

“Abraham’s Intercession (Part 1)”– Genesis 18:22-33

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
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Take a Bible and meet me in Genesis 18...

Today we will enter again into a conversation between the Lord and Abraham. Earlier in this chapter the Lord appears before Abraham, with a couple of angels, and together they share a meal. In this meal, the Lord reveals to Sarah, Abraham’s wife, that she will have her promised child in another year. This was something they have been waiting years for, and something that will take a miracle given their age. But, as text reminds us, nothing is impossible with God (Gen 18:14).

Eventually, the Lord and His angels begin to make their way toward Sodom, and Abraham accompanies them part of the way. The Lord then reveals something of his intentions for cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He tells Abraham that the “outcry” against these cities has not escaped His attention, and because their sin was so grave the Lord was going to pay them a visit. The language is such that Abraham knows judgment is afoot. And, as we saw last time, the Lord reveals this to Abraham because of the man’s privileged position (the covenantal reason) and the responsibility to his offspring (the familial reason). Abraham needs to know that God is just and righteous, and expects His people to pursue justice and righteousness as well. These were some of the lessons we explored last week.

As we pick things up, the angels (simply referred to as “men” at this point) head off toward Sodom, and Abraham continues the conversation with the Lord. Let’s pick things up in verse 22. Remember, this is God’s Word, so listen according...

“So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord. ²³ Then Abraham drew near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ ²⁶ And the Lord said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.’

²⁷ Abraham answered and said, ‘Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?’ And he said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ ²⁹ Again he spoke to him and said, ‘Suppose forty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of forty I will not do it.’ ³⁰ Then he said, ‘Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.’ He answered, ‘I will not do it, if I find thirty there.’ ³¹ He said, ‘Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.’ ³² Then he said, ‘Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.’ ³³ And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.” (Genesis 18:22-33)¹

This is not the first time Abraham has involved himself in the tragic affairs of Sodom. Back in chapter 14, Abraham learned that Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam, and a few of his allies had plundered cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, carrying away their possessions and people. Among those captives was a man by the name of

Lot, who happened to be Abraham's nephew. When Abraham discovered this, he took 318 of his men to war against Chedorlaomer, won the victory, and freed the captives, including Lot.

Now, in chapter 18, Abraham again shows interest in the wellbeing of Sodom, which, no doubt, was because he knows his nephew's family are among the inhabitants of the city. The text doesn't mention Lot, but it's hard to imagine he wouldn't have been in Abraham's mind given the context. He wants the city of Sodom to be spared, at least in part, because he wants Lot to be spared. Yet in this case, he can't rescue his nephew through cunning military tactics because here Sodom is threatened not by the big bad kings of the east, but by the Lord Himself. The "outcry" resulting from the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah has not gone unnoticed by the Lord. He has them in the crosshairs of His judgment. What could Abraham possibly do about that? Well, he could pray. And that's exactly what he does.

Yet nowhere in his request does he either ask God to compromise His righteous and just nature, or spare Sodom for the sake of Lot only. His appeal is grounded instead in the character of God—the character we explored last week, from the previous verses, where we saw that God is both righteous and just in all His dealings. Abraham has received the memo. He is taking the lessons for granted. He's not questioning God's character here. He's assuming it. "He will not attribute to the Lord less of a sense of justice than he himself possesses."² What he's wrestling with is what are the implications and possibilities in light of that character. I think Derek Kidner said it well,

"It would be easy to say that this prayer comes near to haggling, but the right word is 'exploring': Abraham is feeling his way forward [first] in a spirit of faith (superbly expressed in [verse 25], where he grasps the range and rightness of God's rule), [second, in a spirit] of humility, in his whole mode of address, and [finally, in a spirit] of love, demonstrated in his concern for the whole city, not for his kinsmen alone."³

We'll explore these aspects of Abraham's disposition later, but for now I simply want to commend Kidner's language of "exploring"; Abraham is "exploring," trying to understand more about the consequences of God's nature. He is trying to reconcile God's justice with His mercy. He's trying to understand the possibilities in light of who God is. He is examining "the integrity of God's impending actions."⁴ He's doing, what Timothy Keller called, "theological reasoning."⁵ He's trying to understand something about God, which we'll get to in a moment. But first let's deal with a question that may be distracting some of us...

Did God Change His Mind?

