

“Bold to Speak to the Lord,” Genesis 18:16-33 (Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost, October 28, 2018)

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹ 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.”

²² 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.

PRAY

We have been studying the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis on Sunday mornings this fall, and quite frankly our text for today at first glance seems really strange. It’s ok to admit that. We read what Abraham says to God, how he pleads with God on behalf of a city, and he sounds for all the world like an auctioneer working in reverse. “Do I hear fifty? Do I hear forty-five? Do I hear forty?” It’s strange to us that a man would seemingly haggle with God like this.

But then it’s also strange to us that a man would *have* to haggle with God ... over the lives of people! That’s what’s going on. God means to destroy the city of Sodom and everyone in it. We read that and a lot of us are horrified. For many in our society all they hear when someone says “God of the Bible” or certainly “Old Testament God” is this person who likes to burn people. More than a few people have left the church because of this, and there are quite a few

prominent Christian leaders today who say ministers like me need to stay away from the Old Testament because it will only turn people off to Christianity.

Obviously, I disagree with that line of thinking. I deliberately planned to preach on Sodom and Gomorrah. We'll look in depth at the destruction of those cities next week when we study Genesis 19 and we'll look at the wickedness of those cities and what they were doing to attract God's wrath and judgment.

But today we'll focus on Abraham's conversation with God in Genesis 18. I learned something last week about our text I never knew before: this is the first time in the Bible where a man initiates a conversation with God.

In other words, this is the first time in all the Scriptures where we read a man drew near to God **and prayed**. That's significant, and I believe God means to teach us two things about prayer through this text: *first, the power of prayer. Second, the purpose of prayer.*

First, the power of prayer. We looked at the first half of Genesis 18 last week, where these three mysterious visitors appear before Abraham and Sarah's tent near the oaks of Mamre. One of the visitors, it becomes clear, is the Lord God Almighty himself. The other men are two of his angels.

The three get up to leave Abraham and begin walking toward the town of Sodom, and the Lord talks to his two angels. It's clear Abraham can't hear him. The Lord says, "I have chosen Abraham, he's going to become a great nation, through him my righteousness and justice will be established on earth. I need to tell him what I'm planning to do with Sodom."

So in verses 20-21 the Lord speaks to Abraham and says, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹ 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." Genesis 18:20-21. In other words, God is going down to Sodom and Gomorrah to check out the reports and see if the cities are as wicked as he's heard.

Don't get hung up on the language here, where it says God "will go down" to Sodom and see for himself. Some people look at that and say, "Couldn't God have just looked at Sodom from heaven? Why does he have to go there? Does he not know what's happening in Sodom?"

The answer is: of course, God knows. In the Bible, God never asks questions or does investigation for his own information. He's omniscient, he sees all and knows all. He knows everything that can be known.

When God questions or investigates, there's always another purpose behind it. Genesis 18 is no exception. **God goes down to Sodom because he wants to involve Abraham in what he's doing.** God plans to make Abraham into a great nation and he respects Abraham's dignity and personhood. It's not going too far to say God wants Abraham to be a partner in his plans to redeem the world.

How, though, does God get Abraham involved? He tells Abraham what he's up to, and then we read this: "So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD." Genesis 18:22. The two angels go down to Sodom, but the Lord doesn't – instead, he waits. The Lord tarries there with Abraham.

Why? *The Lord wants to grant Abraham an audience.* The Lord of Hosts dares Abraham to address him.

Do you realize what that means? Think about it like this: it is incredibly difficult to get an audience with powerful people on earth. Maybe if I wanted to speak to our congressman or one of the senators I could call a few people and make that happen. After all, they've attended our services before. But it would probably take a few weeks. I could probably get a meeting with the Governor of Mississippi.

But the President of the United States? No chance I could get an audience with him. And beyond that – what chance would I have to have a conversation with Bill Gates, or Mark Zuckerberg, or Jeff Bezos (who I think now is the richest man in the world – he's worth either \$112 billion or \$160 billion)? It's not possible.

Now why would people do just about anything to get an audience with one of these powerful people? Because if someone like that makes a phone call for you or if that person gets out his checkbook and starts writing, your life will change. They are powerful enough to send the course of your life in an entirely new direction. That's power.

