

Abraham the Intercessor

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[0 : 0 0] So this evening we're going to continue our series looking at the life of Abraham from the book of Genesis. So if you have a Bible, you'll find it helpful to have it open at the passage that was read for us from Genesis chapter 18.

I think for many of us prayer can be something that is our greatest comfort at the same time as being one of our greatest challenges in the Christian life.

Because sometimes it can be hard to pray. Sometimes we don't really know how to pray or what to pray for. This evening we come to a passage in the Bible which records the first extended prayer in the whole Bible.

And it has a lot to teach us about the nature of prayer, particularly about praying for other people. In the second half of this chapter Abraham is told by God that the city of Sodom is going to be destroyed because of its extreme evil.

And so what follows is this amazing prayer where Abraham steps up, he draws near to God and he intercedes. He prays boldly and persistently for these people.

[1 : 1 1] From the very beginning of the Bible God's people are marked out as those who intercede, who pray for other people. Because there are different kinds of prayer in the Bible. There are prayers of worship and adoration.

Prayers where we praise God for who he is in all his glory, everything he's done in creation and salvation. Secondly there are prayers of confession where we come to God in our brokenness and in our need and in our guilt and in our shame.

And we lay our sin before him and we are renewed and restored by his inexhaustible grace. Thirdly we pray prayers of petition. In other words we come to God and we ask him for things we need.

Give us today our daily bread. But the fourth kind of prayer and in many ways the most challenging kind of prayer is what we call intercession. An intercession is a little bit different because it always involves at least three parties.

The other kinds of prayer can be directly between us and God. But intercession always involves a third party. It's the bringing of another's need before God. And that's what we have going on here in the second half of Genesis 18.

[2 : 2 5] Abraham is engaging in intercession. He is praying to God on behalf of the city of Sodom. And so this evening as we think about prayer together I want to highlight five brief principles from this passage as we think about praying for others.

The first thing we see as we look at Genesis 18 is that Abraham talked with God. Look at verse 22. 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? You see as we've studied the life of Abraham so far we've seen how God has come to him and has made all these incredible promises to him.

He's established this amazing covenant relationship with him. He's shown how committed he is to Abraham. And here in Genesis chapter 18 we're given this incredible insight into the intimacy of that relationship.

At the start of the chapter we didn't read it, the Lord physically appears to Abraham and they share a meal. In the New Testament James describes Abraham as a friend of God.

[3 : 42] And so God reassures Abraham of the promises he's made to him. Time and time again God demonstrates his commitment to this man and his family.

But now in the second half of the chapter Abraham actually stands before God and is making a case for the people of Sodom. But I think it's significant that the first step in that process is Abraham drawing near to God and speaking with him.

And at one level that might seem really obvious to us but it really is a foundational aspect of prayer. Many people have the tendency to overcomplicate prayer and make it seem like a really difficult arduous activity.

But on one level prayer is remarkably simple. It's when we meet with God we draw near to him and speak to him from our hearts. And the amazing thing is that God in his grace seeks that kind of interaction with us.

God wants his people to draw near. Because we see here not only does Abraham speak with God but God invites Abraham to speak with him. Look at verse 16.

[4 : 53] Then the men set out from there and they look down towards Sodom. Abraham went with them to set them on their way. And the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation.

And all nations on earth shall be blessed in him. And so on and so forth. Maybe when you read these words you wonder why God speaks this way. Surely he doesn't have to physically go down into the city to find out what's going on.

Surely he doesn't have to think through his thoughts aloud like this. God is omniscient. He knows all things. But the point here is that what God is doing is for Abraham's benefit.

He is essentially inviting Abraham to step up and intercede for these people. If God wanted to he could act with no reference to Abraham whatsoever. But in his grace he accommodates us in all of our limits and all of our weaknesses.

So God shows us here his willingness to be approached. The creator and ruler and judge of this incredible and vast universe wants to engage with and relate to individual human beings.

[6 : 05] Many religions give you the picture of a cowering servant before a hard taskmaster unsure of their standing before him. But that's not the God of the Bible.

