

Abraham's Prayer

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] and let's read together. From the book of Genesis chapter 18 verses 16 to 33. So this is God's word, Genesis 18.

Then the men set out from there, that's the Lord and two angels, the angels, the men is referencing the men here. The men set out from there and they looked down towards Sodom and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

And the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

Then the Lord said, because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their son is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me and if not, I will know.

[1 : 05] So the men turned from there and they went towards Sodom but Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Suppose there are 50 righteous within the city, will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the 50 righteous who are in it? 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 it from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just? And the Lord said, if I find it Sodom, 50 righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.

And Abraham answered and said, behold, I've undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the 50 righteous are lacking, will you destroy the whole city for the lack of five?

And he said, I will not destroy it if I find 45 there. Again, he spoke to him and said, suppose 40 are found there. He answered, for the sake of 40, I will not do it.

[2 : 14] Then he said, oh, let not the Lord be angry and I will speak, suppose 30 are found there. And he answered, I will not do it if I find 30 there. And he said, behold, I've undertaken to speak to the Lord, suppose 20 are found there.

He answered, for the sake of 20, I will not destroy it. Then he said, oh, let not the Lord be angry and I will speak again, but this once, suppose 10 are found there.

He answered, for the sake of 10, I will not destroy it. And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place.

This is God's holy word. Next week we're gonna start a series for the month of February and March on the gospel according to Elijah and Elisha at night.

So that'll be a team series. A few of us will be preaching that. So we'll be looking at stories of Elijah and Elisha, some of the great stories and how the gospel appears in those stories. But tonight, before we start that, I had taught on a couple stories about Abram and Lot before the induction week.

[3 : 19] So we'll come back and we'll just make it into a little mini series, a third sermon here on Abram and Lot. And that's what this is about. This is in some ways chapter 18 is the conclusion of the Abraham Lot story.

And it works out well because we have a week to fill, but also it works out well because this is ultimately a passage about prayer. And there's lots here.

We could talk about it from many different angles, but I wanna focus on prayer, specifically on prayer and how it relates to prayer tonight. Prevailing prayer will be one of the things that we'll talk about more and more in this coming year.

And this is a time of change, as you all well know, it's a time of transition, it's a time of grief and expectation, both at the same time. It's never been a better time to pray.

So it's great to take a moment tonight just to think about prayer. And it's a great time, 2024, we're in a new year, but we're also in a time of change in our church. And so it's also a great time maybe personally for us to say, I want this year to reject prayerlessness and say no, just say no to prayerlessness, to put it away and say, I want to be a person of prayer in the coming year.

[4 : 31] And we read about a way to come to that tonight in Genesis 18, it's a time where we really need, not only personally, but corporately prayer, because we need to be asking God to protect us and protect the church, protect its unity, protect its deep relationships, protect its hospitality culture, protect all the great things we've had for so long.

We want protection in that. And prayer is how God loves to give that through the lens of prayer, through our prayers. And so that's what we have here. I'm really indebted tonight to Tim Keller's reflections on prayer in his book about this passage as we focus specifically on what it means for prayer.

So let's see three aspects of prayer here. One condition, one foundation for prayer that we see here. And then a few things about the nature of prayer that will help us I think renew our prayer lives.

And then lastly, the missing link in Abraham's prayer, the missing link, there is one. So first, the condition of prayer we read about here.

So what is prayer? I was looking this week at some of the different authors that write about prayer and they, one says, prayer is the outstretched arms of a child for their fathers, crying out for their father's help.

[5 : 48] Prayer, another author says is the approach of the soul to the throne room of the king of kings. Another author says, prayer is talking to God. There's lots of ways you can define prayer.

Lots of different ways to talk about it. And actually when you look at statistics on prayer, I mentioned this this past Wednesday, lots of people in the modern world pray. People in our city pray.

Secular people pray, people who don't believe in God. They say they say in surveys, you know, sometimes I find myself praying. People are drawn to lift up and cry out to the invisible realm, to the God that they can't see, to long and look for help.

Now God in the Bible, the God of the Bible, the God who does hear prayer and receives our prayers calls us into something deeper and more regular when it comes to prayer and calls us, I think, to hear through this story about Abraham, to really see first the condition of the possibility of our prayer lives.