This is a question commonly raised when this text is considered. Did God change His mind in response to Abraham's intercession? I understand why this kind of question is raised in Scripture from time to time, but it's less apparent why it is raised with this particular text. If you read carefully, there is no point in this passage where God says He will do something that He later decides not to do. He doesn't say that He is going to bring judgment on the city of Sodom, and then not bring judgment on the city. He doesn't tell Abraham He will spare the city if a certain number of righteous are found within, find that number, and then destroy the city any way. Instead, at every point, He does exactly what He says He will do.

The Scriptures are pretty clear on this one. God is unchanging (or "immutable," as the theologians say). Even the pagan Balaam recognized this when he declared,

"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind." (Numbers 23:19)

People lie. People change their mind. God does neither. Indeed, He cannot. As Nick Turner explains in a book entitled, *12 Things God Can't Do...And How They Can Help You Sleep at Night*:

“Think about it like this. Why does anyone change their mind? The impulse must be internal or external. Either something changes inside of me—perhaps as a result of something as simple as a good (or a bad) night’s sleep; or circumstances change [outside of me]—for example, I changed my mind this morning about what to wear, because when I got downstairs, I realized it was going to be much colder than yesterday’s forecast suggested.

In God’s case, there are neither internal nor external reasons for changes. If he really is the great I AM—the one who ‘is who he is’ eternally—then change from the inside is impossible. For a perfect being, all change is change for the worse. Change driven from the outside is likewise impossible, since it presupposes that new information is received. [But]...God can’t learn or be surprised. He never receives ‘new’ information, so he never has any external reason to change his mind.”⁶

Now, are there difficult texts in Scripture to square with this? Yes. But that has everything to do with our insufficiency, not His inconsistency. And all those complicated texts can be reconciled with clear statements in God’s Word. As we let Scripture interpret Scripture, we discover there’s no problem. But that’s an exercise for another day, because here, in this text, there is no evidence of God changing His mind. “God’s design to destroy Sodom is not altered.”⁷

Furthermore, it’s not even clear that Abraham is trying to change God’s mind. This is not a negotiation. It’s a discussion about the justice and righteousness of God, and how those attributes of God relate to what He’s about to do. Abraham is not trying to help God make up His mind about Sodom. He’s not trying to convince God how to God properly. No, Abraham is trying to understand. He’s searching. He is probing the depths of God’s mercy. He’s not trying to change God’s mind. And prayer should never be about trying to change God’s mind or twist His arm to do what we want instead of what He has decreed.

One analogy I’ve heard for prayer may help us. Imagine you are on a boat, holding a rope that is tied to the dock. Prayer is you pulling on the rope. When you pull the rope, you don’t pull the dock to you. When you pull the rope, your boat comes closer to the dock. The dock is not what’s moving. You are. God doesn’t move. We do.⁸ Prayer changes us, not Him. Jesus taught us to pray, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We’re bending to His will, not the other way around. God doesn’t change His mind. That doesn’t mean prayer doesn’t matter. It does. But we’ll get to that next time.

So what then *are* we to learn about God from this text? Well, that depends on who you ask. A lot of it comes down to what we are to make of Abraham’s comment in verse 25—“*Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*” This is a rhetorical question. He believes the answer is yes, and so he believes that the righteous will *not* fare as the wicked. The question becomes...

Was Abraham Right?

There are some who have answered “no,” Abraham’s assumption is misguided. Why would they say that? Because the righteous often do fare as the wicked (and sometimes far worse). Therefore, some have suggested that Abraham is making the same mistake as Job’s friends—assuming that God would not let tragedy strike the one who is truly righteous—or the mistake of the disciples who question Jesus about the man born blind—wondering if it was the man’s sin or his parents that caused the impairment (John 9:1-2)—or the mistake of the crowd when Jesus recalls the eighteen who were crushed by the collapse of the tower at Siloam—since they wondered what these victims must have done to deserve that end (Luke 13:1-5).

In each case, the assumption that bad things like these—loss, sickness, disability, untimely death—don’t happen to the righteous is corrected by the Lord. The Lord sends refreshing rain on the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). And same is true with storms. “The book of Job especially belies the idea of a proportionate relationship

between sin and suffering by showing that even though Job was the most upright man in the world, he was visited by untold misery.”⁹ The righteous can suffer many of the same afflictions as the wicked.

