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Where you can discover some things about spirituality,
and about the Holy Spirit who makes it possible.

Intercessory Prayer

going before God on others' behalf

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What's Different About *Intercessory* Prayer?

Intercessory prayer is not the same as prayers for yourself, or for 'enlightenment', or for spiritual gifts, or for guidance, or any personal matter, or any glittering generality. Intercession is not just praying for someone else's needs. Intercession is praying with the real [hope](#) and real intent that God would step in and act for the positive advancement of some specific other person(s) or other entity. It is trusting God to act, even if it's not in the manner or timing we seek. God wants us to ask, even **urgently**. It is casting our weakness before God's strength, and (at its best) having a bit of God's passion burn in us.

"I commend intercessory prayer, because it opens man's soul, gives a healthy play to his sympathies, constrains him to feel that he is not everybody, and that this wide world and this great universe were not after all made that he might be its petty lord, that everything might bend to his will, and all creatures crouch at his feet."

[Charles Spurgeon](#)

Intercession In the Bible

The Bible has many cases of people standing up for others before God. The most striking example is [Abraham](#). He took the initiative to step forward before God on behalf of his neighbors in Sodom and its area. He cared enough to do it, even though he knew how thoroughly wicked Sodom was, and knew how furious God was about it (which explains why he was so careful in speaking to God about it). [Moses](#) also stepped in when God was angry, standing in the gap in the most literal sense : offering his own life for that of his nation. (Thankfully, God didn't take him up on the offer.) It was part of the role of a prophet not just to speak what God speaks, but to speak with God for the people of Israel. A fine example is the exchange between the prophet [Habakkuk](#) and God, where the prophet asks for God to act against injustice, but God replies about a coming doom. Isaiah prayed with King Hezekiah to save the nation from defeat and destruction at the hands of Assyria, and the armies were suddenly turned back (see Isaiah ch. 36-39). The master builder [Nehemiah](#) prayed to God to bring about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of his people. As they took their concerns to God, the key motivation behind these giants of faith was [compassion](#). They loved the people, the culture, the faith with a love like God's love, and it burned in them so much that they dared to take on God on their behalf. Unlike the gods of the lore of most other lands, this God did not zap them with lightning or turn them into half-beasts. God listened to their cries -- not by ignoring the wrongdoings which got the divine wrath kindled in the first place, but by saving at least some of the people and bringing them back to where they belonged.

The New Testament has its cases of intercessory prayer. Jesus was the prime example of an intercessor. He interceded in prayer for [God to bless and protect](#) His followers. At the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Indeed, His whole life, His whole reason for being born, was to be a living intercession, a giving of His life to span the rift caused by our rebellion against God. Others followed Jesus' example. [Stephen's last words](#) were an intercession on behalf of those who were killing him. [Paul](#) prayed constantly for the struggling young church, for character, behavior, witness, and wisdom. It is Paul's regular intercession for the church and its people which sets the usual pattern for our own intercessory prayers. And Epaphras was the '[prayer wrestler](#)' for the church in Colossae.

Even at its earliest, the young church was praying for people: for [safe travel](#), praying that people might [know Christ](#) through other peoples' witness, praying for [healing and health](#), for [rescue](#), for wisdom, for childbirth, for [spiritual growth](#), for marriages -- asking God to bring benefit or blessing to people other than themselves. The others were not always beloved; they prayed for their political leaders, some of whom were out to kill them. But they knew their God was merciful and was intimately involved with what was going on in the world. And they knew they were called by God to share in that involvement.

Your Intercessory Prayer

The place where intercessory prayer must start is with you. It's great to know that others may be stepping up for someone before God, but God wants you to put something of yourself on the line. Otherwise, it's too cheap to be real. Your private devotions are not just for your own benefit. If God's love is at work in you, you will care about others, and your love for them will lead you to take it to the ultimate Source of strength, healing, and love. Don't be fearful; be persistent and stubborn. God doesn't mind; God likes to see divine love at work in you. God honors your part in the [relationship](#).

It is best to always be aware that you never really pray alone. For when the honest love in you for other people causes you to ask God to act to strengthen, heal, defend, change, or bless them, there is someone else

praying with you : the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is leading you to pray. When your love is not whole or your mind is not clear, the Spirit steps in for you, to express the intercession and draw you into it. Christian intercessors over the past two millenia have prayed their intercessions in a 'Trinitarian' manner : to the Father, through the Son, and in and with the Holy Spirit. God isn't fussy about the pattern, but it helps us to see some part of how God works in prayer.

The intercessory prayer you first pray about someone may not be what God wants you to pray for. For instance, you might be praying to lift a burden, but the Lord might be using the burden to prepare them to do something for God. Then again, your prayer might be what God wants to happen. Thus, we are to pray listening for the Spirit, and pray that God's will be done. I find myself concentrating better when I mutter the words; it gives my mind more focus. The mind may go off to explore something during personal devotions, but not while you're interceding for others -- those others must be your first concern. So, it's sometimes best to do it before you seek stillness (though God will sometimes lead you out of stillness into intercession -- be open to it).

