

Excerpts from Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination by Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992)

pp.298-299:

History Belongs to the Intercessors

Intercession is spiritual defiance of what is, in the name of what God has promised. Intercession visualizes an alternative future to the one apparently fated by the momentum of current contradictory forces. It infuses the air of a time yet to be into the suffocating atmosphere of the present. Those who have made peace with injustice, who receive their identity from alienated role-definitions, and who benefit economically from social inequities, are not likely to be such intercessors.

There is a marvelous image of intercession in the Book of Revelation. Jesus Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb standing though slain-this Lion in sheep's clothing-is opening one by one the seals on the Scroll of Destiny (Revelation 5-8). As he opens the first four seals, the sorry spectacle of human violence is laid bare: the endless cycle of conquest, civil war, famine, and death, depicted by the Four Horsemen. When the fifth seal is broken, the martyred witnesses under the altar cry out: "How long, O Lord? Avenge our blood!" And when the sixth seal is opened, the whole creation lurches and totters in agonized anticipation of God's wrath. Now, just before the seventh seal is opened, those who will be saved are marked off for the new "passover" of the angel of death and destruction. Everything is now in readiness. We await the final unrolling of the Scroll. Toward this climax the whole cycle of the ages has turned.

Now when the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. I saw the seven angels who stand in the presence of God: they were given seven trumpets.

Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all God's people on the golden altar in front of the throne, and the smoke of the incense from the angel's hand went up before God with his people's prayers. The angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it down on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, lightning-flashes, and an earthquake. (Rev. 8:1-5, REB)

Heaven itself falls silent. The heavenly hosts and celestial spheres suspend their ceaseless singing so that the prayers of the saints on earth can be heard. The seven angels of destiny cannot blow the signal of the next times to be until an eighth angel gathers these prayers--prayers for justice, vindication, and victory--and mingles them with incense upon the altar. Silently they rise to the nostrils of God. Then from the same altar the angel fills the same censer with fiery coals and hurls them upon the earth. The earth is convulsed. The silence is shattered. The heavenly liturgy is complete. Now the seven angels who have the seven trumpets make ready to blow.

This scene reverses the usual unrolling of fate, where heavenly decisions are acted out on earth. Human beings have intervened in the heavenly liturgy. The uninterrupted flow of consequences is dammed for a moment. New alternatives become feasible. The unexpected becomes suddenly possible, because people on earth have invoked heaven, the home of the possibles, and have been heard. What happens next happens because people prayed.'

The message is clear: *history belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being*. This is not simply a religious statement. It is as true of communists or capitalists or anarchists as it is of Christians. The future belongs to whoever can envision in the manifold of its potentials a new and desirable possibility, which faith then fixes upon as inevitable.

This is the politics of hope. Hope envisages its future and then acts as if that future is now irresistible, thus helping to create the reality for which it longs. The future is not closed. There are fields of forces whose interactions are somewhat predictable. But *how* they will interact is not. Even a small number of people, firmly committed to the new inevitability on which they have fixed their imaginations, can decisively affect the shape the future takes. These shapers of the future are the intercessors, who call out of the future the longed-for new present. In the New Testament, the name and texture and aura of that future is God's domination-free order, the reign of God.

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If the future is thus open, if the heavenly hosts must be silenced so that God can listen to the prayers of the saints and act accordingly, then we are no longer dealing with the unchanging, immutable God of Stoic metaphysics. Before that unchangeable God, whose whole will was fixed from all eternity, intercession is

ridiculous. There is no place for intercession with a God whose will is incapable of change. What Christians have too long worshiped is the God of Stoicism, to whose immutable will we can only surrender ourselves, conforming our wills to the unchangeable will of deity.

Not so with biblical prayer. Scripture calls us into the presence of Yahweh of Hosts, who chooses circuitous paths in the desert and whose ways are subject to change without notice. This is a God who works with us and for us, to make and keep human life humane. And what God does depends on the intercessions of those who care enough to try to shape a future more humane than the present. [...]

The fawning etiquette of unctuous prayer is utterly foreign to the Bible. Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches.

When Abraham discovers that Yahweh is about to destroy Sodom, where his nephew Lot lives with his wife and two daughters, Abraham blocks God's path: "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing . . . ! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" When God agrees to spare Sodom if there are fifty, Abraham presses the issue: Would you spare the city if there were forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? God agrees, and though ten are not found there, God saves Lot's family, though they are but four (Genesis 18). Moral: it pays to haggle with God.