And when they do, there is no injustice in God. God cares when we suffer. He hears our cries. He works in all things for the good of His people, working in us Christlikeness. He’s not indifferent to our pain. But, and this we must be clear on, God has done us no injustice. As R. C. Sproul explains,

“When anything painful, sorrowful, or grievous befalls us, it is never an act of injustice on God’s part, because God does not owe us freedom from tragedies. He does not owe us protection from falling towers [like the tower of Siloam]. We are debtors to God and cannot repay.”¹⁰

He’s right. God is never in our debt; we are ever in His. He owes us no good thing. The breath that I just took, He gave freely. I didn’t deserve it. I stole it. I have no way to pay it back. If I would have passed away in my sleep last night, God would have done me no wrong. So if God doesn’t owe us anything, then why would we assume—especially in the face of so much suffering—that the righteous never fare the same as the wicked? And on this basis, some have argued that Abraham is making this common mistake with his assumption about what God would allow to befall the righteous.

But I think this interpretation misdiagnoses what Abraham is actually wrestling with in our text. Yes, it’s true, bad things happen to the righteous and the wicked. What’s not true, it seems to me, is that this reality is what is troubling Abraham here. When we think about the destruction that is threatening to engulf Sodom, we’re not dealing with, say, a natural disaster, the sort of which is commonly experienced by every type of person in the fallen world. We are dealing with the judgment of God. Was that not the point of the previous paragraph, our text last Sunday?

And here’s where we have to be careful. When hurricane force winds devastate a state like North Carolina or a fire consumes a city like L.A., you don’t have to look too hard to see some social media pundit or self-proclaimed prophet saying, “Behold, the judgment of God.” But how do you know? You don’t. Not unless the Lord has specifically revealed that it was an act of judgment. Apart from such revelation, how could you know? It could just be one of those very normal consequences of living in a fallen world. Tornadoes happen. Earthquakes shake skylines. Hurricanes make landfall. People die. It happens every day. But unless we have a specific word from the Lord, we don’t have the authority to conclude that these things are the specific and targeted judgment of God falling on particular sinners.

When God wants us to know that it’s judgment, He reveals it. I remember Voddie Baucham stressing this point in a sermon one time. He said something like, “Nobody sits around and goes, ‘You know that flood thing? I wonder if that was the judgment of God.’” Nobody does that. Why? Because there was a hundred years of preaching. We have God’s Word. We don’t have to wonder. And similarly, Abraham will not be wondering, by the end of Genesis 19, when he looks down on the smoke rising from what was the city of Sodom, “I wonder if that was the judgment of God?” He knows. God revealed it. He doesn’t always reveal such things. But when He does, we don’t have to wonder, as with Sodom.

So when Abraham is interceding for the city of Sodom, he’s under no illusions. He knows whatever is coming for Sodom is the judgment of God. It’s not some natural disaster. God has pulled back the curtain. We are dealing with God’s judgment. And with that in mind, reexamine his assumption in verse 25. *“Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked!”* Abraham is not wrestling with the question of whether or not God would let bad things happen to both the righteous and the wicked. He’s wrestling with the question of whether God would let the righteous fall under the judgment of the wicked. And his assumption seems to be that God would not. Why? Because God is just. And I think Abraham is right.

The Wrath of God Is for the Wicked, Not the Righteous

Again, I'm not saying that God would never let tragedy strike believers. And I'm not saying that things like natural disasters never afflict believers. What I'm saying is that the Christian doesn't have to wonder when such things happen if they are experiencing the wrath of God's judgment. Why? Because Christ already has. The wrath of God is for the wicked, not the righteous.

How do we get there from this text? Well, for one, consider Lot. Where is he? He's in Sodom. But in the next chapter he will be delivered before the destruction of God's judgment rains down on the city. Now, listen to the Apostle Peter's reflection on this story:

"...if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷ and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment..." (2 Peter 2:6-9)

So Peter looks at the story of Sodom's destruction and he sees in it a picture of God's final judgment. He concludes that "the destiny of unbelievers is that of Sodom, but God will rescue the righteous."¹¹ Lot's rescue from judgment is the story of every believer. We will be spared God's final judgment. When we are dealing with God's unquestionable judgment, like the judgment that awaits every person on the other side of death or Christ's return, God *will* spare the righteous and sweep away the wicked. That's why Paul says,

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

No condemnation! Why? Is it because we don't deserve condemnation? No. Is it because God has compromised His justice and righteousness? Absolutely not. Then why? Well, Paul continues,

"By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us..." (Romans 8:3-4)

What's he saying? Christ was condemned in our place, so that the righteousness we required in order to avoid God's judgment could be given to us, credited to us. And now, brothers and sisters, we are arriving at the same thought that Abraham was arriving at through his intercession—the notion of substitution.

