

“Suppose There are Only Ten?”

Genesis 18:22-33, 35:1-3; Ezekiel 22:30 ¹

Back in the days when I was a Surface Warfare Officer on destroyers—which was a very long time ago at this point—I frequently commented that the six most-dreaded words in the English language are “Sir, you have the next watch.” Now I know that’s not literally true—it’s not even close to true—but I surely did dread having a red flashlight in my eyes at 0330 and hearing those quiet but urgent words spoken in my direction. I haven’t ever been a morning person, and standing the 0400-0800 watch was always a stretch for a night-owl.

It was while standing many 0400-0800 watches, both in port and at sea, that I began to understand what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, “*My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, yes, more than watchmen wait for the morning*” (Psalm 130:6). Standing watch even appears from time to time in the Bible, such as when God told Isaiah to “*Put a watchman on the city wall. Let him shout out what he sees*” (Isaiah 21:6). The point of watchstanding, of course, is to stand guard over that which has been placed under one’s trust, taking immediate action in response to danger and calling others to action as well.

The story goes that when a young man was being interviewed for a job as an usher at a theater, the manager asked him, “What would you do in case a fire breaks out?”

The young man answered, “Oh, don’t worry about me, I’d get out okay.” That was the wrong answer, of course. An usher’s job is to get everybody else out, whether he gets out or not.² The same principle applies to standing watch. The idea is not to protect yourself so much as to protect the ship, the base, or the city, as the case may be.

Sometimes we Christians miss the point of doing what we can to get everyone else out, and answer the question, “What would you do if you knew that Jesus was coming back tomorrow?” with, “Oh, don’t worry about me. I’d get out okay.” That’s the wrong answer for us, as it was for the usher in the theater.

That’s the kind of thing that was going on when God said to Ezekiel: ² “*Son of man, give your people this message: ‘When I bring an army against a country, the people of that land choose one of their own to be a watchman. ³ When the watchman sees the enemy coming, he sounds the alarm to warn the people. ⁴ Then if those who hear the alarm refuse to take action, it is their own fault if they die. ⁵ They heard the alarm but ignored it, so the responsibility is theirs. If they had listened to the warning, they could have saved their lives. ⁶ But if the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn’t sound the alarm to warn the people, he is responsible for their captivity. They will die in their sins, but **I will hold the watchman responsible** for their deaths.’*”

⁷ “*Now, son of man, **I am making you a watchman** for the people of Israel. Therefore, listen to what I say and warn them for me. . . . ¹¹ As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?* (Ezekiel 33:2-11).

And all this reminds me of something that happened to Ezra the priest when he returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. When Ezra arrived in the city, he was told, “*Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land. They have taken up the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites,*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 6, 2016, the Sunday before the Presidential Election.

² *Illustration Digest*, March-May, 1993.

Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites. . . . Worse yet, the leaders and officials have led the way in this outrage” (Ezra 9:1-2).

Ezra himself was not guilty of the particular sins in question, but here’s how he responded: ³ *When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked.* ⁴ *Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat with me because of this outrage committed by the returned exiles. And I sat there utterly appalled until the time of the evening sacrifice.*

⁵ *At the time of the sacrifice, I stood up from where I had sat in mourning with my clothes torn. I fell to my knees and lifted my hands to the Lord my God.* ⁶ *I prayed, “O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to you. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. . . .”* ¹ *While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and lying face down on the ground in front of the Temple of God, a very large crowd of people from Israel—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly with him (Ezra 9:3-6, 10:1).*

When Ezra learned about the sins of his people, he expressed **shame** for their sin, **fear** of the consequences of that sin, **yearning** that his people would come to their senses and repent, and **hope** that God would have mercy on them rather than send the judgment they so obviously deserved. As a “watchman on the wall,” Ezra saw the danger and called his people to a time of fasting, prayer, and repentance.