The God of the Bible is intimate. The God of the Bible invites people to draw near. He is a God who delights in his children coming before him.

Maybe sometimes as a Christian you feel like nobody really values you or that you don't have much to offer or that nobody really listens to you.

But the amazing truth here is that God wants to speak with you. James chapter four and verse eight promises us he says draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

The Psalms often describe God as the one who hears us when we cry, the one who is close to those who are in need. To be a prayerful person you don't have to have a robust theological education.

[7 : 05] A prayerful person is a person who draws near and talks with God. Jesus own life on earth was saturated with prayer with time spent talking with his father.

Abraham was a man who talked with God. Secondly, Abraham knew God and we see that in his prayer for the city of Sodom. It's based on what he knows to be true about God.

Look at verse 23 he says far be it from you to do such a thing to put the righteous to death with the wicked so that the righteous fair as the wicked far be that from you shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just.

In other words, Abraham is basing his prayer, his intercession for these people in who God is in God's own character. He's not doubting, he's not asking a question about whether or not God is going to do the right thing.

He's declaring his faith in who he believes God to be. He knows that God cannot do the wrong thing. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just, what is right?

[8 : 15] And the point here is that what we know to be true about God will shape our prayers. And this is why theology is really important. That's what Thomas was saying in our midweek meeting, theology matters.

I think sometimes people hear the word theology and shudder because it makes us think of abstract or academic stuff. But theology is vital for every believer because really theology is asking what do we believe about God?

What he has said, what he's like, what he's done and what do we believe about ourselves in light of that? All of that will impact our prayers. And what this means really is that if we have a small view of God and who God is, we will have a small view of the importance and effectiveness of prayers and whether praying for people matters.

So Abraham's basis for prayer is grounded not in himself or even in the people of Sodom. It's primarily grounded in God. Far be it from you, he says.

Here goes on to demonstrate his understanding of who God is. And sometimes in our own prayer life, all we can do is fix our minds on who God is. Sometimes we have no words.

[9 : 34] All we can do is fix our minds on who God is. So Abraham knows God, but not only does Abraham know God, he knows who he is before God.

In verse 27 he says, behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I, who am but dust and ashes. And this great recognition of humility of who he is as he stands before this awesome and this holy God.

Sometimes we can lose sight of that a bit. We can be very casual in how we think about prayer. We have to remember that we do come before a God who is amazing and big.

And there's a freedom in that. There's a freedom, a liberating humility. Because sometimes when we think about the people around us, we feel the need to pretend to be something we're not.

We put a brave face on things. We don't display our weaknesses or our anxieties or our fragility. But when we come to God in prayer, there's a liberating humility in knowing that he is big.

[10 : 42] He is amazing and we are small. Psalm 139 reminds us of this. It tells us that God is a God who searches our hearts. He knows us through and through.

Before we speak a word, he knows it completely. So Abraham talked with God, Abraham knew God. Thirdly, Abraham was bold before God.

And we see that in the passage, not just in terms of the scope of his prayer, the fact that he prayed not just for his friends and his family in the city, but prayed for the whole city to be saved, but also in his persistence.

First, he asks God to spare Sodom if there are 50 righteous, 50 believers in the city. And then he goes down to 45 and 40 and all the way down to 10.

Abraham is bold and persistent in his prayer. But many Christians, many of us, maybe we don't feel like we have that kind of boldness in our prayer. Maybe we feel timid or weak.

[11 : 41] But as Christians, in light of the gospel and what God has done in the New Testament, we actually have even more reasons to be confident. The writer to the Hebrews wrote his letter to encourage and equip Christian believers who were struggling and battling with all kinds of troubles.

And in chapter four and verse 16, he said, Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

And it's really interesting that the Greek word there that's translated as confidence, it really is a sense of frankness. It's often used to convey a sense of speaking freely, of speaking openly.

Because you see in the presence of royalty, for example, you don't go up to them and just chat as if you were old friends. So if a king or a queen tells you to speak freely, to speak openly, to speak your mind, it's an incredible privilege.