And so you see what happens here. In verse 17, the Lord says, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do? I'm about to go down and I'm about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

[6 : 58] It's a very wicked place. If you read on the rest of chapter 18, you will see all the things that were happening there. God says, I'm gonna go down and destroy it. Shall I hide that from Abraham or include him?

Now just before this story, three men had come to Abraham's door. And then we're told in the text that two of them were angels, but they appeared as men.

And the one in the middle was the Lord. And so the Lord drew near to Abraham and came to Abraham with two angels. And then Abraham cooked a meal for God and he laid bread down.

God had condescended and shown up in his life. And it's just very simple, very simple. But in both these stories, we see that the condition for the possibility of prayer is first that God draws near to you.

That God comes to you, that God shows up at your door, that God speaks first, that God's the one who comes into your life, that God's the one who comes and knocks on your door. And then you turn around and say, I want to show you hospitality, Lord, I want to now draw near to you, because you've drawn near to me, because you've condescended, because you've come close to me.

[8 : 04] See, that's the condition that we read about in both of these stories. Here, God says to two angels, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do in Sodom and Gomorrah?

Now, when you say something like that, it's rhetorical, right? You know, you say, shall I keep this from you? And of course, immediately you say that because the answer is no, I'm not gonna keep it from you.

I'm going to tell you, shall I keep this from Abraham? He's saying, I shall not. I'm not gonna keep it from Abraham. Why? And he says, because I've chosen him, because I've drawn near to him. And did you see what he's saying? He's saying, I will speak to Abraham about this and then listen to Abraham, because I want to include Abraham in a conversation about what I'm about to do. You see, you know, God knows what God's about to do. And this text is presented that theologians tell us anthropomorphically, which means in a form that we humans can understand, God says, I shall go down and look at Sodom and Gomorrah to see if it really is as bad as people say. [9 : 07] That's how the text is written. But of course, God knows how bad it is. It's not that he doesn't know, he knows. It's the way the text is written for us to receive. God knows what he's gonna do. God knows his plan.

100% God has determined all things from the beginning, yet he says, I want to tell Abraham so that Abraham comes and barter with me.

So that Abraham will cry out to me in prayer and said, wait, Lord, will you think about sparing this place? God knew that Abraham was gonna do that. You see what it's saying?

It's saying that the condition of prayer is that God comes into your life and he comes close to you and then he says, I want to hear from you. I want to include you.

I want your prayers to really matter. See, God knows all things from the beginning. He's determined all things yet he says, and 100%, I want your prayer life to actually matter in what I do.

[10 : 05] That's what he's saying. It's both. You never have to choose. We're Presbyterians, we're Reformed here at St. C's. We believe in the sovereignty of God 100%. He's determined all things.

And 100%, the Bible says, your prayer life matters. That God wants you to come close and draw near because he's drawn near to you. And he wants to include you in the conversation.

And he wants you to talk to him like Abraham talks to him right here. That's the condition of prayer. God is drawn near and then in verse 22 we learn, so Abraham stood still before the Lord and drew near to the Lord.

The condition. Now secondly, a few things about the nature of prayer. What happens when Abraham prays here to God? It says that he draws near to God and then he starts to talk to the Lord.

Who's right there with him. Now I just wanna point out four things very briefly that Abraham does in this prayer that I think can change our prayer lives.

[11 : 03] Can really transform our prayer life tonight. The first is this. He says, Lord, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

And he says later on, far be it from you, shall not the judge of the earth do what is just? Would you really Lord, sweep away this whole city if there are righteous people there, 50 righteous people there.

Now you see what Abraham's doing. He's coming to God and saying, I know that you're saying you're going to go and destroy this place, but you're the God of justice and I'm calling upon the God of justice to be just.

He's saying something very bold to God. He's, in some sense it almost seems like he's bartering with God and he's crying out to God and he's asking for something enormous.

He's saying, God, I know that you plan to destroy the wickedness of this city, but will you hear me? Will you spare them? His prayers is huge. It's bold.

[12 : 01] He prays for mercy upon this wicked city, Sodom and Gomorrah. And it's just simply to see the first that Abraham prays big, big prayers, enormous prayers.

