

Intercession and Calling, Draft #2

How intercession should inform our calling

INTRODUCTION

I imagine that most people in full-time ministry will confront moments in their lives where they consider the question of whether they are still called to ministry as a vocation. These moments may confront ministers at various points of their ministry, but may be most amplified when they find themselves discouraged by their particular ministry context.

I found myself in such a moment a few years ago. My ministry brought me to a place of discouragement. After nearly 15 months of laboring on a large public university, I had a very small group of students who were connected in community. In addition to the lack of fruit, there were conflicts and tensions on our staff leadership team that required most of my energy. In the moment of discouragement, I questioned my calling into ministry and God's faithfulness to me.

Discouragement contributed to a sense of defeatism. I thought I was done with ministry as a vocation. I felt like a failure and totally defeated by the discouragement. I reduced my calling to a job I have to do, and my faith for what God can do on campus and through me was minimal and pathetic.

God eventually delivered me from my defeatism and brought much needed perspective and healing on my particular situation. But a couple years later, I found myself struggling with disappointment again. This time, my struggles with disappointment brought renewal and motivation for ministry. This bout with disappointment did not defeat me, but gave me a renewed sense of vision for ministry. The difference between these moments lay in my response to discouragement and incorporating intercessory prayer into my life.

The discipline of intercessory prayer moves us to recognize who we are before God and who God is in all of his glory. I recognize there are many excellent books and resources on intercessory prayer. And many of those have deepened my prayer life. In this paper, I seek to draft a model for intercessory prayer that strengthens our calling in ministry. As I have grown deeper in my prayer life, I have recognized how prayer has shaped me to know God, and how the lack of prayer has power to lead me farther from God.

Too often, prayer can be relegated as an afterthought. It may be the thing we do to start or end a meeting. It is the time where we take prayer requests during a Bible Study. And it is the thing we might do when we start our day. But in the

life of my ministry, I have discovered prayer to be the discipline that has led me to know God and know his purposes, especially in light of difficult and trying situations.

This model for intercession has paved the way for me to recognize the importance of prayer in my personal and ministry life.

THE WAY TO DEATH

Being in ministry, I am often confronted by the realities of sin and its impact on people. There are injustices that are committed against people that break my heart. To see people assaulted by the sin that exists in our fallen world makes me wonder if God is powerful enough to confront those principalities and deliver people from such darkness. Other times, we see people choosing into disobedience and dealing with the consequences of choosing against God.

Our world is fallen and it is impossible to escape the corrupting effects of the world around us. Any reflection or examination of these realities leads me to discouragement. I am easily discouraged when I recognize the world for what it is. One pastor commented that ministry is “the call into the hell of people’s lives.”

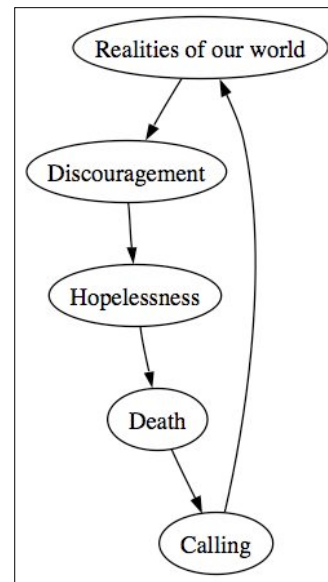


Figure 1: The way to death

But it’s what we do with the discouragement that shapes our next steps. Discouragement can easily lead to hopelessness. To feel defeated in ministry and be discouraged by the realities of our world can lead to be hopeless. Hopelessness is a powerful force that can strip away any thoughts or faith in God. Hopelessness strips God from bringing change when everything else looks dead.

And hopelessness will lead to spiritual death. That death will make me numb to the realities and saving powers of God. My eyes will stop seeing the work of God and my mind will start believing that either God has abandoned me or that he is not at work in my life or in my ministry.

Spiritual death, as bad as it is in of itself, will eventually also inform my calling. Rather than lead with vision, I will lead with cynicism.

