

Great Prayers of the Bible - Genesis 18

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[0 : 00] Please have a seat. Well, what kind of a negotiator are you?

I have an uncle who's a brilliant negotiator. Not only could he negotiate to get the best price possible for whatever he was buying, but he'd also managed to twist the shopkeeper's arm so that they would throw in a cherry on the top, as it were, a freebie on top of what he was buying.

I remember I used to just be in awe of my uncle when he would do this, when he'd work his magic like that. Well, one day, many years later, a little wee Cambodian lady asked my friend and myself to help her to buy a computer.

My friend was a bit of a computer buff, and I remembered what my uncle had taught me all those years ago, and so I assured this lady that I'd go with her and help her to get the best deal possible.

Well, when we got there, we were looking around. She decided on what computer she wanted, and I was like, right, stand back. Time for me to work my magic. I'm going to do it. And all of a sudden, this little wee Cambodian lady turned out to be the master negotiator.

[1 : 11] And it became clear to me very early on in the piece, man, she didn't need me at all. She put me to shame. She was hardcore. So much so that I was beginning to feel a little bit embarrassed as she turned up the heat on the shopkeeper.

You know that feeling when there's a little bit of a dispute going on and you kind of feel embarrassed? You want to get out of there? Well, I did get out of there. Nevertheless, she got an amazing deal and a few extra things thrown in on top, and I assume all parties were happy.

Now, that's not the only way of negotiation, of course. There's political negotiators. We can think of people like Nelson Mandela, JFK, for instance, to name a few.

Well, in our great prayer from the Bible this morning in Genesis 18, we see a master negotiator at work. And he's negotiating with God, no less. But as we look at this negotiating prayer, we'll see that Abraham gets invited to the negotiation table by God himself.

And along the way, we're going to draw out some applications for ourselves concerning prayer. But before we get to the prayer itself, the scene is set in Genesis 18, verses 1 to 15.

[2 : 23] So if you've got your Bible open to Genesis 18, that would be helpful. And the major point in this scene is that there is nothing too hard for God to do. So the scene begins, we're told, in verse 1, with the Lord appearing to Abraham in quite an understated way, you'd have to say.

See, Abraham's just kicking back at the entrance of his tent when he looks up and he sees three men standing nearby. And now we know from Genesis 19, verse 1, that two of these men are angels. And, of course, one is the Lord himself.

And somehow Abraham knows that these three men may be connected with God. And so he hurries and bows down low before them. And what follows in verses 2 to 8 is an illustration of near-eastern hospitality on steroids.

Verse 5 is interesting. Abraham asks if he may get them something to eat. And in the Hebrew, Abraham is basically offering them a piece of bread. I looked at a few other translations this week.

And the King James is awesome. It says a morsel. So he acts like he's going to get them a piece of bread from the cupboard, as it were, just a little something to eat. And yet when they agree, it's all stations go.

[3 : 33] He hurries to the tent in verse 6 and says to Sarah, Quick, get three sahs of fine flour and get cooking. Now, if you look at your footnote in your Bible, three sahs of flour is the equivalent of 22 litres.

Now, I'm not a bread maker or anything like that. That sounds like enough flour to bake hundreds of loaves of bread. So he promises them this little snack to eat.

And meanwhile, he's getting Sarah to cook up a storm with enough flour to feed a small army. But that's not all. We're told he runs to the herd to select the choice tender calf.

And he gives it to his servant to prepare. He selects the best of the flock. And notice again, we're told Abraham runs. It's the heat of the day. And in the Near East, this is siesta time.

It was so hot during this time of the day that you're just supposed to kick back and rest. And then when it cools off a little bit later on, then you can start doing a bit of work. But here we have Abraham, 99-year-old man, running around like an excited child, organising nothing short of a feast for his three guests.

[4 : 40] Well, it's fair to say Abraham knows who he's entertaining and he prepares nothing but the best for them. Well, finally, the feast is ready and Abraham has proved himself to be a great host.

The men begin to eat and Abraham sort of stands nearby, undoubtedly wondering why these guys have come and what they'll say. And finally, the words come in verse 9.

So let's pick it up from there. Chapter 18, verse 9. Where's your wife Sarah, they asked him. There in the tent, he said. Then the Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.

So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, after I'm worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure? Then the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh and say, well, I now have a child now that I'm old.

[5 : 42] Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son. Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, I didn't laugh.

But he said, yes, you did laugh. Well, if you're familiar with the story of Abraham, you'll remember God's call of Abraham in chapter 12 as God promises to make Abraham into a great nation.

But him and Sarah didn't have any children. And yet 13 years pass between this episode and when God promises Abraham in chapter 15 that he and Sarah will have a child.

And then another decade passes, bringing us to this point in Genesis 18, and still no baby, and they're getting older and older. And throughout this time, Abraham and Sarah kind of get sick of waiting, so they try and take matters into their own hands.