The amazing thing is that through the gospel, this is the kind of freedom we have with God. We can come before his throne and we can speak freely. Of course, we come with reverence and with humility, but at the same time, we come with boldness and confidence that he will hear us and he will answer us.

[13 : 01] And the really amazing thing here is that however timid we might feel in front of other people, however much we might feel sometimes like nobody values us or nobody cares about what we have to say, the amazing truth of the gospel is that God wants you to come to him.

He wants you to come to him with confidence and in prayer. Do you ever think about why we end our prayers in Jesus' name?

I think for many people it feels like a bit formulaic or it's just a tradition that we follow. But we pray in Jesus' name because it's in Jesus' name that we have confidence.

He is the only basis on which our prayers have any merit whatsoever. We come in the name of Jesus because we know God will hear us. Sometimes when we think about prayer, we face the temptation to turn it into a kind of transaction.

You know, if we read our Bibles enough or if we go to church enough, if we use the right language in prayer, then surely God will hear us. Surely God then will answer my prayers.

[14 : 06] And we can become so caught up with our own weakness and our own sin that we think somehow we can affect whether or not God will listen. But the amazing thing about the gospel is that we don't come to God on the basis of anything within us, anything we've done, anything we could do.

The reason we come with confidence is because of Jesus. Jesus is our intercessor. He's the one who bridges the gap between us and God. So as Abraham boldly prays, persistently prays for these people, because we too have amazing reasons to be bold in prayer.

When we pray, we're not convincing God to do something he doesn't want to do. John Blanchard, an English preacher and author, said, prayer is not wrestling with God's reluctance to bless us.

It is laying hold of his willingness to do so. The Westminster Confession of Faith is a document that summarizes what we believe as a church.

It says, speaking about adoption, it says that believers are taken into the number and enjoy the liberties and the privileges of children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, and have access to his throne with boldness.

[15 : 26] So we can be free and bold as we come to God in prayer. That's not to say that God will always answer our prayers exactly the way we expect, but he will hear us. He will listen, like a parent listens to their children.

It can be easy sometimes to think, especially in our theological tradition, well, God is sovereign and he will save who he will save. But the incredible thing is that he chooses to use means.

He uses his people. Not just in sharing and communicating the gospel, and not just in telling other people about Jesus, but in praying for their hearts, in praying that they would be changed.

Abraham was bold in his prayers for Sodom. Fourthly, Abraham brought others before God. And this really is getting to the heart of intercessory prayer.

Think about who Abraham was praying for. He was praying at one level for his family, for Lot and his family. He prayed for any potential believers in the city, the righteous, the 50, the 45, all the way down to the 10.

[16 : 37] But he also prayed for unbelievers. He prayed for the whole city to be saved, not just for the righteous to be snatched out. We've seen earlier in Genesis how God has promised through Abraham to bless all nations.

He promises to bring salvation to the world. We don't have time to go into Genesis 19 and explore it fully, but a few things to note about the city of Sodom and these people that Abraham is praying for.

First of all, is the extent of their evil. This is a city full of abuse, of sexual violence, of twisted relationships.

It's a city that Ezekiel later on in the Bible tells us ignored the cries of the poor and needy. And Sodom does highlight to us that sin gets to a point where God says, enough is enough.

But Sodom was also a unique moment in redemptive history. It's a time that really highlights God's grace to us, because this is not the normal way God deals with sin, at least in the present.

[17 : 44] Sodom points us forward to the reality of judgment. But it also raises the question for us, what primarily motivates us to pray?

When we're thinking about praying for others, what motivates us to pray? For Abraham here, it's knowledge of the truth of what's about to happen. It's knowledge of the future.

Abraham knows that these people are going to be under God's judgment for their sin. And so he is driven urgently to pray. And that makes us ask the question of ourselves, do we see the people around us, the world in which we inhabit, as people in darkness, in need of rescue?

Do we see our neighbors, our family, our friends who don't believe as people who are in dire need of Jesus? Jesus himself in his earthly ministry spoke of the reality of judgment and of hell.

And it can be maybe a subject that's uncomfortable for some of us to think about, but it's a truly biblical reality. It's a reality that should drive us to our knees in prayer.