He prays prayers where he says, Lord, will you save this entire city? He calls upon God's character and says, will you spare this place? He prays boldly.

Now, just a question, do you pray big prayers? Do you have in your prayer life a routine of asking God for huge things?

Of saying, Lord, will you bring a revival to our city? Will you spare our city? Will you turn our city upside down? Will you change my workplace?

Will you sweep through it by the Spirit with the gospel? Will you change my entire flat complex? Will you come in and will you do enormous things that no one could believe?

[12:59] That's exactly what Abraham does here. He prays huge prayers. Do you pray big prayers? Do you ask for great things before God? The second thing is he says at the same time, multiple times he says, behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord.

And that is his saying, look, I'm praying these huge prayers to you, God, and really asking for something here, but I know that I've undertaken to speak to the Lord.

And then he adds, I am but dust and ashes. You see that beautiful marriage in his prayer life. He's incredibly bold, and yet he comes deeply reverent.

Incredibly bold, yet enormously humble before the Lord. He says, I know I've undertaken every single time to ask you for more and more and more.

And I'm dust and ashes, I know that Lord. He's afraid. He has the fear of the Lord. So he comes in boldness standing on the foundation that God has drawn near to him.

[14:03] But at the same time, he's fearful. He's got the fear of the Lord in him. He's, I would dare say, he's more bold in his prayer life than we often are, and he's more reverent at the same time than we often are.

He does both at the same time. There's no high language here, not at all. It's pretty colloquial. It's on the ground type language. It's big, but normal speech to God.

Yet at the same time, it's deeply reverent, deeply humble. Are your prayers bold and big and enormous? And are they simultaneously deeply humble, reverent, stepping in in your prayer life before the throne room of God and knowing exactly the one that you're standing in front of.

Knowing who you're with. Third, afford. What exactly is the bold prayer that he prays? And here it is. He says, God, will you spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the righteous?

Now, if you read on, if you read back and you read forward in Genesis, you find out what the city of Sodom and Gomorrah was like. Just read the very next story later on.

[15:10] It was a place completely broken, completely lost, very wicked, a place that was an enemy of Abraham. Why does Abraham ask God to spare the city?

Well, his nephew was there, lot. Maybe that's why. You know, he at least in part thought, my nephew's there, I want God to spare this place.

But I think that it's more than that because he says, he doesn't say, Lord, will you take Lot out? Which is what God is gonna do.

Now, he says something much bigger. He says, will you show mercy to the entirety of the people? The whole city. You know, to Abraham, these are the people, Sodom and Gomorrah, that are what's wrong with his modern society.

You know, if he was alive today, he said, is those people that ruin our contemporary society? That's what he would have said about Sodom and Gomorrah. And yet he says, for these evil people, Lord, spare them in your mercy, show them mercy.

[16:17] For the sake of the righteous, show every one of them mercy. Maybe, maybe he says that because he knows how much mercy he's been shown.

I think that's what it is. Abraham came from Babylon. He was a polytheist at one time. Who knows what his stories are like? But we know some of them. One of them, remember, we looked at the previous two times that he went to Egypt and he gave his wife away to be enslaved by Pharaoh to save his own skin.

He did it once, and you know what? In the next chapter, he's gonna do it again. And I think Abraham prayed this prayer, show mercy to evil people because he thought, God showed mercy to an evil man, me.

He knew he was, he knew. What was deep within himself, he prayed this prayer. He was able to stand in their place because he knew that he was one of them. Can you pray, do you pray?

Can you pray for those people? You know, who is it that you think, these are the people I really struggle with? This is the group, this is the space in our society.

[17:30] But do you pray for them? Do you long that God would show them his grace and mercy and compassion? We pray bold, we pray reverent, we pray for mercy, for people, no matter who they are.

That's what we learn here from Abraham. And then fourth and finally, and this is what really leads us to the final point. Just notice the depth of theological reflection in this prayer, that's the final thing. Tim Keller points this out very helpfully. He says, Abram is doing theology and awakening, I think, to things about God as he prays this.

And so notice, he says, verse 25, the God of all the earth is judge and he will do right. First he says, okay, Lord, he's talking to God and he says, you are a God of justice.

