

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Along with helpful and practical good deeds, responding in prayer to the current virus situation and other causes of national distress is of great importance. Before all else, as Christians we need to recognise that God is dealing with this world and that he knows exactly what is happening in it and we need to respond directly to him in prayer. That is our great privilege, and it puts us in a position of responsibility and also give us encouragement.

The question arises, however, as to how we should pray in the situation we face. That is an important question, and frequently asked. A study of the prophets through whom the words of judgement came provides us with some necessary pointers in this direction. The prophets were people of prayer. They were intercessors. Praying was part of their prophetic calling, and they would not have prophesied if they had not been praying people. We should not be made to feel inadequate or overawed by the depth of their calling, however, but on the contrary take heart and guidance from their experience.

Amos

The starting point for all these prophets was, of course, a recognition and acceptance of the fact that God was active in judgement in their nations. Without that basic understanding there could not have been any full and adequate intercession.

Like Moses before him, Amos knew how to “stand in the gap” for the nation when he recognised such judgement: that is to say that he knew how to confess the sins of the nation and plead with God to hold back his judgements.

We read of two such successful periods of intercession of this kind (Amos 7:1-9). First, God spoke to him of swarms of locusts he was about to send on the land as a judgement. Amos cried out in horror and begged the Lord to have mercy and stay his hand. God listened and spared the nation. Second, Amos was warned of a coming judgement “of fire” which “devoured the land”. Again, Amos interceded and was heard.

Unhappily, Amos had a third vision of coming judgement which began with a word from God, “I will spare them no longer”. Immediately the prophet recognised that he was being told that that any further plea for mercy and deliverance for the nation would no longer be heard. Having realised that, God then spoke to him about what he would do: the land would be ravaged and the people exiled. Amos’ intercession would not stop that. At that point Amos’ prayer vision could only be on a more distant future restoration, not on present deliverance.

Jeremiah

In similar manner Jeremiah interceded with God over a severe drought and asked God to remove it, but was rejected with the words, “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away” (Jer.15:1).

There was nothing wrong with Jeremiah’s heart or intercession, but it was not going to be answered. This is a very serious position for a nation when, in the face of his judgements, God will not listen to intercession that seeks to stop judgement, no matter how earnest. The reason for this rejection of intercession was simply the depth of sin in the nation and the lack of genuine repentance: a deeper “purging” was required.

The one thing we cannot presume in our current situation is that God will relieve his judgments simply by such direct intercession, no matter how sincere our prayer may be: the national rejection of God and his ways has reached a very low point, and it continues to get worse. A deeper purging, a further judgement even, may be needed.

Habakkuk

Such a prospect is very daunting, but Habakkuk brings a degree of relief.

The book of Habakkuk begins and ends with the prophet praying. To start with he is praying earnestly for Judah that God would remove the running sore of violence in the nation. It is the sort of praying we all know well. But Habakkuk was frustrated and disappointed, as often we can be, because there seemed to be no answer to his prayer. He expressed this frustration to God (a mark of real prayer!). Actually, however, God was working on the matter. He revealed to Habakkuk that he was raising up a violent nation (Babylon) to purge out the problem of violence in Judah through judgement. The prophet struggled with this notion, as the book reveals in some detail. Eventually, however, he came to accept that the nation would be under such severe judgement, and the book ends with him asking God to do two things.

The first is that God would do wonders in the nation (as he did of old). It is not easy to know quite what he had in mind, but he knew Israel's God was the God of power and miracles. We need to remember in this context that God has brought outpourings of his Spirit in very dark and foreboding times and brought many people into his kingdom. We must never cease to seek him for the growth of his kingdom, either in judgement or persecution.

The second was expressed in one of the most pithy and important of short phrases, "Lord ... in wrath remember mercy!" (Hab. 3:2). This is supremely the prayer for our times: It is a prayer that accepts judgement but majors on God's mercy. Such is the great mercy of God that it can be found in the worst of times. The grace of mercy denotes unmerited favour and blessing. It is epitomised in Paul's words, "Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us". It stems from the sheer greatness of the love of God. It was such grace that brought about the tears of Jesus as he looked on Jerusalem knowing it would be judged.

We need to rejoice and praise God in our praying and we need to make much of this grace of mercy; it is something that can be manifest even in judgement. It should be a constant theme of our praise and we should bring it to bear on everything we pray for at this time.

Finally, with great determination Habakkuk declares at the very end of his book that whatever happens in the way of judgement he will rejoice in his God, even though "there are no grapes on the vine and ... and no sheep in the pen" Hab. 3:17. He declares against all that is happening around him that "The sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights" (3:19). What better spirit than that to face a threatening future? It is especially relevant in the present need.