[18 : 56] As a church, we are called to be intercessors to our world. As a Christian, as members of God's people, as descendants of Abraham, we too are intercessors.

The reformation of the 16th century recovered the amazing biblical truth that they've called the priesthood of all believers. In other words, it's not just the hierarchy, it's not just the leaders of the church that can come before God in this way.

It's every single believer. Every believer has access to God. Alistair Begg, a Scottish minister over in the US, he said that in some mysterious way beyond our understanding, God requires intercessory prayer as a necessary wheel.

He commits to us, his people, the responsibility of moving that wheel. We move the machinery of his providence when we come before him with the needs of others.

In a similar way, Charles Spurgeon said that prayer is the powerhouse of the church. If the engine room is out of action, then the whole mill grinds to a halt. And what this means for us today is that our prayers matter.

[20 : 06] Our prayers matter. You might not always feel that that's true, but it is. Our prayers for the hearts of other people matter. God uses them.

He's ordained it as part of his process of salvation, that the prayers of his people are powerful. Abraham brought others before God. Finally, Abraham was not God.

In other words, Abraham could not save the people of Sodom himself. As an intercessor, Abraham was limited. He himself stands before God as a flawed and sinful human being.

He himself is a man in need of grace. But the gospel tells us that there is a better intercessor. There is an intercessor who can actually take the place of people, who can go down and face the judgment in place of his people.

If our faith is in Jesus, we have an intercessor who not only makes a case for us before God, but who has already secured our forgiveness, our new life.

[21 : 13] And so Jesus' plea in our defense, he stands before the Father and he says, He is innocent. She is free from guilt and shame.

The penalty for that person's sin has been paid for. The glorious truth of the gospel is that for the sake of one, for the sake of one truly righteous person, God would spare the unrighteous many.

For the sake of his son, Jesus Christ. Maybe you're listening to the service today and you're not a Christian, and the reality is that a passage like Genesis 19 can be a really frightening one for someone who doesn't trust in Jesus.

But the truth is that, and Sodom reminds us of this, a decision about Jesus cannot be postponed indefinitely. People are given a time window, and one day we stand before the God who is so holy and so perfect and so just, and who cannot tolerate sin, and it requires us to give an account of our life.

Who will speak in our defense? The sobering story of Sodom and Gomorrah underlines the extravagance of God's grace.

[22 : 30] Because what happens to those in Sodom who do not repent is ultimately what should happen to every one of us. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

In 1 Timothy 2 and verse 4, he says, God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 2 Peter 3 and verse 9, God does not want anyone to perish, but to come to repentance.

In this time of lockdown, I think many people are getting through their to-do lists, and maybe things you just haven't gotten around to doing for a long time. Maybe you've been putting off a decision about Jesus for much of your life.

I would urge you to consider today where you stand before God. And if you're a Christian this evening and praying for others is something you find hard, something you feel you're inconsistent at, the amazing thing to remember is that our prayers really matter.

Our prayers really matter. Many of us here in St. Columbus who are Christians, we know in our own experience the power of someone who's consistently and faithfully prayed for us.

[23 : 42] But prayer can be hard to persevere with. Sometimes we can't find the right words, but God has promised us in his word in Romans chapter 8 that he will help us.

He says, 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.

So Abraham talked with God. Abraham knew God. Abraham was bold before God. Abraham brought others before God, but Abraham was not God.

For many of us this time of lockdown has brought so many challenges, so many ways we might feel limited in terms of what we can do, but one thing we can do as Christians as a church is pray.

We can be a people this week who are prayerful. May God enable us to do so. Let's pray. Lord God and Father, we thank you and praise you for your Son, Jesus Christ.

[24 : 49] We thank you that He is our basis for prayer. He is the reason we can have confidence in coming before you. Father, we pray that in this week we would trust and rest in Him.

Lord, help us in our weakness, in our flaws. Help us to be a people who are prayerful. Help us to be a people who long to spend time with you.

Father, we pray that you would renew us and encourage us and equip us to do all we do this week to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.