I know that and I know that you can't just wish away, you're not just gonna wish away evil. You're not gonna forgive willy nilly as if nothing's ever been done wrong.

[18 : 30] You're a God of justice, you stand for justice. He appeals to that, he talks to the God of justice. This is not the God of modernism that Abraham prays to. This is not, he's not praying to the God who is just love in such a way that everyone can just do what they want and God will forgive them no matter what, no matter what they believe in.

No, he doesn't pray to that God at all. He prays to this God of justice. And then in verse 24, at the same time, he says, and yet the God of justice loves to show compassion and mercy.

And so he says, I've seen that you're a God of justice. I've seen that at the same time, you're a God who loves to show love and compassion and mercy to people. He says, can you be both at the same time?

That's what he's wrestling with. In what circumstance, under what principle, under what condition could God be both just and merciful simultaneously?

And then he arrives at the conclusion. Now listen, this is one of the first places in the Bible where a principle, a theological principle starts to unfold.

[19 : 36] And it's one that couldn't be more important, that couldn't be more essential to what Christianity is. And it's when he says this, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

But then he takes it further than that. You see, at first all he's saying, listen carefully, at first all he's saying is, will you destroy the righteous with the wicked?

So if there are righteous people there, would you not spare them? Because they're righteous, they don't deserve to die like the wicked. That's at first what he says. But then I think he awakens to something because he takes it further than that.

He changes it just a little bit. And he goes on and he says this, will you sweep away the place and not spare the whole city for the sake of 50 righteous people?

Now there's been something that's changed there. At first it's, is it right for you to destroy the righteous alongside the wicked? Wouldn't it be just for you to spare the righteous, to leave them be?

[20 : 40] No, then it becomes, will you not spare the entirety of the city on behalf of 50 righteous people? Now all of a sudden what's happened?

He's awakening to this great theological principle that one day will be called the Great Exchange.

Can a righteous person, can righteous people stand in the place of the wicked?

Can the righteous stand in and represent and take the place of the sinner? Could it be that in God's justice and his love, he would say that I'll uphold justice by in love giving the righteous for the sake of the sinner?

Could, in other words, could the righteousness of some be imputed to wicked sinful people? And Abraham is asking God, could it be?

Could it be that the God of justice would allow the imputation, the exchange of righteousness in the place of wickedness?

[21 : 55] That's what he's asking. Now that leads us to the final point, the missing link in Abraham's prayer. Abraham's prayers are bold, they're deeply reverent, they're praying that God would show mercy to sinners and they are deeply theological.

They have a theological depth. Do you pray like that? Maybe here's what can help drive you to that, seeing the missing link in Abraham's prayer.

All right, he says this, Lord, would you spare the whole city the wicked for the sake of the righteous?

Could the righteous stand in the place of the wicked?

Could the righteousness of some be imputed to the sinfulness of the sinners? That's what he's asking. And so God says, sure.

He says, yes. If you can go find me 50 people, I will take those 50 people and their righteousness will be enough to spare the whole city.

[23 : 02] And Abraham says, well, if that's the case, then let me come back one more time. And he says, what if there's five less, 45? And the Lord says, what?

Yeah. And he says, oh, well, if there's 45, what if it's just 40? And the Lord says, yeah, 40, 40, 40 righteous could stand in the place of the many wicked.

But what if there's 30? And the Lord says, yes. And what if there's, Lord, what if there's just 20? Yes, yes, God says. I will take the righteousness of 20 to stand in the place of the many sinner. And Abraham says, well, what about just one more time? He says, what about 10? Yes, 10 would be, I would take 10 righteous people, truly righteous people to stand in the place of the sinner. And then Abraham goes home. The missing link in Abraham's prayer. Now look, why did Abraham go home?

[24 : 10] I think because Abraham, when he got to 10, knew maybe it's this, that when he got to 10, realized there aren't 10. He knew his nephew, his nephew's not gonna be that guy.

Read on in Genesis 18. But then Abraham knew, maybe Abraham was pondering just for a moment, could, if I go to Sodom and Gomorrah, could I be the one that stands in the place? And Abraham knew, it's not me.

And remember, we talked three, four weeks ago now that the whole principle of the book of Genesis is in Genesis 315, there's a promise. One day, the son of the woman Eve will come and will stand in the place of the sinner.