Don't be surprised if the Spirit starts tugging on your heart to take some sort of action about a matter you're praying about. You may be the answer God sends into their lives. That's not a license to be a buttinski, stepping into everyone's private lives like some sort of conquering hero. But the Spirit might be calling you to be more than a bystander. Be ready for it. When you intercede, bring your knowledge, gifts, abilities, attention and energies before God and say, 'use these, if that's what it takes to set this right'.

Gifted Intercession

Anyone can pray for others and step in with God on their behalf. But some people are gifted at intercession. They have an ear and a passion for the needs of others, and take them before God even when those other people reject God. An intercessor's heart is touched for those in need, not so much *on* their side as **by** their side and **on their behalf**. They have a burden for that person. They persevere. They let the Spirit give them comfort about it, instead of worrying. And when word of results comes, they celebrate and are happy about it. If that sounds like you, then you may be a gifted intercessor.

Sometimes, someone is led to be an intercessor for a specific person or mission or task. Such people are valuable even beyond donors. Such intercessors sometimes get a strong sense of coming danger about whom they're praying for. They often report they're driven to their knees to pray about something they can't otherwise have known was happening. Sounds weird, but it's true.

Intercessors also pray for world, national, and local [political leaders](#). This follows in the tradition of the early church's prayers for the Roman [authorities](#). Some people actually think it's good to pray against evildoers and oppressive leaders, even to pray for their death. Not that God would pay any attention to you if you did. But such thinking poisons *your* attitude. Pray rather that the Spirit would lead them or [change them](#). When James and John asked for permission to do harm to their enemies by praying for divine acts of judgement, Jesus reminded them of why He was there (and they, too):

**"For the Son of Man did not come to destroy peoples' lives, but to save them."
(Luke 9:56)**

Intercessory prayer aims to build people into what God wants of them, not to tear them down.

Thy Will Be Done

"Therefore faith prays in such a manner that it commits everything to the gracious will of God; it lets [God] determine whether it is conducive to his honor and to our benefit."

Martin Luther, in a sermon on [Matthew 8:1-13](#).

Some people claim we can ask God to do things on behalf of people, and *know* it will be done. It's understandable to think that, for Jesus promised that our prayers would cause things to happen, especially when we keep at it. But look at the Biblical intercessors again. Their success was very real, but far from complete.

- Abraham stuck his neck out with a rightly-angry God, but could only save his relatives.
- Moses' people were spared immediate destruction, but his generation would not get the land God had promised -- the next generation did.
- All of David's deep and totally sincere weeping and begging could not save his baby son -- though it did set up for the birth of his successor.
- Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers, and [the apostles](#) prayed for the unity of the church. They gained much unity, but still had serious divisions.
 - The apostles prayed for each of their poor, but had more poor members by the day.
 - The apostles had hundreds of people constantly praying for their safety, but they died martyr's deaths.

In such cases, God's mercy does not override God's purpose nor God's justice, not to mention our own wills. We cannot fathom God's purposes or know for certain what God knows about what is to be. God's love simply has a broader, deeper, longer work to do, and sometimes what we pray for simply cannot find a place within that work. Intercessors sometimes must accept even the most bitter of losses, with the awareness that their prayers did not -- and sometimes must not -- avail. This is a hard mystery of intercession.

Our place is to follow the example of Jesus, who prayed on Thursday that He not have to go through what He was to go through that Friday. But He also prayed, "Not my will, but Thine". In this garden prayer, He was not praying Himself into death. He was praying with the confidence that whatever was needed to happen would and should and must happen, and though that apparently meant death, so be it. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God's purposes be fulfilled everywhere, right here on earth, not just in the hereafter. Praying 'thy will be done' is not the same thing as praying with [doubt](#). It is the act of **putting your trust in Whom it belongs**. God has something more in store for you -- that is why you get to breathe your next breath. When you step forward in faith, you can stand in that confidence, whatever happens with your specific prayer.

None of us are fully aligned with God's purposes. There will always be a difference between the two. It's okay to ask for what you want from the situation; that's a part of being honest with God. You can pray that your request somehow be found in the divine purposes, and pray for doorways to a better way if it can't be. (Maybe God will provide you a ram as with Abraham when sacrificing Isaac.) But God may have other plans, and your part is to [trust](#) that God's plans will be best.

Intercessory prayer does not work by your own power, as if you were the Almighty. When prayer is answered, it is answered in God's way, and it may not be at all like the 'victory' you are 'claiming'. Most of the time, the Spirit's main work is to change *you*, to make *you* care more, and to get *you* to focus on what others are going through instead of only seeing life from where you are. Sometimes, something more happens.

God, in giving us all free will, said to us: "Your will be done." Some of us turn back to him and say: "My will is that your will be done." That is obedience to the first and greatest commandment. Then, when we do that, he turns to us and says: "And now, your will be done." And then he writes the story of our lives with the pen strokes of our own free choices.

Peter Kreeft

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