Notice, when Abraham intercedes, he is not asking God to rescue *only* the righteous. He is asking God to save the whole city on account of the righteous.¹² He's not trying to get around God's righteousness. He knows God is righteous and just. He's not trying to get God to act inconsistent with His nature. But he's exploring, remember? He's engaged in theological reasoning. He's trying to understand the implications of God's righteousness. "I know you're a righteous God," he says. "I'm not trying to get around that, but what I want to know is could the righteousness of someone else...the righteousness of the few...save the unrighteous, undeserving many?"¹³ That's what he's probing.

And here we have to understand something of the difference in our worldview and his. Sometimes people like us, twenty-first century Americans, struggle with passages like this. Because our worldviews are so distinct from the original audience and the people we're reading about. We tend to be very individualistic as Westerners. That's not the case in most of the rest of the world and throughout most of history. It's not that such people, people like Abraham, don't understand things like personal responsibility and individual guilt. It's simply that they also would not recoil from concepts like corporate or collective guilt.¹⁴ Those ideas make us very uneasy. To think that I could (or even should) share in the guilt of someone else's behavior seems, at best, unfair and, at worse, downright unAmerican.

But Abraham would not have shared our objection. The author of Genesis certainly does not take issue with the idea. In Adam, all die. Federal headship. He was our representative. He sinned, so we now sin by nature and by choice. There are communal consequences, corporate guilt, if you will. There are tons of examples of this in the Bible. God tells the Israelites not to take any of the spoils of their defeated foes in the Canaanite conquest. One man, Achan, disregards the Lord's instructions, and hides some treasure under his tent. The result? The nation gets whooped in the next battle, and dozens die. Why? Because one man sinned, and God held the nation responsible. Corporate guilt. The community suffered for Achan's unrighteousness (see Joshua 7).

Now, of course, Abraham hasn't heard of Achan (or Israel for that matter) as that comes later in history. Nevertheless, he'd recognize the principle at work. And when you remember that, I think it helps to bring into focus what Abraham is digging at with God. He gets the idea of corporate guilt and responsibility shared by those with whom there is some sense of solidarity. But here, it's as if he's asking, "Could it work in reverse too? If it's true that I could share some of the guilt for the actions taken by another I'm in solidarity with, then is it also possible that the righteousness of someone else I'm in solidarity with could be shared by me as well?"¹⁵ Is it only the evil record of the many that can determine the way the Lord treats a community or can it be the righteous record of the few? Guilt can be imputed. But what about righteousness? Can the reverse be true? Can the city be pardoned—which in Hebrew could be translated "forgiven"¹⁶—because of the righteousness of the few? And the answer he stumbles into is "yes...yes...yes...and yes." Wonderfully, astonishingly, gloriously, God keeps saying "yes." And it's not, "Yes, I will spare the righteous," it's "Yes, I'll spare the city for the sake of the righteous" (cf. 18:26). That's a "substitutionary deliverance."¹⁷ That's a gospel idea!

But if you're anything like me, you're a bit disappointed when you get to the end of the chapter. Verse 33 comes along like the cliffhanger of a season finale. Aggrrhh! Abraham's like, "Would you spare the city for fifty righteous people?...What about forty-five?...How about forty?...Thirty? ...Twenty?...Ten?" And then it just stops. Verse 33 tells us that the Lord and Abraham part ways. And if you're anything like me, you're like, "Come on, Abe! Why did you stop at ten? Why didn't you keep going?"

The answer may be that the Lord didn't give Abraham the opportunity. Verse 33 could give the impression that the Lord just cut off the conversation and abruptly left. It could just be that simple. Some suggest that Abraham stopped at ten because he believed that number would be enough to deliver Lot and his family. Others say that ten may have been the minimum number Abraham could imagine as having a preserving influence on a society like Sodom.¹⁸ Interestingly, later rabbinic tradition taught that ten was the minimum number required to have a prayer gathering or synagogue in a city.¹⁹ Could the number have something to do with the preserving impact of believers on a society?²⁰ We'll have more to say about that in two weeks. The truth is we'll probably never know why Abraham stopped at ten.