Doubtlessly, there were many in the nation who did not respond to Ezra’s call to prayer, but those who did “stood in the gap” for the rest. And as you may know, the metaphor of “standing in the gap” comes from Ezekiel, too, where God said, *“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**”* (Ezekiel 22:30).

With these images in our minds, let’s return to Abraham’s negotiation with God about Sodom. There are many things in this story about which I’d like to know more, but it’s Abraham’s last question that has haunted me for years: **“Suppose there are only ten?”**

I don’t know about you, but I sometimes wonder whether our nation’s half-empty churches, filled with half-hearted worshipers, make any real difference. I mean, just think about the mess we’re in at this very moment, much of it fomented by “church folks.” And on a local level, it seems to me that if the churches right here in Columbia were filled week by week with persons who were absolutely passionate about loving the LORD our God with all of our hearts, all of our souls, all of our minds, and all of our strength, and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, this would be a different city than it is (Mark 12:29-31).

Yet at the same time, it also seems likely to me that we half-hearted worshipers in our half-empty churches just may be the equivalent of the “ten righteous people” because of whom God forestalls cataclysm, not just for Columbia, but for our nation as a whole. And that thought brings me back to the central verse that I hope you will remember this morning, Ezekiel 22:30: **“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.”**³

“Suppose there are only ten?” Abraham asked. It seems to me that the percentage of humans who deeply yearn for God, who allow God’s love and power to truly transform their lives,

³ *“Moses, his chosen one, stepped between the LORD and the people. He begged him to turn from his anger and not destroy them” (Psalm 106:23).*

and who are fully committed to the transforming work of God's inbreaking Kingdom has always been pretty small, from the Day of Creation until this very day (Matthew 7:13-14).

Indeed, if we were to evaluate the evident effectiveness of God's Kingdom as we might evaluate a profit and loss statement, we'd probably not invest in it. But Jesus told us that "*I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it*" (Matthew 16:18). That's what God is doing in our world, whether it looks like it to us or not, and we have been asked to help!

So, as we think about "standing in the gap" at the beginning of this Election Week, such "standing" is usually understood to refer to intercession on behalf of the nation. That was what Ezekiel meant by the phrase, and such prayer is most surely needed.

As you and I sit here in worship this morning, there is an intense and desperate need for intercession for our nation as a whole; and yet as I think about this I'm reminded of a *Peanuts* vignette in which Lucy throws her arms open wide as she says grandly, "I love the whole w-i-d-e world! It's just people that I can't stand."

Schulz's point, of course, is that it's not possible to love people "in general." If you and I are serious about loving people, if we're serious about praying for our nation, then effective prayer will be prayer for particular situations and for particular people, not some vague, generic, and essentially empty statement of "God bless America."

So how's your prayer list? Do you have one? Is there any method or purpose or strategy in your praying? If you need some help, there are prayer lists for our congregation's known needs available for you as you enter and leave worship, and there's an insert in your order of worship that also suggests some strategies for prayer.

One of the best-known verses in the Old Testament is 2 Chronicles 7:14. There, speaking into situations such as Ezra faced and such as we face, God said, "***If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.***"

My friends, whether we want it to be so or not, God has put you and me on watch as "watchers on the wall" over our nation. The "watchers" of the Bible—usually called "prophets"—seldom relished their task, because people don't generally appreciate being told that their behavior is self-destructive, city-destructive, nation-destructive, and world-destructive. Even so, such is our responsibility, and God has promised to be our Helper in this work.

Finally, after we have been nourished at the Lord's Table, I will invite you to join me in singing James Weldon Johnson's powerful hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the battle hymn of the Civil Rights Movement. Then, as now, our nation had some things very, very wrong, even while having many things very, very right.

This is a hymn of hope for Watchers on the Wall. May we be found faithful!

Suppose There Are Only Ten?