We'll crush the head of the serpent, we'll destroy sin, death and destruction forever. And we're realizing throughout Genesis, it's not the patriarchs, it's not Abraham, it's not Lot.

Abraham knows the theological principle, could one stand in the place of the many? But he gets to 10 and he stops and you wanna shout at him, don't you, and say, Abraham, just say one.

[25 : 17] Could one, could one righteous man stand in the place of the whole of the wicked, the whole of the sinners? All the sinners. And Abraham stopped at 10, God didn't.

A thousand plus years later, God would send his only begotten son, the one man, the son of the woman Eve, the one righteous person to stand in the place of the many wicked.

And it's not just that his righteousness covered the evil, our evil, but it's that he actually came and stood in the middle of Sodom and Gomorrah. It's that Jesus Christ actually came and received the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah so that we could stand, so that we could escape, so that we could be lot and run and flee to the mountains and have great rescue.

Jesus Christ is the one that Abraham was praying for, but he never quite got to. He's the missing link. Could there be 10? The Lord says yes, if there were only 10, but there will be one.

And he's come, Jesus Christ has come. Now listen, that means that in the middle of history, we have this great principle being realized that Abraham realized in the beginning of history.

[26 : 34] And that's this theological idea, this reality of the great exchange. And the great exchange is simply this. He for me, so me in him.

He died for me so I could be found in him. He stood in my place. He got what I deserved so I now can get what he deserves. That's the great exchange.

Donald MacLeod, I like the way he talks about it. He says, the great exchange means today, you can say this of yourself today. If you follow Jesus, listen, say this of yourself, I am not cursed or left as he was.

Desolate and forsaken, devoid of any sense of the Father's love. Christ, very important, Christ did not merely die with me. Christ did not come to die with us.

He came and died for me, for us. So that in the sense in which he died, I will never die. Every single one of us will face death.

[27 : 36] But the sense in which Jesus Christ died, you will never experience when you follow him. He died so that you don't have to. He went to hell so that you don't have to.

He went into the heart of Sodom and Gomorrah so that you don't have to. He is the one who stands in the place of the many. Wow, this was written so long ago. And there's the principle and it's fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Leon Bridges says, surrender to the good Lord. And he will wipe your slate clean. That's the great exchange. Now, let me just give you a quick application. That means that the foundation of your prayer life is because Jesus got what you deserve, you get what he deserves.

So the swap is not just negative. You see, it's not just that because he died, you get forgiven. That's one side of it. But the positive side of it is you actually now get what he deserves.

It's like he stood in your place and died for you and you get a great medal of honor. You get the victory, you get everything on the backside of it. You now get what he deserves. So you can actually come before the Father and you have the ear of God.

[28 : 53] Why? Because Jesus Christ has the ear of his Father. See, because he got what you deserve, you now get what he deserves. You get what he deserves. God really hears you. God really hears your prayers and your prayers really matter to God.

So tonight, because God in Jesus has drawn near to you, draw near to God this week. Draw near to God tonight. Draw near to God this week. Secondly, say no, just say no to prayerlessness.

So I'm not going to have it. I'm not gonna have prayerlessness in my life. I'm gonna say no to that. Because God has drawn near to me and Jesus Christ and then take your prayers and pray like Abraham.

Be bold this week. Ask God for great things, for big things, kingdom prayers that encompass big spaces. That's what we learned here tonight from Abraham.

Pray bigger. Pray that God would show mercy to our great city. Let's pray. Lord, we pray for that, that God, you would show mercy to so many in our great city.

[30 : 00] And we thank you for this great example of prayer, but even more for the one, the one righteous man who stood in the place of the mini-center, Jesus Christ.

So thank you for the beauty of the fact that you show us the gospel some 12, 13, 1400 years at least before Jesus was ever born right here in Genesis 18.

We thank you for that. That's renewing. So we pray that that would feed our souls tonight. As we step into Monday, work day, school day, early morning wake up, Lord, we need prayer.

We need your strength. We need to know that we're loved. We need to know that whatever we face, our justification that you're for us and the great exchange will never be taken away.

That's what we need tomorrow morning. So we ask that you would teach us that tonight. We pray that in Christ's name. Amen.