

GOD'S QUEST FOR A MAN

"And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none." Ezekiel 22:30

Ezekiel vividly portrayed the great evils of his time as enormous breaches in the walls of Jerusalem. He saw his people like a besieged city, with great breaches made in her walls, in imminent peril of overthrow. The need was for men to stand in the gaps and build up the walls of truth and right.

Ezekiel here speaks of Jerusalem as it was in the days immediately before its final destruction, and the reason for that was not far to seek. For years it had been in a state of moral decline. Those who had any ideals did not have any heart to do anything. A sense of despair settled down on their spirits. They folded their hands with a sigh of resignation and said, "It is useless to attempt anything further." Even those with the best intentions felt a sense of utter moral impotence, and as a consequence, things steadily drifted from bad to worse. People said, "It is now every man for himself, and we must get what we can from the wreckage; we must take our chance while we have it." In Jerusalem it seemed impossible to find an uncorrupted man. Even God, Who "sought for a man," seemed driven to despair.

In referring to making up the hedge, God was speaking of the great thorn hedges that were grown around vineyards to keep the foxes from coming in at the time of the ripening grapes and greatly damaging the vines as they ate the grapes. In substance God said, "Find me someone who can fill up the gap in the hedge, and stand before me for the land." That is a thrilling call. What a privilege to fit in with God's great purpose and to fill the place which He wants filled. He has a place for us and He always needs us.

When Israel was enslaved, and contented in slavery, God raised up Moses to stand in the gap. Moses chose affliction with the people of God rather than the pleasures of sin for a season. He was guided and upheld by spiritual forces. Perhaps in all history there is not a finer example of a man to stand in the gap.

Another such man was Samuel, the last of the Judges and the first of the Prophets. He was raised up in an hour of national decline and corruption. He repaired the gaps and the rents in the hedge of national life and safety and brought the people back to God.

Another man to stand in the gap was Elijah. True worship was proscribed and the prophets of Jehovah hunted and slain. Then Elijah appeared on the stage of national history like a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder and proclaimed the Word of the Lord. By doing so he built up the hedge and held the nation together.

If you will read the list of evils which Ezekiel mentioned as existing in Jerusalem, you will be impressed with the fact that practically all of them are duplicated in America today. God has blessed America in a singular way. He has hedged us about with two oceans. He laid the foundation of the nation in the faith of godly men. He gave us the Lord's Day, the Bible, the churches, the schools, etc. Yet now how many gaps there are in the national hedge. Anywhere else in the world our poverty would be riches. Yet here are the gaping holes in our homes, our churches and our schools. People are needed to stand in the gaps.

That oft quoted resolution of Jonathan Edwards is so worthy that it should be brought to our ears again and again. You recall it: "Resolved, First, that every man should live at his highest and best for Christ always and everywhere, and Second, that whether any other man in the world so lives or not, I shall strive with God's help so to live to the end of my day." That is a good resolution for all who would honor Christ. That is the kind of life to which Christ calls all His followers.

One of the most epoch making sermons ever heard in America was preached over a century ago by Horace Bushnell in Stamford, Connecticut. He had for his subject: "Every Man's Life a Plan of God." God has a plan for every life. Life takes on a higher and deeper meaning the moment one realizes the fact that God has a plan for every life.

Moses was not an accident. By God's providence and plan he was enabled to influence for good his own and all succeeding centuries. Paul was such a man; mightiest man of all the Christian era. One can understand why God should bring on a man like George Washington; larger and larger in the appreciation of the whole world with every passing year. We can understand why God had a plan for Spurgeon, for Luther, for Wesley, men of world influence. But we do well to understand that He has a plan just as really for Spurgeon's mother and for Wesley's mother as for their famous sons.

Those of you who have read Spurgeon's life, are aware that he never lost an opportunity to pay tribute to his mother. You recall his statement when one of the world's leading journalists asked him: "If you could put the secret of your notable life into one sentence, what would the sentence be?" He said, "The prayers of my mother and the prayers of my church; this is the explanation of the life that I have lived in the world." He was the oldest of seventeen children. John Wesley's mother had nineteen. Now God had a plan for the lives of these mothers just as definitely as for their great sons. We want to lay to heart then, that God has a plan for every life.

To every man his work. To every woman her work. Not to every man a work; not to every man some work, but to every man his work. God had a plan for your life just as definite as He had for any other. We should live at our highest and best and try to find that plan and devote all our powers in trying to carry out that plan. Your question and mine should be, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" What niche am I to fill? What race am I to run? What mission am I to accomplish? What work am I to do? The big quest of life is right there. We are to find the work that God has for us to do. The humblest person in circumstances, in station, in condition, God has a plan for him or her, and my prayer is that you may find that plan. You may be led in a way you do not know. Often we are led along providentially, gloriously, without any realization of being led. God has a plan for every life. The great matter is to find that plan. It may be right where we are, in the place where providence puts us. Right there we can translate by obedient life, worthy life, victorious life, whatever our condition, we can translate it into triumph for God and betterment for ourselves, and everybody around us. Right here is the high meaning and mission of life.

