

Prayers That Change the Course of a Nation

We can be assured that God is ultimately in control of where, when and from whom judgment is withheld and mercy and blessing are given instead. He alone makes it rain on one city while withholding rain from another in a time of drought (Amos 4:7). In fact, one of the most remarkable elements of God's mercy in the context of His judgment is that at various times in history, the Lord has changed the fate of an entire nation due to the prayers of godly believers.

If you do not think your prayers matter, think again—they do! And as you consider this truth, take a look at just three of the many cases the Bible records of those whose history-changing prayers made the difference between blessing and judgment.

King Josiah

Josiah lived in the same generation in which Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. Both his father and grandfather were wicked kings of Judah, yet Josiah “did what was correct in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Chron. 34:2). Despite Josiah's own godliness, the people he ruled still worshipped other gods and refused to turn to the Lord.

As a result of their persistent sinfulness, the prophets told Josiah trouble was coming and Jerusalem would be razed to the ground. Josiah's response revealed his true colors, which so moved the Lord that He said this to the king:

“Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and those who dwell here, and you have brought yourself low before Me and torn your clothes and wept before Me, I have heard you, declares the Lord. I am bringing you to be with your fathers,

and you will be brought to your grave in peace, and your eyes will not see all the disaster that I am bringing on this place and on those who dwell here” (2 Chron. 34:27–28).

Because of Josiah’s commitment to the Lord and his lifestyle of crying out to God on behalf of his nation, the Lord actually delayed His judgments against Judah. This one man caught God’s attention to such an extent that He altered history on his behalf.

Following God’s assurance that Josiah would not see Jerusalem destroyed, the king successfully brought the people of Judah and Israel back to a posture of truly worshipping God and walking according to His covenant—“to walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all [their] soul” (2 Chron. 34:31).

Moses

On several occasions, Moses vented to God about the Israelites’ stubbornness, and the Lord reassured him of His plans for His people. Yet in Exodus 32, we find the tables slightly turned after the Israelites made a golden-calf representation of God and began to worship it and make sacrifices to it. The Lord was so enraged that He told Moses, who was meeting with Him privately atop Mount Sinai, “Let Me alone, so that My wrath may burn against them and I may destroy them” (v. 10). The Lord planned to wipe out the Israelites and start over with only Moses.

Despite his frequent frustration over the hard-heartedness of Israel, Moses pleaded with God to change His mind. “Turn from Your fierce wrath,” Moses asked the Lord, “and relent of this harm against Your people” (v. 12b). Once again, God listened to the prayer of one of His servants. He spared Israel from the judgment they deserved (v. 14), even though He knew how often they would eventually turn from Him.

Where Does That Leave Us?

Each of these examples reveals the extravagant compassion of our God—a kindness that goes far beyond what is deserved. Today, we live in an era of extravagant mercy and grace. Given our nation’s growing defiance of the Lord and His ways, God’s justice and righteousness could demand judgment—we certainly deserve it.

And yet God continues to show mercy. As King David wrote, the Lord is “full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in mercy and truth” (Ps. 86:15b).

The Lord remains compassionate by giving those who rage against Him more time. To use a cliché, we as a nation are living on borrowed time, just as the Israelites were in each of the examples above. Why are we living under such extreme mercy?

Because God does not delight in releasing a severe judgment upon America or any other nation. He wants restoration of our nation and desires for all to be saved. Likewise, He is waiting for the nations to turn to Him in repentance. Even the wickedest nation has an opportunity: “At one moment I may speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it. If that nation against which I have spoken *turns from its evil*, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to do to it” (Jer. 18:7–8, emphasis added).

Not only is God waiting for nations to turn to Him, but also He is actually seeking intercessors who will pray these nations into His kingdom. This is how much God wants people saved; He is actively looking for those who will “stand in the gap” and contend in prayer on behalf of even those wicked nations that hate Him and rage against Him (Ezek. 22:30b).

What an amazing God! {eoa}

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