

The prayer of Genesis 18. Bangalore, India. 30 January 2007.

Reading : Genesis 18. 1-2a, 16-33; 19. 27-29; 2 Peter 2. 4a, 6-10a.

Abraham is certainly no stranger to intercession – to prayer on behalf of others. He has earlier pleaded for Ishmael, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before you’, 17. 18. And he will later plead for Abimelech, king of Gerar, in chapter 20. ‘God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, You are surely a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife. But Abimelech ... said, Lord, will you slay a righteous nation ...? (seemingly by barrenness of all the women, v. 17) Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she ... herself said, He is my brother. In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this. And God said to him in a dream ... I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. Therefore I ... withheld you from sinning against me ... I did not let you touch her. Now therefore, restore the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you ... Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech’, Gen. 20. 3-17.

Abraham now responds to God’s message about Sodom with what must rank one of the most impressive intercessory prayers of all time. And intercession is a tremendous privilege open to us all. But intercession is not only a privilege, it is a duty and a responsibility. ‘I exhort, first of all (as of first - of primary importance)’, Paul urged Timothy, ‘that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made on behalf of all’, 1 Timothy 2. 1.

And, frankly, it is unnerving to read of God’s reaction when His people fail to intercede for one another. Two Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Ezekiel, give it to us very straight.

God said through Ezekiel in chapter 22 of his prophecy, ‘I sought for a man among them who would stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore have I poured out my indignation on them’, vv. 30–31. It was very much as if God had hung out a large ‘Help Wanted – situation vacant’ sign in the window of heaven. But there wasn’t so much as one applicant for the post – for the position – no-one willing to come and stand in the gap as the required intercessor.

Isaiah is even more hard-hitting. He reports in chapter 59, ‘the Lord was displeased that there was no justice (judgement, KJV). He saw that there was no man, and he *wondered* that there was no intercessor’, vv. 15–16. ‘Wondered’ is a very tame translation. Literally, ‘he was appalled, stunned, horrified that there was no-one to intercede!’ The bad moral condition of His people displeased/distressed Him, but what ‘shocked, devastated Him (probably best translation)’ was the absence of anyone to intercede for them – there was no one ready to step in between Himself and sinful Israel to plead on their behalf – there was no-one to do an Abraham!

In many ways Abraham’s prayer is a model of intercession. But probably the most striking feature of Abraham’s praying is that he stopped when he did. **So, why did Abraham stop when he had successfully negotiated the Lord down from 50 to 10?** Well, certainly God hadn’t told him to stop – as He would later tell Jeremiah more than once – ‘Do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them’, 7. 16; 11. 14.

Nor does God cut Abraham off when he reached ten. True we read in verse 33 – much as in 17. 22, following the making of the covenant – ‘the Lord went His way as soon as He stopped/finished speaking to Abraham’. And, in that sense, it is the Lord who terminates the conversation. But we note that Abraham has already stopped asking. His sixth and last plea – ‘suppose ten should be found there’ – is preceded by his assurance, ‘I will speak but once more’, v. 32.

Then why does he stop? Does he feel that to push for less than ten would be presumptuous and unreasonable – that the sin of Sodom was far too serious for God to spare the city for less than ten righteous? No, that won’t wash. For the same logic surely holds true for one righteous man as it does for fifty. Would it been any more just for God to destroy one righteous person than to destroy ten – or fifty? And, indeed, centuries later, God spoke through Jeremiah in terms of pardoning or sparing the city of Jerusalem if He found but one man who practised righteousness, Jer. 5. 1. My suspicion is that Abraham is confident that God will find at least ten righteous souls in Sodom. After all, will he not find Lot and his wife; their two sons, 19. 12, their two virgin daughters (no small achievement in Sodom¹), v. 8, their two married daughters, and their two sons-in-law, v. 14. Alas, if that was Abraham’s expectation, he was to be sorely disappointed.

This brings us to the question, ‘**But did God grant Abraham his request?**’ Well, it all depends what we mean by ‘his request’. If we are referring to *the actual words* which came out of Abraham’s mouth, then ‘No’, God didn’t – for, in the words of Moses later, ‘Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim were overthrown by the Lord in His anger and in His wrath’, Deut. 29. 23 – to which Jeremiah adds the detail concerning Sodom, ‘as in a moment, with no hand to help her’, Lam. 4. 6. And, *on the face of it*, Abraham’s concern and plea were for Sodom to be spared. Certainly if that’s what was on Abraham’s heart, his prayer failed abysmally! For when, the following morning, he looked out over the once fertile plain of Siddim, everything was engulfed/enveloped in flames, 19. 29. Sodom certainly hadn’t been delivered by his prayers.