A Dramatic Reading for Three Readers

Narrator: *When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the LORD said,*

The LORD: *“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”*

Narrator: *Then the LORD said,*

The LORD: *“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”*

Narrator: *The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham approached him and said:*

Abraham: *“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”*

The LORD: *“If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”*

Abraham: *“Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for the lack of five people?”*

The LORD: *“If I find forty-five there, I will not destroy it.”*

Abraham: *“What if only forty are found there?”*

The LORD: *“For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”*

Abraham: *“May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?”*

The LORD: *“I will not do it if I find thirty there.”*

Abraham: *“Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?”*

The LORD: *“For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”*

Abraham: *“May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”*

The LORD: *“For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it” (Genesis 18:16-32).*

Narrator: The Word of God for the People of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

STRATEGIC MISSIONAL PRAYING

In his book, *Personal Missionary Partnerships*,¹ Steven Loots suggests a specific theme for prayer on each day of the week as we “stand in the gap” for missionary friends around the world. It seems to me that these themes work nearly as well as guides for our prayer for the persons on our personal prayer lists

MONDAY: Praying *down* God’s Power. Pray that the Father will make His love real to your friend in ways uniquely suited to where she is in life’s journey today. Pray that God will bring persons across your friend’s path who will be especially able to connect with him and who will lead him little by little toward Jesus. Pray that God will give your friend a hunger for God’s written Word, and that God’s Spirit will make that Word come alive, leading her toward falling in love with Him who is the Living Word.

TUESDAY: Praying *away* Spiritual Darkness. The phrase “misery loves company” finds its greatest fulfillment in Satan’s clear purpose to keep every person he can out of God’s Kingdom of Light. Satan will lie, deceive, and kill, marshalling every means he can to drag persons created in God’s image into his own realm where Darkness is punctuated only by unquenchable fire; and the idols of self-gratification worshiped by our culture are some of Satan’s favorite tools. Though these idols introduce themselves with many other names, their true names are Sloth, Greed, Anger, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, and Pride. We pray to protect our friends from these.

WEDNESDAY: Praying *open* Closed Doors. Pray again that your friend will meet the right people and that God will provide her with divine appointments. Pray that every temptation will become, not one of Satan’s traps, but a vehicle of God’s grace. Pray for the town where your friend lives, that it may be a place where God’s Spirit has freedom to act. Pray for your friend’s close relationships, that whatever pain or distress is found there may lead him to seek godly counsel, and through that, the LORD.

THURSDAY: Praying *in* Resources. Pray that God will use your friend’s employment—or the lack of it—to deepen his reliance on the Father. Pray that God will meet her essential economic needs in ways that cause her to become curious about God’s providence. Pray that the Spirit will guide your friend in wise and generous use of the resources that become available to him. Pray that God will act in whatever ways are necessary to free your friend from the fool’s gold of material things.

FRIDAY: Praying a Spiritual Covering *over* and *around* your Family & Friends. Standing in the gap to provide a wall of God’s righteousness around our Concentric Circle friends also involves watching and listening carefully for clues to Satan’s plan of attack against them. Being watchful requires an awareness of what’s happening in the world and sensitivity to spiritual forces—especially to spiritual promptings from the LORD. Pray for your friend any time God brings her to your mind. If you have the sense that you should call or visit him, “just do it.” Some of the Kingdom’s greatest adventures and advances come in this way.

SATURDAY: Offering *up* Glorious Praise. Most of us have no difficulty remembering to pray when we or our friends have urgent needs. Once those needs have been met, though, it’s pretty easy to forget to thank the Father for His provision—especially if that provision came in unremarkable ways, which it usually does. Thank God for every contact with your friend, for every spiritual conversation, for every evidence that God is indeed at work nurturing a harvest of love in her spirit.

SUNDAY: Praying *out* Workers into the Harvest. Pray for Christians who are already present in the circles of your friend’s life. Pray that they will be sensitive to God’s leading as they interact with him. Pray that their lives will be winsome and above reproach. Pray that they will demonstrate what it looks like to go through each day, “not *somehow*, but triumphantly.”

¹ Steven Loots, *Personal Missionary Partnerships* (Greenwood, VA: World Christian Press, 2008).