But no matter how powerful someone is, at the end of the day they are all perishing. They are, as Abraham says, just dust and ashes. Genesis 18 tells us, however, that it's possible to have an audience with someone much greater than any of those men. We can have an audience with the Lord God Almighty himself, and when the Lord determines to do something in your life or in this world *no one can frustrate his plans.*

You get an audience with the President, or with Jeff Bezos, or whomever? That's great. But Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." You get an audience with one these powerful men, and they determine to help you and get you what you want. That's a blessing. But Proverbs 21:30 says, "No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD." When you have his blessing no one can stop you.

Friends, Genesis 18 is an invitation for you to unlock the most powerful resource you have at your disposal: the power of prayer. Too often Christians talk about prayer like it's a burden: "Oh, I know I should pray more. I don't spend enough time in prayer. My prayer life is so weak." I know what people mean when they say that – I've said that.

But whenever we speak of prayer like that it betrays a serious misunderstanding of what prayer is. Prayer is not some hoop we jump through in order to keep God happy. Prayer is our chance to come before the living God and change the world around us.

When we pray, the hearts of people around us change. You can't change your children's heart, your spouse's heart, your employer's heart. But God can. God can take a cold, dead heart, a heart bent of self-destruction, and set it right.

Prayer can change your heart. Right now, you may want a lot of things that are bad for you and couldn't care less about things that are good for you. But if you can muster the strength to pray for God to work in your life, he can make you want new things and he can make things that once seemed so good to you taste bad.

Prayer can even move God to do things on earth he would not otherwise do. Our prayer prompts God to change the world. "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit." James 5:16b-18. This is why we pray for our President, this is why we pray for Congress, this is why we pray for the big things we do each Sunday morning such as the gospel going to unreached people groups. **We do this because we believe we have access to someone who can do anything in response to our requests.** We have access to God through prayer. That's power.

Second, the purpose of prayer. One of the wonderful assurances of the Christian faith is that we have in the Lord a Father in heaven who is not only all-powerful, but he loves us and knows us in intricate detail.

"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God.⁷ Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." Luke 12:6-7.

I used to think these verses were hyperbole, some kind of exaggeration (no one could know the number of hairs on your head), then I had kids. I used to try to cut the hair on my oldest son to save money. But I always messed up one side of his bangs when I did it. I didn't know why at first so I started studying his hair. I noticed at one spot on his scalp his hair grew in a different direction – everywhere else it grew down, but in this one spot it grew up. That's why I kept messing it up.

After months of looking over his head I finally saw that. But friends, don't you see? We have a Father in heaven who has been looking over his children from before we were born, before we were formed in our mother's womb (that's Jeremiah 1:5). He knows us and takes such delight in us that he literally knows even the number of the hairs on our head. Granted, it's easier for God to count the hairs on some heads in this room than on others. Still, it shows how much God cares.

Therefore, we can go to him in prayer and ask for whatever is on our hearts. "[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Philippians 4:7. And Psalm 55:22 says, "Cast your burden [whatever it is] on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved."

So it is true that one purpose of prayer is to go to God with your needs, **it's just not what Abraham does in Genesis 18.** What is he doing?

For a long time I thought Abraham was only praying because he was burdened for his nephew Lot. He hoped God would spare Lot from the coming destruction of Sodom. But in his prayer Abraham doesn't even mention Lot. "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?'" Genesis 18:23-24.

If all he cared about was Lot, Abraham could have prayed, "Lord God Almighty, I know you are determined to destroy Sodom, but my nephew Lot is there. Will you please make sure he gets out before you rain fire and brimstone down on that city?"

In fact, that's how you would *expect* Abraham to pray. Abraham has been promised this land, after all. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, aren't inclined to give it to him. Therefore, when God says, "Abraham, I'm going to destroy those cities on the plain," you'd expect Abraham to say, "Oh, *that's* how you're going to fulfill your land promise to me. I know you told me you were going to give me this land but I never saw how until now. Burning all those dirty, idol-worshipping pagans to a crisp ought to do it."

That's not what Abraham does. Instead, he prays like this: "God, I know Sodom is full of desperately wicked people who deserve judgment. But what if there are just fifty people in Sodom who are still righteous? Will you not spare the city for their sake?"

Do you see what Abraham is doing? He's not praying for Lot. ***He's praying for Sodom.*** For the first time in world history you have a man, Abraham, who looks at a people who are ethnically different from him, who are religiously different from him, who are morally different from him (Abraham is a moral man, and as we'll see next week the people of Sodom were not) *yet Abraham has compassion on them.* It's remarkable.