And Abraham has a child through his servant girl, Hagar, to try and keep the family line alive. And this has dramatic consequences, which brings trouble and division on Abraham's household.

[6 : 45] And some would argue we still see some of those consequences even today with the Arab-Israeli conflicts. So lots of time has passed and still no baby.

And so Sarah, we're told, upon overhearing the promise, laughs. And before we start picking on Sarah, we need to remember that this was Abraham's reaction also in chapter 17.

They laughed. And probably because they thought it sounded a bit crazy and who could blame them? You see, from a human standpoint, it did sound crazy. The narrative itself goes out of its way to stress the reality from a human standpoint.

We're told in verse 11, Abraham and Sarah were already old and well-advanced in years. We're told in the second half of verse 11 that Sarah was past the age of childbearing.

And in verse 12, we see that Sarah views herself as worn out and her husband as old. You see, it appeared to be impossible that Abraham and Sarah could have a child in their old age.

[7 : 49] Their experience in the world told them that it just wasn't going to happen. No doubt they knew that God was powerful and could do amazing things, but like us, they were conditioned by the fact that some things in this world are possible and some things just aren't.

Well, the Lord could sense the doubt in what Sarah had said and he wants to make sure his message sinks in. So in verse 14, he says, is anything too hard for the Lord?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Obviously, the Lord wants us to assume, no, there isn't anything too hard for the Lord. It's a question we need to ask ourselves when we're tempted to stop waiting for the Lord and try and take matters into our own hands.

And it's a question we need to ask ourselves when we put limits on God, especially when we fail to pray because we just think, oh, that's impossible. There's no way that would happen. I'm not going to pray for Jean.

There's no way she'd come to know the Lord. We put limits on God like that. Well, it wasn't too hard for the Lord and in Genesis 21, we see that God was true to his promise and Abraham and Sarah do have a child.

[8 : 58] Now, I'm not pretending for a minute that our situations are like Abraham and Sarah's, but we do have the same God, don't we? The God for whom nothing is too hard.

Now, this is our God whom we approach in prayer and we must remember that nothing is too hard for him. Now, we mustn't let the seemingly impossible stop us from coming to God knowing that he is the God for whom all things are possible.

And the Bible is full of testimonies of this very thing, isn't it? We only have to turn over to the next book in the Bible, Exodus, to see God hearing his people's cries and delivering them from their oppressors, something that would have seemed impossible to the Israelite slave under the harsh oppression of the world's most powerful nation at the time.

And no matter what the situation is, we need to remember that we're coming to our God for whom nothing is impossible. Therefore, we shouldn't restrict him with what we think is possible for him.

No heart is so hard, no heart is so hard that the Lord can't soften so that his spirit won't draw that person, could draw that person back to faith in him.

[10 : 12] No government is so powerful so as to stop the progress of the gospel because for our God, nothing's too hard. No child is so far gone that in spite of the parents' best efforts to bring that child up in the way of the Lord, that the Lord in his power can't bring that child back to himself.

Therefore, throw off those fetters in your mind that chain God, those fetters that have come because of our conditioning to this world and our perceived reality which says what God can and can't do.

Pour out your hearts to God because he can do it and draw comfort from the fact that with our God, nothing's impossible and let that thought undergird all your prayers. We now come to what many see as the first prayer in the Bible as Abraham pleads for Sodom and Gomorrah in verses 16 to 33.

And the first point I want to make in this section is the amazing privilege of prayer that's given to the covenant people of God. In verse 16, the meal's wrapped up and the men get ready to leave and Abraham, still the good host, begins to walk along with them and see them on their way.

And something interesting happens in verse 17. The Lord says, Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do? Here it seems that the Lord is deliberating with his companions as to whether or not to let Abraham in on the heavenly council, as it were.

[11 : 39] The Lord initiates the invitation to include Abraham and to invite him, as it were, to the negotiation table. And as the story continues, we see that Abraham will indeed be allowed to be involved in the heavenly council, to weigh in on it, and even to have his voice heard.

And the reason we're given is in verse 19, and I'm just going to summarize it for us. It's basically because God has chosen Abraham to be in covenant relationship with him.

Therefore, in Abraham, we see exemplified the awesome privilege of God's covenant people throughout all the ages as God reveals his purposes to them and allows their voice to be heard.

And friends, as Paul points out in Galatians 3, we're Abraham's children by faith. So we too are part of the covenant people of God, and therefore we're privy to God's purposes. And our voice can be heard as we intercede for ourselves and for others.

So the Lord lets Abraham in on what's happening in verses 20 to 21, as he states, the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin is so grievous that the Lord will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached them.

[12 : 57] Now Abraham, possibly knowing how bad Sodom and Gomorrah really are, because his nephew Lot lives there, is in no doubt that the Lord will find the city guilty when he investigates further.