But the point is that he stumbled on this principle of substitution, this principle of God dealing with the unrighteous on the basis of the righteous.²¹ He has learned that "the righteousness of someone else can save an unrighteous person" without compromising God's justice and righteousness. As Tim Keller once put it, Abraham seems to have spotted the path through the "seemingly impregnable mountains" of God's justice, "but he couldn't walk it himself."²² Lot couldn't walk it. Who could walk it? The question just hangs there for centuries. Abraham hasn't unearthed the full mystery. He hasn't quite thread the needle. But he's on to something. His intercession has carried him to nothing less than the gospel itself—salvation through substitution. More specifically, Jesus in our place. That's the gospel. Hold that thought.

Suppose There Is Just One...

What if Abraham had kept subtracting from his total? How low could he have gone and still received the same reply from the Lord? I believe the answer is "one." But Abraham doesn't ask the question. He doesn't get us there. But the Scriptures do. Abraham, you see, was not the last prophet to wrestle with this question.

For instance, listen to what the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah...

“Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her.” (Jeremiah 5:1)

The Lord is challenging the people to find one righteous person—just one—in all Jerusalem, that He might spare the city the judgment the prophet announced for the sake of that one. They couldn't do it. But if they could, the Lord assures them that He would spare Jerusalem. Just one. One righteous person.

And yet, when you read Ezekiel, it would seem to contradict this. Ezekiel describes a time when Jerusalem was so far gone that even the most righteous citizen could not save it. In fact, he suggests that “even the presence of such luminaries as Noah, Daniel, and Job would not have saved it (Ezek. 14:12-23).”²³ Jerusalem had become worse than Sodom, the prophet says (e.g., 16:48). But, and this is glorious, that didn't mean there was no hope. The prophet goes on to speak of restoration. And the beautiful thing is that it's not just a restoration of Jerusalem, but one that will include even the likes of Sodom. How? Why? The answer is given in the final verse of chapter 16,

“...that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 16:63)

Atonement. God Himself will make atonement. God will do it. That's grace.

So it's not that Ezekiel contradicts Jeremiah. Jeremiah says that God would spare the city for the sake of one righteous individual. Ezekiel clarifies that it has to be for the sake of the right righteous individual. It can't be someone like Noah, or Job, or even Lot. Why? Weren't they righteous? Not intrinsically, no. They were not righteous in themselves. Read their stories and you will see their unrighteousness.²⁴ Paul reminds us of the sorry state of fallen humanity when he writes, in the language of the psalmist,

“None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10; cf. Ps 14:1-3)

And yet the Scriptures call these men, even Lot, righteous. How? What did Lot do to become righteous? That's the wrong question. We are declared righteous. Counted righteous through faith. That was the lesson we learned in Genesis 15:6—Abraham “*believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*” And the same was true for Lot. Lot was not a righteous man in himself. But through faith, God counted him righteous. He credited his spiritually bankrupt account with perfect righteousness. It wasn't Lot's own righteousness. It was an alien righteousness, a righteousness from without, the righteousness of another. Whose righteousness? The answer is Jesus.

That's how justification works. We are made right with God *not* because we make ourselves right with God by what we do. We are given right-standing with God through faith. We believe God, and God credits Christ's perfect record of righteousness to us. You are declared righteous. And when you are declared righteous, the Bible says, God works in you both to will and to act according to His good purposes (Phil 2:13). So even when you do those things that are the fruit of righteousness, it is owing to God working in us to do those things, so you can unpuff your chest now.²⁵

And do you know what's so beautiful about the atonement that Ezekiel describes? It comes to the worst of sinners. God promises to atone for sinners who were worse off than even the citizens of Sodom. That's what Ezekiel says. And that's really good news. I love what Iain Duguid says about this:

“This is good news for all of us. It is good news if you are wrestling with sins that feel overwhelming. Perhaps your struggle is with same-sex attraction, or a pornography addiction, or a broken marriage, or something you wouldn’t dare admit to anyone else. If you are trusting in Christ, God has made an atonement big enough to pay for all your sin and to welcome you into his family as his friend. But it is also good news for self-righteous Pharisees like me—those who have invested deeply in building up our own righteousness before the Lord. The death of Jesus Christ, the righteous for the unrighteous, is an all-sufficient atonement for the salvation of the very worst sinner and for the proudest Pharisee. In the words of Fanny Crosby, ‘The vilest offender who truly believes / That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.’”²⁶