Martin Luther understood this aspect of prayer well: "Our Lord God could not but hear me; I threw the sack down before his door. I rubbed God's ear with all his promises about hearing prayer."⁷

Scripture is full of this motif of spirited give-and-take with God. When Israel, impatient from waiting forty days for Moses to return from Sinai, makes the golden calf, God says to Moses: You'd better get down there. Israel has made a golden calf, and I'm fed up with dealing with them. "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation" (Exod. 32:9-10).

Moses refuses to let God destroy Israel: Yahweh, why should your wrath blaze out against this people of yours whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with arm outstretched and mighty hand? Why let the Egyptians say, "Ah, it was in treachery that he brought them out, to

do them to death in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth"? Leave your burning wrath; repent and do not bring this evil on your people.

And we read, "The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people." Moses made Yahweh repent (Exod. 32:14, RSV)!

[...]

Nor is this theme confined to the Hebrew Scriptures. We see it in Jesus' parables of the Persistent Widow and the Friend who Came at Midnight, both examples of how we are to hammer away in prayer until a breakthrough comes (Luke 18:1-8; 11:5-13). Thus Rudolf Bultmann is speaking not only for Jesus but for the whole Bible when he says, "Prayer is not to bring the petitioner's will into submission to the unchanging will of God, but prayer is to move God to do something which He otherwise would not do."⁹

No doubt our intercessions sometimes change us as we open ourselves to new possibilities we had not guessed. No doubt our prayers to God reflect back upon us as a divine command to become the answer to our prayer. But if we are to take the biblical understanding seriously at all, intercession is more than that. It changes the world and it changes what is possible to God. It creates an island of relative freedom in a world gripped by an unholy necessity. A new force field appears that hitherto was only potential. The entire configuration changes as the result of the change of a single part. An aperture opens in the praying person, permitting God to act without violating human freedom. The change in even one person thus changes what God can thereby do in that world.

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God Is the Intercessor

All this about our role as intercessors in creating history is arrogant bravado unless we recognize that it is God rather than ourselves who initiates prayer, and that it is God's power, not ours, that answers to the world's needs. We are always preceded in intercession. God is always already praying within us. When we turn to pray, it is already the second step of prayer. We join with God in a prayer already going on in us and in the world.

The Spirit also helps us in our present limitations. For example, we do not know how to pray worthily, but God's Spirit within us is actually praying for us in those agonizing

longings ["groans"] which cannot find words. Those who know the heart's secrets understand the Spirit's intention as they pray according to God's will for those who love God.

(Rom. 8:26-27, Phillips, with revisions)

This groaning of the Holy Spirit within us echoes and gathers up two other groanings mentioned in the previous paragraph: the groaning of the whole creation in pangs of childbirth (Rom. 8:22); and we ourselves, who groan inwardly as we await the ultimate transformation—the redemption of our bodies (8:23).

The Spirit gathers up all this pain and releases it through us with sighs too deep for words. These sighs are not our own sighs, given articulation by the Spirit. They are the actual groanings of the Spirit within us, and they must be given articulation by us.

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Waging Spiritual Warfare with the Powers

Now we must consider more directly the role of the Powers in prayer.

Most of us were taught that unanswered prayer is a result of either our failure or God's refusal. Either we lacked faith (or were too sinful and impure or asked for the wrong thing), or God said no out of some inscrutable higher purpose.

Perhaps there are times when our faith is weak. But Jesus explicitly states that it is not how much faith we have that counts, but whether we simply do our duty and exercise whatever faith we do have; and an infinitesimal amount, he says, is enough (Luke 17:5-6). The issue, after all, is not whether we are spiritual giants, but whether God really is able to do anything. Faith is not a feeling or a capacity we conjure up, but trusting that God can act decisively in the world. So if we have faith like a grain of mustard seed—that is, if we have any faith at all—we should not blame ourselves when our prayers go unanswered.

[...]

Nor is it adequate in certain cases to blame God's nonresponse to our prayers on a higher will for us that, for now, requires a no. No doubt what sometimes appears to us as evil is the very explosion necessary to blast us awake to the destructiveness of our habits. Sickness and tragedy are, unfortunately, at times the indispensable

messengers that recall us to our life's purpose. We sometimes do pray for the wrong thing, or fail to recognize God's answer because we are looking for something else. But there are situations where God's will seems so transparently evident that to assert that God says no is to portray God as a cosmic thug. I still cannot see, after twenty-five years, how the death by leukemia of a six-year-old boy in our parish was in any sense an act of God. And don't even try to tell me that the death of approximately forty thousand children a day—over fourteen million a year—is the will of God!