The words I will go down echo the words that the Lord says in Genesis 11, verse 7, as the Lord descends on judgment against Babel. And Abraham, it seems, is in no doubt about the fate of Sodom and is concerned, no doubt, about his nephew Lot.

So he begins to intercede for Sodom. And so he begins to negotiate, as it were, with God. And the first thing we want to note about Abraham's prayer is that he pleads with God in view of his character.

We see this in verse 23 and 25, as Abraham asks two questions. He says, Will the Lord sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

And will not the judge of all the earth do right? And sandwiched between these two questions, Abraham states, Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked the same.

[14 : 04] Far be it from you to do such a thing. See, here we see Abraham appealing to God's character. You see, in Abraham's thinking about the justice of God, it was inconceivable that God would treat the righteous and the wicked the same in judgment.

Abraham's probing God as to whether God values the righteous more than he seeks the destruction of the unrighteous. See, he knows God is just. Therefore, how can God treat the righteous and the wicked in the same way when he judges?

Abraham knew the kind of God he was serving. Do you also know God in this way? See, the more we know the Lord, the more we know his qualities, his character, and his nature.

When we intercede on behalf of ourselves and our family or our nation, we should likewise solicit God's attention by proclaiming all that we know to be true about him. And our proclamation has a great advantage to it because we know that God can't act contrary to his nature.

Therefore, call upon God's mercy. Call upon his patience, his loving kindness, his greatness, his faithfulness. You know, I think we've lost this kind of prayer, the art of pleading with God in view of his character.

[15 : 26] I think sometimes we think that appealing to God's character as a means to having our prayers heard and answered is kind of like trying to blackmail God or something. And yet throughout the Bible, we see examples of this kind of prayer.

Read the Psalms, and you'll see the psalmist constantly pleading with God in view of his character. Psalm chapter 6, verse 4, for instance, says, Turn, O Lord, and deliver me.

Save me because of your unfailing love. And we too can pray with confidence as we appeal to God's character. Perhaps you're wrestling in prayer over an unbelieving family member or friend.

Well, appeal to God who's rich in mercy and full of grace, that he might in that same grace and mercy which makes up his character save your loved one. A prayer I like to pray is, Lord, you're not too weak to save.

Therefore, save my unbelieving family member or friend. So Abraham appeals to God's character, and so can we. We now turn to another aspect of Abraham's prayer, and that is that he pleads with God in boldness and humility as he continues to intercede for Sodom in a way that resembles a Near Eastern bartering session.

[16 : 48] Now, when I visited China back in the year 2000, I had the interesting experience of having to barter for everything, even down to a bottle of water sometimes. And the process would almost always be the same.

The shopkeeper or the person on the street would start out really high, sometimes ridiculously high, and at first it was a real shock to me. And then I realized, oh, okay, we've got to bring him down.

And so we'd start bartering, bring the price down, and then we'd bring it down to an agreed-upon price, and then all parties were happy, and it was all good. Well, in verse 23 to 32, Abraham, it seems, looks like he's bartering with God for Sodom.

He starts out high in verse 24 to 26, and he asks God to spare the city for the sake of 50 righteous people. And when God agrees, Abraham, sensing an opening, goes in again and lowers the number to 45.

And God agrees, and Abraham begins to work him down, 40, 30, 20. And as he keeps bringing the number down, you can sense the tension, can't you, as Abraham kind of starts realizing and he's out of his depth, questioning God like this.

[18 : 00] And scattered throughout this passage, Abraham says things like this in verse 27. Now that I've been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. He continues in verse 32.

May the Lord not be angry with me, but let me speak this just one more time. What if only 10 people can be found there? 10 righteous people.

He answered, for the sake of 10, I will not destroy it. And at that point, either God indicated he'd go no lower or Abraham was like, just didn't want to press his luck.

And before we go any further concerning Abraham's boldness, I just want to take this point, this opportunity to point out what this exchange establishes about God's character. And I think this is important.

Firstly, it shows that God is a God who is far more willing to show mercy than to destroy in judgment. And that's so different from how the world perceives our God, isn't it?

[18 : 58] They kind of think of our God as a note-taking God ready to drop the hammer of justice down any moment you put a foot wrong. Oh, that's not the God we see here. Secondly, it shows that at the heart of God's judgment is love.

You know, when the Lord heard the outcry against Sodom's sin, he personally came down to investigate the case, to see if things were as bad as what he had heard, and to bring justice for those crying out.

And let's face it, if God turned a blind eye to injustice, he wouldn't be loving, would he? Furthermore, he allowed Abraham to intercede when he could have just gone straight there and destroyed the city from the beginning.

But we see God's mercy most clearly in this one fact. He would have spared the city for the sake of only ten righteous people. Now, God is a merciful God.