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

But the other side of this, the darker side, is that there is no hope—no atonement—apart from the one God has made. To reject Christ and His work is to embrace guilt. And when you do that, the assumption of Abraham in our text—the fact the Judge of all the earth will certainly do right—is not good news for you. It’s terrible news. The Bible is clear, apart from Christ no one will possess the righteousness required to stand before a holy God and escape His judgment.

So how do we avoid the judgment that is to come? Run to Jesus. Hope in Jesus. Trust in Jesus. We are saved in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, for the glory of God alone. Run to Jesus. He is our hope in life and death. Christ alone. As the song says:

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save
'Til on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

Amen? I hope that is more than a song for you. I hope it is your testimony.

Now, there’s more to this text than we’ve had time to explore. Usually sermons on this passage are almost exclusively on lessons we can learn about prayer from the intercession of Abraham. This is legitimate on one level, but I’ve chosen to spend much less time on this than others because the predominate theme of the section is actually the justice of God.²⁷ The intercession of Abraham is primarily meant to teach us about God’s nature. The prelude and the events that ensue in the next chapter convey undeniable truth, which Waltke captures well:

“It’s now established that the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, the paradigm for God’s future judgments, is just. The Lord investigates the accusations thoroughly (18:22), ensures two objective witnesses, involves the faithful in his judgment, displays active compassion for the suffering, and prioritizes divine mercy over indignant wrath (i.e., not to be destroyed if even ten are righteous).”²⁸

He is just. He is righteous. That informs how He deals with the righteous and wicked. That’s really the point of this text.

That said, this is the first prayer of intercession—that is, prayer for the sake of others—that we have recorded for us in the Bible, so surely it informs our understanding of the ministry of prayer to some extent. And it is interesting that this prayer is related to the salvation of sinners. It’s a priestly prayer. Abraham is playing the role of a mediator. He’s not just praying. He’s “priesting.”²⁹ And inasmuch as we are called to be a kingdom of priests, then there is probably a thing or two we can learn about prayer from Abraham’s intercession.

But I didn't start there for a reason. Sometimes that's where people start, and they never get beyond that. They moralize this text, point out what is good about Abraham, and then challenge you to work hard to be more like Abraham. But if you do that, this text will crush you. Listen, you won't pray more like Abraham until you first behold and come into the saving embrace of the One to whom Abraham pointed. Grace first, then transformation. So join us next week and, Lord willing, we'll look at some of the lessons we can learn about prayer from Abraham, but we will do so in view of the grace we've considered this week...And some additional ways that Abraham's intercession points us to Christ.

Pray with me...

¹ Concerning verse 22, Derek Kidner writes: "There is good cause to reverse the roles in the last sentence [i.e., 18:22], reading 'but the Lord still stood before Abraham'; for the present text is listed by the Massorettes as a scribal correction (to avoid the fancied irreverence of the original). Either way, whether God waits for Abraham to speak, or waits while he speaks, the whole passage displays His approachability to such a servant." Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 133. Cf. Joyce D. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1986, 2021), 184.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

³ Kidner, 133.

⁴ Phillip Bethancourt, *Exalting Jesus in Genesis*, CCE (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2024), 132.

⁵ Timothy Keller, "Abraham's Prayer for the City," *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

⁶ Nick Tucker, *12 Things God Can't Do...And How They Can Help You Sleep at Night* (The Good Book Company, 2022), 56.

⁷ John D. Currid, *Genesis*, EPSC (Leyland: Evangelical Press, 2003, 2015), 1:338.

⁸ Baucham, “Abraham Intercedes for Sodom,” accessed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp4tpCo6tJE>.

⁹ R. C. Sproul, “When Towers Fall,” accessed online at: <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/when-towers-fall>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Currid, 1:339. James Montgomery Boice writes, “We may learn from this that there is no reason for us to feel restrained or hindered in praying for unconverted individuals or cities or the world just because we do not know what God’s ultimate purpose may be concerning them or it.” James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 2:615.