But did Abraham's real - his underlying - concern lie with the city of Sodom itself. I think not. I cannot believe that Abraham felt any great sympathy for the inhabitants of Sodom and the other cities of the plain. He had long known that the men of Sodom were 'wicked and sinners against the Lord exceedingly', 13. 13. And, no doubt, in chapter 14, when Abraham brought Lot and the rest of the captives of Sodom all the way back from near Damascus, there was ample time for Lot to tell his uncle how his righteous soul had been constantly tormented and vexed by the lawless deeds and lascivious lives of the people of Sodom. And has not the Lord only just emphasized to Abraham that 'the cry of Sodom is great,' and 'their sin is very grievous', v. 20. It seems clear from his opening words in verse 23 that Abraham's real concern lies elsewhere – not with the city itself but with those he terms 'the righteous' who he believes are in it.

Surely, it is no coincidence that, in writing about this very occasion, Peter lays tremendous stress on the righteousness of Lot – referring in the space of two verses to 'righteous Lot', 2 Pet. 2. 7; 'that righteous man', v. 8; and 'his righteous soul', v. 8. I see no reason to doubt that Abraham had Lot and his family particularly in mind when he prayed – for who else in Sodom would he have reason to expect merited the description 'the righteous'? Abraham's concern lies then – not with the impending fate of the men of Sodom – which he has no reason to doubt is well-deserved on account of their filthy lifestyle. His concern lies rather with the outcome for one of his own immediate family – one of his own kith and kin – having, together with his father Terah, brought Lot from Ur, and for whom to some extent he therefore felt responsible.

But there is much more to this than a family connection. Abraham's keen sense of justice recoils at the thought of righteous Lot perishing among the guilty men of Sodom – and he therefore bases his plea to God, not on Lot's close family relationship, but on Lot's personal righteousness. How can God punish the righteous with utter destruction – simply because the righteous happens to be living among the notoriously wicked? The very thought is abhorrent to Abraham! 'Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked – far be it from you', v. 25. And so He doesn't plead God's mercy (though God did show mercy – pity, compassion – towards Lot, 19. 16) but His righteousness – resting his case foursquare on the justice of God.

This isn't, of course, the first time that Abraham has set out to deliver Lot. Back in chapter 14, perhaps 15 years ago, Lot was in hot water – he had been taken captive by Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, and his confederates.² Initially, Abraham had shown no inclination whatever to get involved in the conflict between Chedorlaomer and the cities of the plain – no doubt on the principle later stated by Isaiah, 'Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth', Isa. 45. 9. But everything changed when he was notified that his nephew was involved – 'when Abraham heard that his brother (his kinsman, near relative) was taken captive' – that was different!

This is then the second occasion when Abraham intervenes to rescue Lot. In chapter 14, he delivered Lot from bondage in Elam by his sword; in chapters 18 and 19 he delivers him from being barbecued in Sodom by his supplications. This combination of events raises a very serious issue for us all – beginning with what I must call 'Abraham's right to pray for Lot'.

Back in chapter 14, when Lot was carried captive, Abraham didn't think it enough to add him to his prayer list. No way. He – together with his allies (Mamre, Eshcol and Aner) and his 318 trained and armed men – sped in hot pursuit, routed the foreign invaders and did everything necessary to deliver Lot. The point being that, when Abraham could meet the need himself, he did.