But Abraham's big question is this: **does God have this compassion for the wicked, also?**

Abraham prays, "Will you sweep the righteous away with the wicked?" And God says, "No, for the sake of the fifty I will spare the city." Abraham says, "What about 45? What about 40? Or 30? Or 20? Or what if there are only 10 righteous people in Sodom?" Each time God says, "For the sake of the righteous I will spare the whole city." The Hebrew word translated as "spare" often means "forgive" in the Bible.

This is amazing. Abraham learns something about God no one ever knew before. God does not so love justice that he would destroy the righteous in order to punish the wicked. **Rather, God so loves righteousness that he would forgive the wicked in order to honor the righteous.** Abraham learned the principle of the imputation of righteousness. For the sake of ten men who have earned favor with the Lord, God will spare the many who have earned destruction.

What an insight Abraham got into the character of God! And it *was* an insight. **Here's what you must see:** *the primary purpose of prayer is to not to get your needs met (God knows, after all, what you need before you ask him); it's get to know the God of the universe, his character, and his purposes in the world.*

We see this all the time in the Bible. In Daniel 9, we read where the great prophet Daniel is praying and interceding on behalf of his people. In response to his prayer, an angel appears to him and says, "O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding." Daniel 9:22. God wanted to teach Daniel about who he is and his plans in the world. In the New Testament, Acts 10, we read that while Peter was in prayer, he had a vision in which he learned how God's plan included not just Jews but also Gentiles in the kingdom he is building on earth.

Now I am not saying that if you pray God or an angel will appear to you in a vision. **But I am saying the only way to really get to know the Lord God Almighty is to spend lots of time with him in prayer.**

Like a lot of you, I grew up in an environment that was saturated with Christianity. My parents had me in a Bible-believing church from birth until I went to college, and I am very thankful for that. Therefore, I literally do not remember a time when I did not know that basics of the faith. I knew the Bible, I knew the order of the books of the Bible, I knew the way of salvation. *But I didn't really pray, and so while I knew about the Lord I didn't know the Lord. I knew he loved me in theory, but I didn't know it with my heart.*

Friends, while you may know all about the Lord in theory you'll never really know him and his goodness, his love, his mercy, his compassion, and his justice until to get to the point where you spend lots of time with him in prayer – *that's the purpose of prayer.* In that way a relationship with God is just like any other relationship – the only way you can get to know anyone is to have enough of a commitment to them so as to actually spend time with them, and then after spending lots of time with them you get to know them.

Abraham prayed, and he learned that God loves righteousness so much that if he finds it then for its sake he will forgive the wicked. But it didn't work for Sodom, did it? Why? *Because there were not ten righteous people in Sodom.* In fact, there wasn't even one righteous person in Sodom. Lot was a righteous man, but he wasn't a citizen of Sodom. Genesis 19:9 tells us Lot only sojourned in the city. And, as we'll see next week, Lot wasn't exactly a perfect man. He has some serious flaws.

Abraham learned that the righteous can save the wicked, but that person's righteousness would have to exceed the righteousness of Lot and that person must identify far more closely with the wicked than Lot did.

But that is precisely what we have in the gospel. We'll see next week how wicked Sodom was, but here's what you need to know: when you get down to brass tacks, we're no better than the people of Sodom. We have more in common with Sodom than we'd like to admit, for we are sinners. We are wicked in God's sight.

Yet rather than give us what we deserve God gave us Jesus. Jesus identified so closely with us that, though he is fully God, became fully man. Unlike Lot Jesus didn't just sojourn with us – he didn't become a man for a few years, but he is to this day fully God and fully man.

And Jesus is completely, totally righteous. You know, Abraham for whatever reason stopped at ten. He said, “God, will you spare the wicked for the sake of ten righteous persons.” Why didn't he go down to one? I don't know. Maybe Abraham lost his nerve.

But Jesus picked up where Abraham left off. It's as if Jesus said: “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose just one righteous person is found on earth? Will you spare the wicked for his sake?” And God's answer is, “Yes, Jesus, if you are that one.”

God says to us, “I honor the righteousness of my son Jesus Christ so much that if you trust him and take shelter under his name the fire and brimstone of judgment will not touch you. You will be spared and forgiven.” As Romans 4:5 (NIV 1984) puts it: “⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

The challenge of the Christian life is to get to the place where everything you do is built on the rock of that gospel, so that no matter what happens in your life you can find peace and joy and nothing can shake you. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.” Matthew 7:24-25.

Don't you want that? I know I do, but we can only get to that place through prayer, through spending lots and lots of time getting to know him, learning to love him and trust him, and adoring him. But once you do nothing can shake you. You can be strong, firm, and steadfast.
PRAY