¹² Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, SIBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 236.

¹³ Timothy Keller, “Real Friendship and the Pleading Priest,” *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

¹⁴ “[T]he entire scene raises a deeper issue, and that is the concept of collective guilt.” Currid, 1:336.

¹⁵ A paraphrase of an insight in Keller, “Real Friendship and the Pleading Priest.” Keller credits Gerhard von Rad for this insight.

¹⁶ The word for “*spare*” in verse 26 is literally “to lift up” in Hebrew. It could in context mean to “lift up” their faces, meaning to show them grace, or to “lift up” their sins, meaning to pardon/forgive them of sin.” See Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 271.

¹⁷ Bethancourt, 134.

¹⁸ Sarna, 134.

¹⁹ “But ten is also the minimum number for a Jewish prayer meeting (cf. b. Meg. 23b, which could usefully have claimed this passage among its prooftexts), and Tg. Ps.-J. takes that fact as the clue to Abraham’s numbers. They had started from fifty, indicating a minyan in each of the five towns, with the eventual implication that even a prayer meeting in one town could have forestalled the calamity.” John Goldingay, *Genesis*, BCOTP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 302. Something similar is proposed by Phillips, concerning the reason Abraham stopped his requests at ten: “One possible answer is that later in Judaism a synagogue could be formed only by ten or more believers. The idea was therefore that so long as a functioning church existed in the city, there was hope for its redemption. Lacking an effective gospel witness, however, Abraham had to admit that there was no hope to avert judgment.” Richard D. Phillips, *Genesis*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023), 634-635.

²⁰ Iain M. Duguid suggests that Abraham is indeed “concerned with the possible leavening influence of the righteous.” Iain M. Duguid, *The Gospel According to Abraham: Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999, 2014), 101. “The premise of this question [in verse 23] is that those who live righteously generate moral value that acts as a preservative for a corrupt society threatened by judgment.” John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 182. Goldingay writes, “The story encourages the audience to think, but in light of the thinking that it encourages, it also drives it to be faithful, because a small number of faithful may make all the difference.” John Goldingay, *Genesis*, BCOTP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 312. Phillips has similar remarks: “Will God relent of his judgment for the sake of the witness of even a small group of Christians in a particular city or nation? Genesis 18 suggests that he will. Here, we see the broader significance of God’s call for Abraham to raise up his children to faith and godliness, which is not only their own hope but also the only hope for the world. We see here as well the antidote to the temptation for Christians and churches to become like the world in a wrongheaded attempt to curry the world’s favor. Christians do the world good by remaining distinct in godliness, by upholding biblical truth in the face of worldly error, and especially by our boldness in spreading the gospel and interceding for the lost in prayer. Jesus compared the presence of believers to the preservative power of salt: ‘You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?’ (Matt. 5:13). He added: ‘You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.... In the same way, let your light shine before others’ (vv. 14, 16).” Phillips, 636.

²¹ “The biblical teaching on the remnant of the righteous first surfaces here. A nation may be preserved because of a righteous remnant. And people have a right to pray for deliverance for their sake, for God is willing to spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous.... Israel would continue to believe that God is a righteous Judge, that righteousness exalts a nation, and that righteous people preserve society. What, then, should the righteous do—in any age? According to this passage they must live righteously before the Lord in order to enjoy his benefits, they must teach righteousness to their children, and they may entreat the Lord that the righteous not be swept away with the wicked in judgment. It became a fundamental idea among God’s people to pray according to God’s will; here, it was the will of God to destroy the wicked but to preserve the righteous.... We may say that the presence of the righteous in the world benefits the wicked because the justice of the Lord will not destroy the righteous with the wicked.” Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996, 1998), 348, 352.

²² Keller, “Real Friendship and the Pleading Priest.”

²³ Duguid, 102.

²⁴ “The lurid details of the following episode indicate that there simply were no righteous people in Sodom—not one!” Hughes, 266.

²⁵ Baucham, “Abraham Intercedes for Sodom.”

²⁶ Duguid, 104.

²⁷ Ross, 347. This is consistent with Von Rad, though he adds, “The narrator would scarcely feel himself badly misunderstood if we were to read this text from the viewpoint of intercession and its power.” G. von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1963), 209; cf. 207-208.

²⁸ Waltke, 271.

²⁹ Keller, “Real Friendship and the Pleading Priest.”