

Text: Ezekiel 22:30-31 (Pew Bible pg.841)

Title: “Standing in the Gap”

INTRODUCTION

It was the darkest of the darkest hours for the Jews and the city of Jerusalem when God called a young man by the name of Ezekiel to the ministry of the prophet. Open your Bibles to the book that contains his message ... Ezekiel 22. We're making our way through the books of the OT that contain the messages of the Major and Minor Prophets. Ezekiel, one of the Major Prophets, came from a family of priests and so he was well acquainted with the deplorable condition of the spiritual life of his people. He lived at the same time as Jeremiah, and he may have even heard Jeremiah preach. The Babylonians had been tormenting Judah and Jerusalem for years. One of the first things they did was to carry off the royal family and many of the important families of Jerusalem. Ezekiel, being from a priestly family, was among that wave of exiles. It would be another 10 years or so before the Babylonians would lay siege to the city and finally destroy it. Remember that Jeremiah stayed behind in Jerusalem and prophesied to the exiles from there. Ezekiel, on the other hand, went into exile and prophesied to the inhabitants of Jerusalem from Babylon. Ezekiel is speaking for the Lord. Read Ezekiel 22:30-31.

So the physical walls of the city of Jerusalem were about to be breached by the invading Babylonian army. Unless someone stepped forward who was strong enough to stand in the breach of the wall and fight off the invaders, the city would fall. More importantly, the spiritual lives of the people of Jerusalem were about to be breached. Their own sin and rebellion had put them at odds with Almighty God who now stood ready to severely discipline them. The only thing that would save them is if someone could stand as an intercessor to stem the tide of evil in the city. They would only be spared if someone could come from among them to turn the people to repentance and renewed commitment to the Lord God.

But sadly there was a leadership crisis in the land. No one really seriously considered the fact that their life could make a difference.

ILLUSTRATION – There's an old parable about a king who really loved his people. It had been a particularly prosperous year when the grape harvest was bountiful. So to celebrate, the king decided to honor the people of his land with a great feast. Everything would be provided ... the meat, vegetables, breads and desert. The only thing the people were to do is to bring a bottle filled with the juice from the grapes of their bountiful harvest. They were to empty their bottles into a huge vat from which everyone would drink.

Again, this had been a particularly bountiful year for the grape harvest so everyone had plenty of grape juice. But one of the citizens thought that with the vat being so large, holding 5000 gallons, no one would know if he just brought water instead of grape juice in his bottle. So he chose a green bottle so no one could see what was inside, and filled it with water. So off he and his wife went to the King's feast. He walked up to the great vat, like the rest of the citizens, and poured the contents of his bottle into the vat. As far as he could tell no one knew he only poured water into the vat. After all, what difference would it make; it was such a large vat if everyone else was pouring in grape juice.

Surprisingly the king called upon this man to be the honored guest to draw the first juice for the King and Queen to drink. He was handed the golden chalices from which the king and queen drank, and was told to fill them with the delicious drink. With everyone watching the man walked over to the vat, opened the tap and out of poured crystal-clear water ... nothing but water! The great king was bewildered. How could this be? As it turned out, everyone in the kingdom thought that *their* bottle of grape juice would not matter so they all substituted it with water.

That must have been the way it was in Jerusalem in the days of the great prophet Ezekiel. Everyone seemed to have bought into the lie that their life didn't really matter. As a result the national life had spiraled downward and downward.

And so it is today. As followers of Jesus Christ it's easy for us to think that in a city as large as our city, it really doesn't matter how I live my life; I'm just one person. But I want to challenge you today with the truth of Scripture that God wants you to be an influencer ... as witness for Jesus Christ ... as salt and light where God has placed you ... as an intercessor for those who are perishing.

I want you to notice...

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INFLUENCERS

It's clear by reading Scripture that there were plenty of influencers, but they were influencing others in the wrong direction. And as a result the spiritual lives of the people of God were at an all-time low.

