referring to Jesus, he prophesied, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brothers. Him you shall hear” (Dt 18:15,18). Peter and Stephen quoted it in defence of the Gospel (Acts 3:22; 7:37). The people who saw Jesus testified, “A great Prophet has risen up among us, and God has visited His people” (Lk 7:16). The inaugural Scripture reading by Jesus for His ministry was Luke 4:18,19, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the **poor**.” He pointed this to the disciples of John as the attesting sign of His Messianic ministry: “The **poor** have the Gospel preached to them” (Lk 7:22). In His Sermon on the Mount, He sternly warned against hoarding of money (Mt 6:19-21). Jesus came as the “Wonderful Counselor” in response to God the Father’s plea, “I looked, and there was no man; I looked among them, but there was no counselor, who, when I asked them could answer a word” (Isa 41:28). A rich young man was seeking counsel to inherit eternal life and become perfect. Instead of beating around the bush, Jesus pointedly counselled him, “Go, sell what you have and give it to the **poor**, and you will have treasure in Heaven” (Mt 19:16-22). Oh, for such prophetic

counsellors! Today's so-called Prophets are afraid of the rich and they offer them front seats (Js 2:1-4). But God addressed a millionaire, "You fool!" (Lk 12:16-21). Paul was a Prophet (Acts 13:1-3). He warned that the love of money is a "foolish lust," and he commanded the rich to be rich in CHARITY (1 Tim 6:9,17,18).

The early Church was a "prophetic" community. They understood Joel's Pentecostal prophecy rightly: "It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall *prophecy*... And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall *prophesy*" (Acts 2:16-18). The first manifestation of the spirit of prophecy on them was sharing of their material blessings with the havenots (vv44,45; 4:32-35). Unfortunately we are stuck with Acts 2:4 without moving on to 2:44! Earlier I pointed out how over 50% of the Country's wealth is held by just 1% of its population. The picture is not much different in the Church. A spiritual awakening to address this sinful imbalance is the urgent need of the hour (2 Cor 8:12-15). God is dead against the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer (Isa 5:8; Js 5:1-3). The healing of the Nation depends on the repentance of the Church (2 Chr 7:14). Anything must start with the Church. As the Church goes, so goes the world! We need Prophets like Amos who would chide the luxury-loving Zionists for "not grieving for the affliction of (their brother) Joseph" (Am 6:1, 3-6). We need Prophets like Micah, "full of power by the Spirit," to rebuke those Church leaders who can be influenced by money (Mic 3:8-11). Judgment must begin at the House of God (1 Pet 4:17). James was the Lord's brother (Mt 13:55). His definition of "pure and undefiled religion" cannot be improved upon. It is this: "To visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (Js 1:27). Do you notice that **charity** comes first? Whenever there's a national or global calamity, the Church must be the first to swing into action. When there came a worldwide famine during the reign of Claudius Caesar, according to the prediction of Prophet Agabus, each believer contributed to the relief fund liberally and cheerfully (Acts 11:27-30). I request all Pastors and Church Leaders to channelise the offerings of March and April this year towards the relief and rehabilitation of the **poor** who suffer(ed) from COVID-19. The individual Christians can themselves distribute the money to the deserving in their vicinity.

We read in John 3:16 that “God so *loved* the world...” He still loves the world. But He is angry. The wrath of God is an integral subject in the Bible. Get hold of a Bible Concordance and see the innumerable references to it. Undoubtedly God has struck the world in His anger through Coronavirus as He has done in the past through “crawling locusts, consuming locusts and chewing locusts” (Joel 2:25). But He is rich in mercy and forgiveness. His servants as well as His people must fall flat before Him for His gracious intervention and withdrawal of this plague. A fresh commitment to **charity** will speed up our healing (Psa 41:1-3; Isa 58:8; Acts 9:36-43). The national lockdown gives an opportunity for repairing the prayer altars of individuals. Prophet Elijah rebuilt the altar with twelve stones representing each tribe (1 Ki 18:30,31). Each family in the Church must decide “not to falter between two opinions” any longer, but walk before God in total obedience and undivided allegiance (v21). “God’s anger is but for a moment, His favour is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psa 30:5).

As we give ourselves to prayer in this hour of crisis, we must not forget the two Divine Intercessors committed to plead for us before God the Father, 24 hours a day, everyday. One is Christ Jesus the First *Comforter* who ever lives to make intercession for us in Heaven from the right hand of God (Rom 8:34). The other is the Holy Spirit the Second *Comforter* who makes intercession for us to the Father from our hearts (v26). It’s because of these two Intercessors, God blesses us “above all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20). There’s another vital truth that we must keep in mind: “The whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now... We also groan within ourselves eagerly waiting for the adoption of our body” which will take place at the Return of Christ (Rom 8:22,23). Come, Lord Jesus, come soon!