

## INTERCESSORY PRAYER

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**Date:** 09-01-2022

**Scripture:** Genesis 18:16-33

On these Sundays leading up to Lent which begins in March, I'd like for us to look at some of the different prayers that we find in the bible.

- Abraham's prayer for Sodom (Genesis 18)
- Moses' prayer for Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 32)
- David's prayer for pardon and confession of sin (Psalm 5)
- David's prayer of surrender (Psalm 139)
- David's prayer at the end of life.
- Hezekiah's petitions for deliverance.
- Daniel's confession on behalf of his people.
- Nehemiah's prayer for success.
- The Lord's prayer
- Jesus' prayer of submission at Gethsemane
- Paul's prayer for the Ephesian believers.

We are going to see how we can look at each of these prayers, and see what we can glean from them that will help us to better our own prayer lives. Today, we're going to look at Abraham's prayer for Sodom.

Years before, Abraham had emigrated to Canaan along with his nephew Lot. As his uncle, he retained a strong obligation to protect his nephew, a member of his extended family. Lot had settled in Sodom, a sinful city in the fertile valley near the Dead Sea. Once, when the kings of Mesopotamia sacked Sodom and carried off Lot and other residents as slaves, Abraham raised his own personal military force, attacked the Mesopotamian army by night, rescued Lot, and returned him to his home. We read of that in Genesis ch. 14. There was a strong filial bond between Abraham and Lot.

But now, Lot is threatened by another overpowering force – God Himself; and Abraham finds himself contending for Lot before the Lord. Abraham has entertained three men. It turns out that two of them are angels on their way to Sodom, and the third is Yahweh Himself. And this is where our story begins.

Genesis 18: 16-33

You know that three men came; Sarah was inside preparing a meal. Then she heard one of them say, "I will return to you about this time next year, and your wife Sarah will have a son." And we know that Sarah laughs silently to herself.

*"Then the men got up from their meal and looked out toward Sodom. As they left, Abraham went with them to send them on their way.*

*"Should I hide my plan from Abraham?" the Lord asked. "For Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. I have singled him out so that he will direct his sons and their families to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just. Then I will do for Abraham all that I have promised."*

*So the Lord told Abraham, "I have heard a great outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah, because their sin is so flagrant. I am going down to see if their actions are as wicked as I have heard. If not, I want to know."*

*The other men turned and headed toward Sodom, but the Lord remained with Abraham. Abraham approached him and said, "Will you sweep away both the righteous and the wicked? Suppose you find fifty righteous people living there in the city – will you still sweep it away and not spare it for their sakes? Sure, you wouldn't do such a thing, destroying the righteous along with the wicked. Why, you would be treating the righteous and the wicked exactly the same! Surely you wouldn't do that! Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"*

*And the Lord replied, "If I find fifty righteous people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake."*

*Then Abraham spoke again, "Since I have begun, let me speak further to my Lord, even though I am but dust and ashes. Suppose there are only forty-five righteous people rather than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?"*

*And the Lord said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five righteous people there."*

*Then Abraham pressed his request further. "Suppose there are only forty?"*

*And the Lord replied, "I will not destroy it for the sake of the forty."*

*"Please don't be angry, my Lord," Abraham pleaded. "Let me speak – suppose only thirty righteous people are found?"*

*And the Lord replied, "I will not destroy it if I find thirty."*

*Then Abraham said, "Since I have dared to speak to the Lord, let me continue – suppose there are only twenty?"*

*And the Lord replied, "Then I will not destroy it for the sake of the twenty."*

*Finally, Abraham said, "Lord, please don't be angry with me if I speak one more time. Suppose only ten are found there?"*

*And the Lord replied, "Then I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten."*

*When the Lord had finished his conversation with Abraham, he went on his way, and Abraham returned to his tent.*

We talk about prayer, and we say that prayer is nothing but speaking to God, having a conversation with Him. This is precisely what happened between Abraham and God – a conversation. God looking at Abraham and saying, "This thing that I'm about to do, how can I keep it from Abraham? After all, there are so many promises that are going to be fulfilled through him." Then He shares with him, and this whole dialogue between God and Abraham is almost like a bargaining. But this is the first instance of intercessory prayer, interceding for the people of Sodom by Abraham.