Ezekiel looked around him and at the conditions in his day, and said; "I sought for a man among them that should stand in the gap." The context reminds us of the awful conditions that reigned in Ezekiel's time. The king and his officials had thrown all standards of righteousness into the discard. The whole land was fast plunging on toward chaos and destruction and the faithful prophet of God realized it all and set about to remedy it. He realized that it is "Righteousness that exalteth a nation" and that sin is a reproach and a waste, and finally makes for the destruction of the sinner, whether the sinner be an individual, or a family, or an organization, or a nation. There never was one sin that ever paid, from the first one committed by Adam until now, and never will there be one that will pay.

In Ezekiel's time, the king and the officials were plunging the land into chaos and disaster, and the prophet looked about him for someone worthy, some capable man who could "stand in the gap" and avert the crisis that he saw plainly coming to his country. All down the ages that has been the great need, a faithful man, a trustworthy man or woman to stand in the gap, to avert the crisis, to hold back the flood that can easily overflow the country. John G. Holland wisely wrote:

"God give us men. A time like this demands
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and
ready hands.

Men whom the lust of office does not kill,
Men whom the spoils of office can not buy,
Men who possess opinions and a will,
Men who have honor; men who will not lie.
Men who can stand before a demagogue
And damn his treacherous flattery without winking,
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog
In public duty and in private thinking,
For while the rabble with their thumb-worn creeds,
Their large professions and their little deeds,
Mingle in selfish strife, lo freedom weeps,
Wrong rules the land and waiting justice sleeps."

Emerson said the test of civilization is the kind of men and women a country produces. Any civilization will be a dismal failure, even though its banks be flooded with gold, and its crops overflowingly generous in their harvest, and its ships go in all directions carrying the product of such land, if its people ignore God. Civilization is a fearful failure if it loses sight of the truth that a man or woman or boy or girl is worth more than all material values. Ill fares the land that values money more than manhood; possessions more than righteousness. A land is not to be measured by its material and financial resources but by its moral and spiritual assets. That little boy crouching under a covered wagon this morning because his parents are too poor to furnish the little fellow a roof over his head, in God's sight may be more valuable than all the deposits in all the banks of the world.

This standard was not the standard in Ezekiel's time. They desecrated manhood, assaulted manhood, undermined manhood, and brought manhood to defeat and destruction. The prophet saw it all and sought some trustworthy man to rise up and govern the ill-fated people.

Ofttimes the question is raised: "What is the most valuable life in the social order?" Certainly not the longest life. One could live a very long life, and live to no worthy purpose at all. The most valuable life is not the longest, nor is the most valuable life the most famous life. One of the most famous lives this world ever knew was that of Napoleon, the military genius of the centuries. But what else was he? He was a colossal butcher. What did he care to involve great countries in wars and kill myriads of people if he could carry out his rapacious ambitions? One day when one of his officers remonstrated with him and said: "Sir, this cannot be done. This attack is untimely. If you make it you will lose 100,000 of your brave men." With scornful look Napoleon said: "What care I for an 100,000 men? You will make the attack." There are successors to Napoleon.

What then is the most valuable life in the social order? Not the longest life, nor the most famous life, but one seeking to live in harmony with the will and word of God. Such a man may never be heard of out of his own tiny sphere. But he is the salt of the earth. He is the tonic of society. He is the life-blood of civilization. The plain men and women building their homes, quietly rearing their children in honesty and piety, paying their debts, moving quietly and helpfully around to help their neighbors, seeking above all to know and to do the will of God — these are the lives that make the world a better place in which to live. These are the people who are standing in "the gap" for home and country and God.

What is the greatest trait in a human character? Faithfulness! Faithfulness to the right; faithfulness to the right standards; faithfulness in all the relations of life. That is the first virtue that God granted to mortals to which He added a promise: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." Faithful to the dying point,

that is the greatest thing in life. The highest tribute you can pay a man is to say: "You can depend on him." Lord Wilson, a great London journalist, went down with the Titanic to his death. When a survivor was asked how the great journalist died, he replied: "He helped the women and children into the life boats, then he and another man, arm in arm, went down with a smile." They stayed at their post. They were faithful.

There are three great institutions as you know, and all are divinely given and immeasurably important. The first one is the home, the next is the government, and the third is the church. Are there wrong conditions in these institutions, the home, the state, the church? Then let us remedy the wrong. Today if the church and all that it stands for were removed, what a plight would be ours! Lord Byron said to the people of this country and the people of his country, that we were turning our attention to the other countries, and letting our own countries go back to the dark ages. We are playing fast and loose with religion. China as you know has been gravely assaulted in these latter years. The leader of a Chinese army, himself a great Christian along with his Christian wife, said: "We are not going to have peace in the Far East or anywhere else, until we all come back to the feet of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord."

There was one who stood for us, the one Mediator between God and man, and made atonement for our sins. He is the One who stood in the gap for us, and stands in the gap forever. He comes to us in our sad plight and poverty, in all of our spiritual needs and bankruptcy, and tells us: "I will take care of you. I have already made atonement for you. I have answered the law of God in your behalf. Every demand I have met. I will do this for everyone who believes on me, trusts in me, yields his life to me, and surrenders himself to me." Won't you accept Him and link your life on to Him as now we sing?