THE GIFT OF INTERCESSION

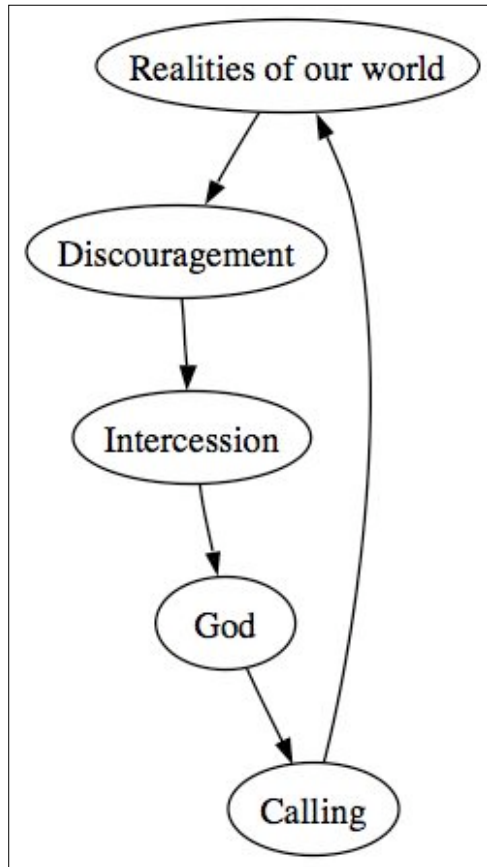


Figure 2: The way of intercession

But rather than turn to hopelessness when confronted by discouragement, we can turn to intercession. By going to God, we gain truth. We gain truth about the situation. We may see spiritual realities and have a much better and informed perspective about the situation at hand and the realities of the world. Out of our time with God, our calling will be informed. We will see how God is calling us into the “hell of people’s lives.”

And when we are with God, God will empower us with wisdom (James 1.5). And he will equip us with what we need to enter into the realities of our world and to confront whatever the situation may be.

I believe we have a choice. We have a choice to respond by interceding and going before God or we can dwell in our hopelessness. Our response to discouragement will inevitably shape our calling and sense of mission.

TWO CHOICES

When we confront discouragement, we have two choices—either to turn to intercession or to turn to hopelessness. And each path will lay a set of consequences. From experience, hopelessness tends to be the default mode for me. In other words, it takes more energy, discipline and intentionality to choose to intercede for a situation or person, rather than to be hopeless about it.

And though it would be easier if we only had to face the decision once, the reality is that we are constantly confronted by the issues associated with the realities of our world. We may choose to intercede and gain the proper authority from God to minister within that reality, only to be discouraged again.