### **What is Intercessory Prayer?**

Quite simply, intercessory prayer is praying on behalf of others. There is an error in contemporary Christianity, that those who offer up intercessory prayers are a special class of Christians, super Christians, prayer warriors, called by God to a specific ministry of intercession. Although there is that gift of intercession, the bible is clear that all Christians are called to be intercessors. All Christians have the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and just as He, that is Jesus, intercedes for us in accordance with God's will, we are to intercede for one another. This is not a privilege given to an elite exclusive few. This is a command to all of us to be interceders, to be intercessors.

In fact, not to intercede for others is considered a sin in the bible. Consider this verse:

1 Samuel 12:23 *"As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you."*

All of us are called to be intercessors, to intercede for others just as Abraham was doing for the people of Sodom – fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten. Lord, will You hold Your anger?

### **General observations about this passage.**

#### **1. God seems to reveal His purposes to His friends:**

Abraham was known as the friend of God. We see that in 2 Chronicles 20, Isaiah 41, and James 2. In fact, verse 19 literally reads: *“For I have known him, for I acknowledge him to be my intimate friend,”* as we see in the exposition of Genesis by Baker.

The Psalmist writes: *“The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant.”* God shares His secrets with His friends, the people who follow Him and keep His commandments. In fact, the Lord Jesus told His disciples, *“No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”*

So, God reveals His purposes to His friends, and I think the thought that we need to take from it is that we need to grow closer and closer to God, to make sure that we are God’s friends, that we grow in intimacy with Him just as Abraham grew in intimacy with God through keeping His commandments, being obedient, keeping the faith, and all that. We too should grow in our friendship with God, so that He lets us know His will and His purposes.

## **2. God initiated this dialogue so that Abraham would intercede.**

At first glance, it seems as if Abraham was taking the initiative with God. But a more careful look reveals that the Lord took the initiative with Abraham. He first broached the subject. He then waited for Abraham’s appeal after the two angels left. They left, but God still remained, waiting for Abraham to respond to what He had said. He drew Abraham on. From fifty, He almost seemed to be egging Abraham on to keep bringing that number down – almost as if it was a bargaining session going on. Finally, He chose when to end it. In vs. 33, *“When the Lord had finished His conversation with Abraham, He went on His way.”* So, the Lord started it and the Lord ended it. There is this window for intercession.

General observations: God reveals His purposes to His friends, and so we need to grow in friendship with Him. Then, God always wants us to intercede, to be intercessors for others.

### **Specific observations regarding Abraham’s intercession**

#### **1. It was bold.**

*“Will not the judge of the world do what is right?”* Those are bold words indeed!

Vs. 25: *“Surely, you wouldn’t do such a thing, destroying the righteous along with the wicked? Why? You would be treating the righteous and the wicked exactly the same! Surely you wouldn’t do that! Should not the judge of all the earth do what is right?”*

And yet, this boldness was couched with humility. Vs. 27: *“Since I have begun, let me speak further to my Lord, even though I am but dust and ashes.”* Bold, yet couched in humility.

Vs 30: *“Please don’t be angry, my Lord,”* Abraham pleaded.

Vs. 31: *“Since I have dared to speak to the Lord,”*

Vs. 31: *“Lord, please don’t be angry with me if I speak one more time.”*

Bold, yet humble. Through the finished work at Calvary, we too are invited to come boldly to the throne room of grace to receive mercy, as we see in Hebrews 4:16, and humbly as well, as we see in James 4:10, *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.”*

Boldly, yet cloaked in great humility.

#### **2. He was persistent.**

He kept almost bargaining with God. When you are bargaining with a shopkeeper or a merchant, you hold the money and he holds the merchandise, and each of us has something that the other person wants. So we have some amount of bargaining power.

But when it comes to God, He holds everything. Who would imagine bargaining with the God of the universe? Yet, that's exactly what Abraham was doing. Starting with 50, 45, 30, 20, and then 10. What does this tell us about God? It tells us that the last thing it seems that God wants is to exercise His judgment against His people, or to allow His anger and His wrath to flow forth.

2 Peter 3:9 says, *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness. But He is patient toward you, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

Ezekiel 33:11 *"Say to them, 'As surely as I live,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?'"*

So that's what it tells us about God – that the last thing He wants is to bring His wrath and His anger against the sin of the people, and to have people die.

What does it tell us about ourselves? Jesus, when talking about prayer, told two stories.

