



Part 43 – Learning to Pray with Abraham

Genesis 18:22-33

After receiving once again the promise of the Lord, Abraham has his gaze directed toward the wicked cities of the plain, the dwelling of his nephew Lot and his family. Abraham's intercession provides an example of righteous prayer. Abraham's faith and righteousness are on full display as he intercedes

with great humility and reverence. Nevertheless, Abraham, the true covenant partner, strives with the Lord, searching the depths of his mercy.

- **Vv. 21-22** – God is fully aware of everything that has been occurring in the wicked cities of the plain. These verses are a sort of anthropomorphism (God's actions being described in human language and categories) used for the purpose of establishing the pattern for acting justly: A matter must be investigated thoroughly and based upon the testimony of multiple witnesses, etc. God sets the pattern for man to exercise justice.
- **Vv. 22-23** – Abraham standing before the Lord is a picture filled with theological significance. Abraham takes up the place of a mediator; an intercessor for the sake of God's people.
- **Vv. 23-25** – Abraham's intercession for sparing Sodom is based on a concern for justice and mercy. His prayer reflects the heart of God that mercy is "determined not by the wicked ones in the midst of the community, but by the righteous ones."¹ Whatever happens the righteous are assured that God will never act unjustly.
- **Vv.26-32** – Like the wicked of Noah's day, the people of Sodom had time and sufficient warnings to repent. But as with everyone else, the time of God's patience and opportunities to repent eventually come to an end. Abraham's intercession may appear on the surface to be close to manipulation. But this is to miss the point. Abraham's intercession is exemplary. He is not tempting God to ignore the demands of justice. Rather, he is searching the depths of God's mercy.

1. Pray in light of what we know.

- By the time we get to Abraham's intercession in Genesis 18 it is clear that he has gained great knowledge about the character of God. He prays as one who knows the Lord. Take note of his proper deference and humility before the Lord (**vv. 27, 30, 32**). Notice also Abraham's confidence that God is both just and merciful (**vv. 23-25**).
- When Christians pray we cannot help but do so out of our knowledge of God. When we pray we are doing so theologically. For example, believing God is aloof and uncaring or an indulgent parent or a cruel dictator will inevitably shape the ways we pray. So thinking rightly about God; believing the truth about who He is and what He is like is vital to a healthy life of prayer. Abraham's prayer in this passage clearly reveals that he was a man who knew the Lord.

A) We pray because God is sovereign.

- We can "pray big" precisely because God is sovereign. Abraham prays with full confidence that God is able to do all that he wills. Some see conflict between prayer and God's sovereignty: "If God is truly in control then why pray at all?" The better question is, "If God is *not* in control, then what reason would there be to pray?" Only a sovereign God has the power and eternal presence to weave the prayers of his people meaningfully into the working out of his sovereign will. The prayers of God's people matter. The prayers of Christians are effective precisely because God has sovereignly designed for it to be so.

B) We pray because God is merciful.

¹ Roop quoted in Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A New Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) pg. 270

Vv. 24-32 – “Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city...Suppose five of the fifty are lacking...Suppose forty are found there...Suppose thirty are found there...Suppose twenty are found there...Suppose ten are found there...”

- Abraham begins his intercession by asking the Lord to spare the cities if there are fifty righteous persons living among them. Eventually he pleads on behalf of the possibility of only ten righteous ones. The Lord responds positively to each new request for greater mercy. Perhaps you have been told that Abraham’s prayer is impetuous or manipulative as though he is trying to bargain with God in a rather cynical fashion. I believe this is to miss the point. Abraham is not portrayed as being manipulative or cynical in his praying. Indeed, the Lord – who cannot be manipulated – agrees to each new request.
- Abraham’s intercession is for the sake of any righteous who may inhabit the cities of the plain. But that mercy would extend to the wicked as well. The wicked would be spared for the sake of the righteous. Derek Kidner observes: “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 in a spirit of faith, of humility, in his whole mode of address...”² Of Abraham’s intercession, Iain Duguid writes: “The friend of God was the friend of sinners. He was not a friend of sinners in the way that Lot was, so hopelessly compromised with them that there was little that was distinctive about him. His friendship with sinners led him to intercede on their behalf.”³

C) We pray because God is just.

Vs. 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?”

- Abraham’s intercessory countdown serves the purpose of underscoring God’s justice in destroying the cities of the plain. He would have indeed spared the cities for the sake of only 10 righteous inhabitants. But as the narrative reveals, that basement level standard could not be met. Unlike the gods of the pagans, the Lord’s judgment was neither capricious nor cruel.
- It is important that we not construe Abraham’s words to indicate that the righteous will not suffer. Abraham rightly confesses that God’s people are never the objects of divine wrath. But like everyone else in this fallen world, the righteous can and do suffer. The Scriptures record instances of the righteous suffering along with the wicked for the sins of the wicked and this is addressed in a number of places in the Bible. Jesus Christ himself is the supreme example of the Righteous suffering for the sins of the wicked for reasons of God’s own sovereign plan and purpose. Ultimately, however, God will not treat the wicked and the righteous alike. Even the hard things the Lord appoints for his children to suffer are never unjust nor are they acts of Divine wrath.

2. Pray in light of all we don’t know.

- Take note of Abraham’s humility as he prayed: “Behold I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (**vs. 27**). Abraham was well aware of his limits. In knowing God he also had a growing understanding of all he did not know. It is inevitable that, at times, we will pray in ignorance. After all, we cannot know all that God knows. We can’t even know what is always best for us and others. This is why praying according to the Scriptures is so vital. For in the Scriptures God not only reveals to us what he is like but also imparts to us wisdom which will help us to pray. Abraham’s intercession is an example of a man praying according both to what he knew (or better, *Who* he knew) and to what he did not know. Of course, the good news is that God always knows. He always knows what is best and what it is we truly need. Our lack of understanding is met by his mercy.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (**Romans 8:26-27**).

- What a comfort it is to know that Abraham’s greater seed (**Galatians 3:16**) did what Abraham could never achieve. He took our wickedness upon himself to the cross and paid our debt to justice in full. And now the risen Jesus is our Divine Intercessor. His prayers for the saints do not go up to God, as it were, but are the prayers of the everlasting Son of God (**Hebrews 7:25**).

² Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1967) pg. 133

³ Iain Duguid, *Living the Gap Between Promise and Reality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999) pg. 91