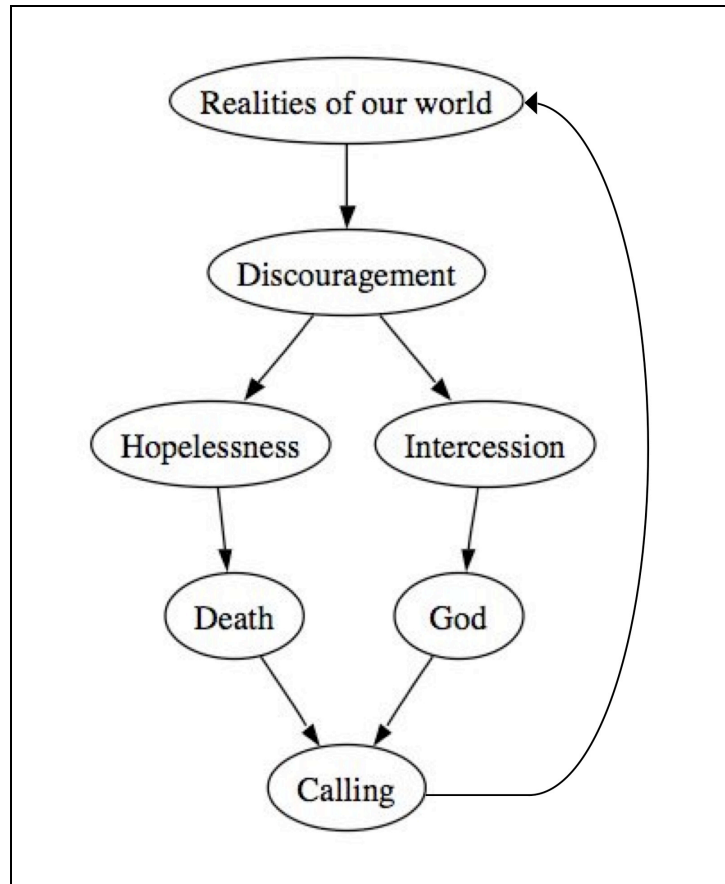


Figure 3: A model for intercession

The continued and regular process of discouragement may over time thwart us from intercession to hopelessness. At the moment we open the door to hopelessness, we are inviting defeat and death into our lives. Success as a minister is not just defined by fruit (though fruit in ministry should give us some sense of direction). Success as a minister must also be defined by our resilience to suffer well (in light of discouragement), to turn to God for our identity and authority, and persevere as we re-engage the mission field.

Once a leader or minister turns to hopelessness, he or she has opened the door for defeat and failure in his or her ministry.

BIBLICAL CASE STUDY

In Numbers 13, Moses sends out 12 spies to scout the land that God has given to them. These spies see how rich the land is and they recognize that the land is a gift from God to the Israelites. As they spy out the land, they recognize the reality of their world—that the land may be great, but the inhabitants are

dangerous. The report back to Moses was negative—that the Israelites did not have what it takes to take over the land.

When they are disappointed by the realities of their world, the spies (save Caleb and Joshua) and what seems like the entire nation (Numbers 14.1) is devastated by the report. The entire nation is upset and disappointed, to the point that they would rather be in Egypt rather than at the frontiers of the Promised Land. There is no more hope left. Caleb and Joshua try to bring the word of hope, but the other spies drown out their voices. Hopelessness turns to desire for slavery.

Rather than turn toward God, the nation is turning away from God. As a consequence of their lack of faith and their hopelessness, God prevents anyone from that generation (except for Caleb and Joshua) from ever possessing the Promised Land. The Israelites' hopelessness turns to death. They will die in the wilderness without experiencing the gift of God.

The Israelites' lack of obedience informed their decision to turn against God's vision. And that lack of obedience plays itself out throughout the 40 year journey. At the end of Numbers 14, the nation deceives itself into believing that by apologizing, they can regain God's trust to take the land. Their desire to go to battle is yet another act of disobedience. In other words, their calling is being formed by disobedience and they re-engage realities through that lens.

The Israelites chose the path that leads to death. Contrast their story with that of Paul in Acts 18. His preaching produced mixed results. Some people responded in belief while others reviled him. And knowing Paul's story, the apostle was persecuted and beaten for his faith and his preaching. Paul recognizes the realities of the world and it does lead to disappointment. In Acts 18.6, he declares to the Jews, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Paul is disappointed with the Jewish response to the gospel. Immediately following this incident, God speaks to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18.9-10). I imagine that Paul's disappointment was turned to intercession and Paul connected with God. In connecting with God, Paul had his calling re-enforced. Luke then tells us that Paul stayed in that place for another 18 months. Paul's disappointment took him to God. And God reinforced his calling to stay in the very place he may have abandoned.

PERSONAL CASE STUDY

I have found myself on both sides of the intercession diagram. I have found myself allow disappointment turn to hopelessness to the point of death. And I have found myself turn to intercession and reconnect with God.

In 2003, my ministry was falling apart. There was little fruit to show for our labor, and my partners in ministry were abandoning me. I felt lonely, confused and disappointed by my realities. At that point, I tried turning to God, only to find myself unable to connect with Him.

My disappointment drove me to be hopeless which only served to chip away at whatever life remained in me. One pastor counseled me that I should count getting out of bed in the mornings as victory. My life had come to the point where simply choosing to wake up would constitute some sort of victory. My soul was dying as fast as my ministry.

This death began to inform my calling. I questioned whether I was adequate as a minister and especially as a minister on a college context. I questioned my gifts and my faith. And I re-visioned for my campus ministry context. I had small hopes for my students. I had small hopes for myself. My calling into ministry was full of faithlessness and full of small hopes. I began to believe the lies that this mission field was far too hard.