Ezekiel 22:3 - and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O city that brings on herself doom by shedding blood in her midst and defiles herself by making idols,

Ezekiel 22:4 - you have become guilty because of the blood you have shed and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come. Therefore I will make you an object of scorn to the nations and a laughingstock to all the countries.

The city of Jerusalem, rather than being a light for the glory of God to the nations, as God intended it, was instead filled with violence and with idolatry.

And there's still more wrong in the city. Ezekiel 22:6-12 paints the sordid picture. There were powerful people who used their power to shed blood. Children treated their parents with contempt. Strangers, widows and orphans were oppressed and mistreated. The holy things of God and the holy day of God were being desecrated. At pagan shrines they committed lewd acts and unconscionable sexual immorality ran rampant. There was greed and bribery and extortion. But worst of all, the Lord says in v.12, "You have forgotten Me."

And we might ask, "How could this city that was established by God to be the center of the holy worship of His people ... a city that was to be a light to the nations was now so godless?" It's a

crisis of leadership. Those who were supposed to be leading the people toward the way of the Lord were doing just the opposite.

Drop down a few more verses and you see...

THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH THE PRINCES.

Ezekiel 22:25 - There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her.

THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH THE PRIESTS.

Ezekiel 22:26 - Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH THE POLITICIANS.

Ezekiel 22:27 - Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.

THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH THE PROPHETS.

Ezekiel 22:28 - Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says'—when the LORD has not spoken.

SO IS THERE ANY SURPRISE THAT THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH THE PEOPLE?

Ezekiel 22:29 - The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.

There's a crisis of leadership ... a influence vacuum. You see, family never grows beyond its leaders. A church never grows beyond its leaders. A city never grows beyond its leaders. A nation never grows beyond its leaders.

ILLUSTRATION – Researchers have discovered this tendency in human beings ... that we tend to watch what others around us do, and change our actions to fit what we see. In a 2008 experiment was conducted by researchers at a university in England. Groups of people were placed in a large room and instructed to walk aimlessly around in the room without conversing with one another. But the researchers gave just a few of the people detailed instructions on where, precisely, they should walk in the room. What the researchers found was that no matter how large or small the group, everyone in it blindly followed that handful of people who appeared to have some idea where they were going. As one of the researchers put it, "The research suggests that humans flock like sheep and birds, subconsciously following a minority of individuals," and that it takes a mere 5 percent of

"informed individuals" to influence the direction of a crowd of up to two hundred people. The other 95 percent trail along without even being aware of it.

So what was God's solution to the problem?

Ezekiel 22:30 - "I looked for a man among them..."

God's plan always includes a man or a woman.

Ezekiel 22:30 - "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none."

That's the significance of spiritual influencers. Next there is ...

2. THE SEARCH FOR INFLUENCERS

Now I want you to notice that this is all at the initiative of the Sovereign Lord. The "I" in v.30 is the Sovereign Lord. It is the Sovereign Lord who sees the problem ... it's the Sovereign Lord who determines the outcome. God was looking for someone who would stem the tide of national destruction.

Ezekiel 22:30 - "I looked for a man among them..."

The word for "man" is the word for "male" as opposed to female. And certainly that is a reminder of the importance of men to be leaders and influencers in our homes, in our church, in our community and in our land. But this in no way underestimates the powerful influence women have in the same spheres of influence. Next Sunday is Mother's Day and we will celebrate the impact that women have as mothers.

But this verse reveals that God chooses to do His work through a person. God is constantly scanning the population for those through whom He can do His work.

2 Chronicles 16:9a - For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

So there is the significance of influencers and the search for influencers, but notice also...

3. THE STANDARD FOR INFLUENCERS

Exactly what kind of person would God choose to stem the tide of evil? What kind of person is God looking for to show Himself powerful in their behalf? Look carefully at v.30 and you see at least three qualities:

- **CONSTRUCTIVE** – "I looked for a man ... who would build up the wall..."