The first about the friend that came at midnight. Luke 11:5 *Then teaching them. More about prayer, He used this story: "Suppose you went to a friend's house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, 'A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.' And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can't help you.' But I tell you this – though he won't do it for friendship's sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence.*

*And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you."*

Because of persistence, he will do for you.

Luke 18:1-8 *One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. "There was a judge in a certain city," he said, "who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, 'Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.' The judge ignored her for a while, but finally, he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!'"*

*Then the Lord said, "Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end."*

I want us to look at both these passages and see what we can learn from them: to be persistent. As we look at this person, what he won't do for friendship, he will do through persistence. What he won't do for justice, he will do out of persistence from this lady. The whole point that Jesus is making is if they can do this, sinful people, people of the world, how much more will our heavenly Father do for us, His children. Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.

### **3. He was willing to intercede for people.**

Abraham could easily have said, "Sure Lord," when he heard that that's what God was going to do. "That's your prerogative. You are God!" and he could have left it. But he didn't. he was willing to go out on a limb for his people, especially for Lot and his family.

When we look at what Jesus has done for us – He has done exactly that, and He continues to intercede. He is willing to do that. in fact, the words that are used in the New Testament for what He is doing:

1 John *"He is our advocate,"*

1 Timothy *"He is our mediator."*

Romans 8:34 *"He is always interceding for us."*

Hebrews 7:25 *"He is making intercession for us."*

So where should that leave us? Back to our original point that we too ought to be willing intercessors. We should be willing to stand in the gap for people who need interceding. Beloved, for me, one of the most poignant and sad verses in the bible is found in Ezekiel 22:30 where God says, *"I looked for someone 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 no one."* We are called, beloved, to stand in the gap as intercessors.

As I said earlier, there is a window for intercessory prayer, and I want to put that out to you so that we don't take it for granted. "I'll do it tomorrow. I'll pray later." Because in Amos we read, *"Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive, he is so small?"* And then the biblical text goes on and says, *"So the Lord relented. 'This will not happen either,' the Sovereign Lord said."* God stopped and relented. Then we read in Amos 7:8, *"I will spare them no longer."* The time for intercessory prayer had passed. There's a window that God opens for us, his intercessors, to join the great Intercessor, Jesus, and pray on behalf of the people around us.

### **What, where and in which places can we intercede or pray for?**

What should we pray? How should we intercede? Maybe that's the question that's on your lips. Let me give you a few points from the bible to answer that.

- **For all in authority:** 1 Timothy 2:2 says to pray and intercede for all in authority. For leaders, for people especially those who are looking after or trying to find ways to cope with this COVID pandemic. Pray for them. Pray for people in power, people who have authority, the rulers, for police, judiciary, whoever. Pray, intercede that they would use the power and authority with wisdom and understanding.
- **For those in ministry:** Philippians 1:19 "For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers." Paul says it will turn out for his deliverance. So pray for those ministries, for pastors, for leaders, for evangelists, those who are doing ministry. Pray for them.
- **Pray for friends:** Job 42:8 says, "Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves, and My servant Job will pray for you." God says that His servant Job will pray for you. He will intercede for you. These are the friends who came to be with Job during the time when he was going through such turmoil in his life. So pray for your friends. What's going on with your friends? What do they need? What kind of prayer requests do they have? Ask them.
- **Pray for fellow countrymen and your nation:** Romans 10:1 "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is that they may be saved." That they may be saved, everyone out there, that they may not be lost.
- **Pray for the sick:** James 5:14 "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." The elders interceding for the sick ones.
- **Pray for your enemies:** That's a tough one! Jeremiah 29:7 "Seek the prosperity of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare, you will

find your welfare.” Maybe you’re in a place that you don’t like, and yet you’re stuck there. Maybe you’re filled with resentment. You should be interceding for them.

- **Pray for your employers:** Pray for your office, the company that you work in.
- **Pray for those who persecute you:** Matthew 5:44 Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”
- **Pray for all people:** 1 Timothy 2:1 Pray for everyone as the Holy Spirit brings them to mind.

So, we see that Abraham’s prayer for Sodom was a textbook prayer of an intercessor. God has called us to be intercessors, to be bold and yet humble, persistent and willing to stand in the gap. The question for us is: Will we, while that window of opportunity is still open? May God help us to be intercessors. Amen.