I traveled a cycle of death that hardened my heart to the vision of God. I felt ashamed and defeated, and I had plenty of excuses for all who were interested. At the end of this cycle, I decided along with other wise friends and advisors to change my ministry context. Though the decision to leave this ministry was wise at that point, it only reinforced my feelings of faithlessness and failure.

But I am grateful that God preserved a small remnant of faith within me that would take a couple years to be nurtured. In the summer of 2005, I found myself again disappointed by the realities of my world. I was disappointed by my leadership and by the lack of joy in ministry context. During that period, I began to study the book of Esther and I was struck by Mordecai's admonition to his niece:

"For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4.14).

The Lord spoke to me through this passage, asking me to consider whether I want to see him work or not. Would I shrink back or would I engage with God in

ministry? Would I believe that God could bring deliverance to people's lives through me? Would I allow disappointment to lead me to perish? The decision before me was whether I would trust God to be with me and lead me in the areas of disappointments that had historically defeated me.

My disappointments began to be filtered through intercession. As I interceded for students and for the ministry, I sensed myself becoming closer to God and gaining a clearer picture of God's work in my life. During those months, my wife and I were discerning whether to transition from ministry. As God formed my calling, he gave me new vision for the ministry, particularly the invitation to go back to the very ministry that once invested in my faithlessness and failure.

Intercession led me to God, and he defined my calling. And part of that calling was to re-engage a broken world. God sent me back into my initial campus context.

BEST PRACTICES

As I mentioned in the footnote above, there are many definitions for intercession and this paper is by no means a final or complete word on the subject. My hope through this paper is to articulate and clarify how intercession can inform our calling in ministry and how the lack of intercession can defeat us.

Here are some practical ways that have aided my intercession:

- **Read the Bible:** The more I read the Bible, the more I know the character and heart of God. I am better at connecting with God when I know him.
- **Keep a journal:** I keep a journal where I record my joys and disappointments. This gives me a record of what is irritating me and what is propelling me to joy.
- **Be real:** Work hard not to explain away or avoid disappointments. I want to experience the disappointment for what it is. The more I can recognize the disappointment, the more equipped I feel in connecting with God and asking him for transformation. By expressing my feelings toward the disappointment, I am able to better articulate the pain I feel and why I want God to bring change. Disappointment may be the most valid emotion when we confront the realities of the world. Avoiding it will not help us articulate how we need God's transformation in our lives and our situations.
- **Ask for input:** I am not as self-aware as I would like. Having people speak into my disappointments and realities, allows me to recognize if I

- am avoiding my problems and disappointments, or engaging them, which then propels me back into intercession.
- **Struggle with God:** By entering into intercession, I find myself praying and struggling with God for wisdom. I like the picture of Jacob who wrestles until the Lord gives him a blessing. Our best intercession, and best engagement with the world, will come when we're persevering and wrestling in need of direction.
 - **Believe the word:** When God gives us a word, we need to believe and act on that word. That word can be a word of hope in the midst of empirical data that suggests otherwise. Faith is to believe and act on that word.

EPILOGUE

Intercession is an important and necessary practice that will lead us closer to God's heart and vision. Without the practice embedded in our lives, we will allow disappointment to have the final word and it will shape our decisions. With it, we will experience new life and inspiring vision to engage our calling.

Disappointment is an expected emotion in ministry. People will disappoint us and our ministry contexts may often seem fruitless and bleak. We have a choice to respond to disappointment by turning to God or by turning to hopelessness. Hopelessness will invite defeatism and death into our spiritual lives. But when we turn to intercede, we invite ourselves to be shaped by God.

Ultimately, our calling will be shaped by God or by the emotional and spiritual death in our lives. A calling that is not rooted in God will have little faith for transformation in our world.

Disappointments in my life brought despair, cynicism and death. My faith was shaken and vision for people was uninspiring. I believed less and less in a God that would bring transformation and almost left ministry as a vocation. But when I chose to turn to God in intercession and receive promises and words that are from God, I experienced a renewed sense of calling into a world full of despair. The road to death invites us to receive our calling from the world. The road to life invites us to receive our calling from God. Ultimately, only God's voice will inspire a calling that is compelling and powerful that will believe in God's transforming power in our world.