What we have left out of the equation is the Principalities and Powers. Prayer is not just a two-way transaction. It also involves the great socio-spiritual forces that preside over so much of reality. I am speaking of the massive institutions and social structures and systems that dominate our world today, and of the spirituality at their center. If we wish to recover a sense of the importance of these Powers in prayer, we can scarcely do better than to consult the Book of Daniel. Daniel marks the moment when the role of the Powers in blocking answers to prayer was, for the first time, revealed to humanity.

Daniel is a symbol of Israel struggling against all efforts to destroy its fidelity to Yahweh." Daniel is depicted as a Jew who had risen to high position in the Persian bureaucracy in Babylon. Three years before, Cyrus had freed the Jews from captivity and offered to rebuild their temple at royal expense. Yet few Jews had responded by returning home. When the story opens, Daniel is in deep mourning and fasting for his people. In the light of Rom. 8:26-27 we might say that the Holy Spirit wanted to prepare him to receive a vision and so released in him a flood of anguish that Daniel wisely chose to face and not repress. So he entered upon a major fast. After twenty-one days an angel came and said, "Daniel, don't be afraid. God has heard your prayers ever since the first day you decided to humble yourself in order to gain understanding. I have come in answer to your prayer."

Why then was the angel twenty-one days in arriving, if the prayer was heard on the very first day that Daniel prayed? Because, the angel continues, "the angel prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty-one days." He could not even have managed to get through to Daniel at all, except that "Michael, one of the chief angels, came to help me, because I had been left there alone" to contend with the angel of Persia. Now, while Michael occupies the angel of Persia, the messenger-angel has slipped through and is able to deliver the vision of the future for Daniel's exiled people. That mission completed, "Now I have to go back and fight the

guardian angel of Persia. After that the guardian angel of Greece will appear. There is no one to help me except Michael, Israel's guardian angel. He is responsible for helping and defending me" (Daniel 10, TEV).¹⁶

The angel of Persia is able to block God's messenger from answering Daniel's prayer! For twenty-one days Daniel contends with unseen spiritual powers. [...]

Daniel continues praying and fasting, God's angel continues to wrestle to get past the angel of Persia, yet nothing is apparently happening. God seems not to have answered the prayer. Despite this apparent indifference, however, there is a fierce war being waged in heaven between contending powers. Finally Michael, Israel's own guardian angel, intervenes and the angel gets through.

This is an accurate depiction, in mythological terms, of the actual experience we have in prayer. [...]

Notice that the Bible makes no attempt to justify the delay in God's response. It is simply a fact of experience. We do not know why God cannot do "better," or why, for example, Michael is not sent to the aid of the messenger angel sooner. It is a deep mystery. [...]

In short, prayer involves not just God and people, but God and people and the Powers. What God is able to do in the world is hindered, to a considerable extent, by the rebelliousness, resistance, and self-interest of the Powers exercising their freedom under God.

God *is* powerful to heal, and all healing, I believe, is of God. But if the Powers flush PCBs and dioxin into the water we drink, or release radioactive gas into the atmosphere, or insist on spraying our fruit with known carcinogens, God's healing power is sharply reduced. [...]

God is not mocked. The wheels of justice may turn slowly, but they are inexorable. Take the story spun around Daniel again. After fifty years of captivity, God had at last raised up Cyrus to deliver the Jews from Babylon, and God's people chose rather to remain in exile! Daniel, fasting and praying, creates a fresh opening for God. Into that breach God pours the vision of future life in a restored Holy Land, as an enticement and lure to coax Judah home.

Prayer is not magic; it does not always "work." It is not something we do, but a response to what God is already doing within us and the world. Our prayers are the necessary opening that allows God to act without

violating our freedom. Prayer is the ultimate act of partnership with God. Therefore God allows no groveling. Daniel throws himself on his face before the divine messenger, but the angel touches him and rouses him to his hands and knees. The angel orders him, "Stand on your feet." Daniel does, but cannot speak or stop trembling. The angel touches his lips, and again his body, infusing him with the strength and power to speak the message he has received. God is no eastern potentate demanding obeisance. God puts us on our feet, fills us with power, and sends us on our way.

The sobering news that the Powers can thwart God is more than matched by the knowledge that our intercessions will ultimately prevail. Whether we have to wait twenty-one days or twenty-one years or twenty-one centuries changes nothing for faith.