Well, back to Abraham's boldness. He shows amazing boldness while remaining humble. And his fears for his nephew Lot have been allayed as the result of the argument is that it will only take a very small number of righteous ones to save a community even though it's largely populated by guilty people.

[20 : 11] Abraham was very bold and humble as he approached, sorry, as he interceded for Sodom. And we too can be bold as we approach the Lord in prayer.

Because as I've already pointed out, we are children of the covenant as well. So we can come to God with the same boldness and humility in which Abraham comes to God.

And yet we can come with even more boldness as we're in Christ who's greater than Abraham and through whom we read in Hebrews chapter 4 and 10 grants us access to the very throne room of God's grace.

We, like Abraham, can be bold and persistent while remaining humble and remembering our position before God. Like Abraham, we are just dust and ashes but yet we have this amazing privilege.

And what an amazing privilege it is that God has revealed his purposes to us and invites us to speak as he is willing to hear our voice. And we needn't shrink back from this because in Christ we can boldly approach him.

[21 : 19] We can pour out our hearts to him and our petitions before him. So let this thought wash over you and encourage you to come to God boldly as you intercede for others and as you petition God for your every need.

And our final point about this prayer this morning is that Abraham he watches for an answer. You see, sometimes I don't know about you guys but sometimes when I pray no sooner am I done and then I move on to the next task.

You know? I sometimes forget that I've even prayed at all and once it's out of my mind I don't even sort of wait in anticipation to see what the Lord will do.

Well this can't be said about Abraham as we learn in chapter 19 verse 27. See, Abraham gets up early in the morning we're told and returns to where he stood with the Lord the day before.

He's obviously concerned and wants to see if his intercession was successful. The mediator has now turned into the spectator. But to his dismay he sees the two cities are totally destroyed and dense smoke rising from them.

[22 : 33] You see, in chapter 19 we learn that the city was filled with wickedness. Chapter 19 verse 4 we see that the entire city of Sodom both young and old surrounded the house where the two visitors were staying and demanded to have sex with them.

The Lord was justified in destroying the city as not even ten righteous people were to be found there. And while Abraham stands helplessly remembering Lot as he looks over the burnt cities the Lord remembers Abraham and spares Lot and his family.

Look with me at 19 verse 29 So when God destroyed the cities of the plain he remembered Abraham and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.

See, the Lord rescued Lot we're told not necessarily because of Lot's righteousness but because the Lord remembered Abraham. You see intercession does matter.

So let's not forget that and switch off after praying but let's wait expectantly being watchful as our God remembers our intercessions and will act. If we've learned anything from this passage today then it's that we as God's covenant people have been admitted as it were into the heavenly court and given insight into God's purposes.

[23 : 57] And in the gospel we learn what God's purposes are for the world. He's redeeming people beginning with Abraham and extending to all those who are children of Abraham by faith which includes ourselves.

God's and he's also judging the world and Sodom and Gomorrah is only a taste of God's judgment that's to come. The next time the Lord comes down as it were it will be for the judgment of the world.

Therefore if you're here this morning and you're not part of the covenant people of God then you're heading for destruction. So I'd strongly urge you to put your faith and trust in God.

You see Abraham we're told in Genesis 15 was righteous not because he was a great guy. If you read Genesis you'll see he makes a lot of mistakes just like us. But he was called righteous or declared to be righteous because he believed in the Lord and the Lord credited to him as righteousness.

Therefore put your trust in Jesus who died and rose so that you might be forgiven and you too will be declared righteous in God's sight and escape the judgment that's coming. And if you're part of God's covenant people here this morning then you play a part in what God is doing in the world.

[25 : 13] Therefore we have permission to speak. We can petition God in view of what we know to be true about his character and we can come boldly and humbly while expectantly waiting and watching for him to act.

Sometimes he acts in a way that we weren't expecting. I'm sure he acted in a way that Abraham wasn't expecting but nevertheless he acts and he remembers our prayers.

Now intercession does matter and that's been seen very clearly from our great prayer in the Bible this morning. Abraham was willing to be used by God to intercede for the cities of his time and later in Israel's history the Lord again was looking for someone like Abraham to intercede for Jerusalem.

In Ezekiel 22 verse 29 to 30 we read this concerning Jerusalem Jerusalem. The people of the land practiced extortion and commit robbery. they oppressed the poor and needy and mistreat the alien denying them justice.

I looked for a man among them who had built up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so that I would not have to destroy it but I found none. Here it's like the Lord's lamenting over Jerusalem he kind of wanted someone to stand between him and Jerusalem to intercede on behalf of Jerusalem but he found none.

[26 : 35] so he had to destroy it. Well may that not be true of us let us be found by the Lord interceding for our country our city our family and our friends and may we do so in the vein of Abraham.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.