Remember that Jerusalem is under siege. Nebuchadnezzar how built his siege ramp against the walls of the city and was hammering away at the protective wall around the city. But the greater problem was the broken condition of the spiritual lives of the people of God. Was there anyone who would step forward to be a builder like Ezra or like Nehemiah ... men who would return to Jerusalem decades later to lead the people to not only rebuild the city and the temple, but also their renewed commitment to the Sovereign Lord?

Note: Some leadership ability only shows up when there's something to tear down. Influencers like this have a vision of greatness and excellence.

- **COURAGEOUS** – “stand...”

Peer pressure is a powerful thing then as it is now. God was looking for a courageous soul who would obediently stand for Him. Now God had found that kind of person in Ezekiel. Back in Ezekiel 4-5 we read that God told Ezekiel to do some pretty strange things to communicate His message to the people. He was told to take a clay tile and sketch the city of Jerusalem on it. Around it he was to build a miniature model of the city with armies encamped around it and a siege ramp built up to the wall. Then he was to take an iron pan and put it between him and the model he built, signifying the barrier that existed between God and His people. Then Ezekiel was told to lie on his left side for 390 days, then turn over and lie on his right side for another 40 days, the days representing the years that Israel had sinned against the Lord. Then he was to be tied with ropes to signify the siege of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Then he is told to eat some pretty nasty food, which signified what would happen to the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the siege. Then he was told to shave his head and his beard and burn part of his hair, strike part of it with a sword, tuck a few strands in his cloak, and throw some in the fire. All this was to symbolize for the people who watched this weird behavior that God was about to deal very severely with Jerusalem.

And Ezekiel courageously obeyed. But he was in exile. God was looking for someone in a constructive, courageous influencer in Jerusalem. God was also looking for one who was...

- **COMPELLING** – “stand before me in gap...”

The Lord is looking for people who can stand before Him, whose hearts are perfectly His. So we're not just talking about having influence with others, but having influence with God. The psalmist asked the question...

Psalm 24:3-4 - Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.

James 5:16b - The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

A godly spirit has great influence with God and with others. But God is also looking for one who is ...

- **COMPASSIONATE** – “on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it...”

God was looking for someone who cared enough for the people of God to make a difference.

EXAMPLES: I think about Moses who stood on the mountain and held up the rod in prayer as Joshua fought the Amalekites in the valley below. I think about Abraham who begged God to spare Sodom for the sake of a hand full of righteous people. I think of Paul who grieved over his own countrymen, the Jews: “My heart’s desire and my prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.” I think of Jesus grieving over the city of Jerusalem hundreds of years after Ezekiel’s day, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I long to gather you to Myself.”

So there is the significance of influencers, the search for influencers and the standard for influencers, but sadly this verse reveals...

4. THE SCARCITY OF INFLUENCERS

Ezekiel 22:30 - “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.

Ezekiel was already in exile. Jeremiah has likely has been carried off down to Egypt by now. He would die there. The land was completely void of spiritual influencers. There was not found one person who could stand in the gap ... not one. How sad! And consequently...

Ezekiel 22:31 - So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

Judgment of God was coming and nothing could hold it back.

As I read these dark verses I am reminded that our Lord Jesus Christ was the perfect influencer. Jesus was One who was ultimately faithful. He was a man among us. He stood in the gap before the Lord for us. He was “destroyed” in that God heaped our sins on Him so that we might not be “destroyed” for our sin. Out of compassion and love for us, God let His own Son absorb the wrath and fiery anger of God against our sins. God brought down on His head all the sins we have done.

So ultimately God is looking for men and women, young and old who will be like His Son and lay down their lives for others.

ILLUSTRATION – During the senior robing ceremony every student was asked to explain why the person robing them was significant in their life. Is there anyone out there that will look back and say of you, “He made a difference in my life. She made a difference in my life. He led me to Christ. She disciplined me. He mentored me. She set a great example for me. He guided me.”