But now Abraham's sword and personal army are of no use. Only prayer can possibly save Lot from the inferno of God's judgement. *It isn't then that Abraham expects God to do for Lot what he can do for him himself.*

Now that Lot's situation is beyond human help, Abraham is entitled to go to God for His help. If God had responded, 'Now, Abraham, how much does Lot actually mean to you? What – in the end – would you be prepared to do for him?' - Abraham could have answered truthfully, 'I stand ready to do all that I can for him – even risking my life if necessary'. His action in chapter 14 had proved just that – a formidable foe, Chedorlaomer's coalition had taken on the giants – the Rephaim, Zuzim and Emim, Gen. 14. 5.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves how much we are prepared to do for the folk for whom we pray. God may sometimes have occasion to say to us, 'Your words are all very fine but how sincere are your prayers really? Have you done what you can? (Pray for sense of His presence with housebound saint?) Frankly, it's no good asking Me to meet so and so's financial needs – you're the one with the money – pass on some of what I've entrusted to you. And even when you can rightly insist that you aren't able to do anything for the person – because of distance or circumstances – I still have a question – I should like to know, if you were able to help that person, would you? And, if not, do you really think that you have any right to ask Me to intervene for him or her'.

But did God grant Abraham's request? I said just now that 'It all depends what we mean by his request'. If we mean the words which came from his lips – then 'No'. Ah, but if we mean the underlying request of his heart, we

answer a resounding 'Yes'. For we are told plainly that, 'when God destroyed the cities of the plain, He remembered – not Lot but – Abraham and brought Lot out of the overthrow', v. 29.

The implication is clear – Abraham was the reason that Lot was spared. I note the action of the angels - 'while Lot lingered (because of the man's crazy reluctance to leave his house) they took hold of his hand – for the Lord was merciful to him', v. 16. Again, I note the word of the angel, 'Hurry and escape. For I cannot do anything until you reach safety', v. 22.³ Indeed, the angel's words in 19. 15 and 17, 'Lest you be destroyed (swept away – 'consumed', KJV)', explicitly recall Abraham's prayer in 18. 23, 'would you destroy (sweep away) the righteous with the wicked?' Oh yes, God remembered Abraham and heard his cry on behalf of righteous Lot.

We know that **God had His own reason for destroying the cities of the plain**. It was not yet time to judge the Canaanites – their 'iniquity was not yet full', 15. 16 – but the sins of Sodom were exceptional and called for exceptional treatment. God intended, as Peter said, that Sodom would be 'an example to all those who in later generations propose to live in an ungodly manner', 2 Pet. 2. 6. Jude agreed - 'Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them are set forth as an example', Jude 7. That is, God both *destroyed* Sodom and Gomorrah – *and revealed the reason for this* – for the benefit of future generations.

Nor did Abraham's descendants ever forget – either the incident itself – or the salutary lesson it taught about the wages of sin. For Sodom and its sin or its destruction – or both – are referred to in no less than seven later Old Testament books⁴ and in six books of the New Testament⁵ – featuring as late as Revelation 11. 8 – 'the great city called spiritually Sodom and Egypt' – from the first book in the Bible to the last.

But, as Peter made clear, **God wanted to teach two lessons – not one**. 'If God, turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked -- then the Lord knows how (i) to deliver the godly out of trial and (ii) to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgement', 2 Pet. 2. 6-9. In other words God wanted to demonstrate that He is able both to deliver **the just from judgement** and to deliver **the unjust to judgement**.

Abraham feared the destruction of the righteous (and he knew Lot was that), and he saw the sparing of Sodom as the only way to achieve this. But he was wrong! He began his prayer well enough, 'Would you destroy (sweep away) the righteous with the wicked?', v. 23. No, God – the Judge of all the earth – wouldn't do that – *and I suggest that it would have been far better if Abraham had simply left it to God to decide which steps to take to see that this didn't happen*. But Abraham ventured further – and proceeded to dictate to the Lord *how* He should deliver the righteous. From where he stood, Abraham saw the future in terms of an 'either/or'. Either God, to use Peter's language, could 'turn the cities into ashes', or He could 'deliver righteous Lot'.

Abraham saw no way in which God could do both – to Abraham the only way to save any righteous souls in Sodom was for the whole city to be spared, v. 24. But he was wrong – and, had God done as Abraham wished, Sodom would never have served as an example of God's righteous judgement – and the only lesson taught would have been that of God's ability to deliver the godly. Whereas, as Peter points out, in the event the Lord proved that He 'knows how' to deliver both the just from judgement and the unjust to judgement.

But, thank God, He isn't constrained by the words we pray. He is bigger than all our spoken prayers. The all-wise God is able to bypass what is on our lips and respond to what is in our hearts. The apostle **Paul** discovered this when he pleaded with the Lord three times to remove his **thorn**, 2 Cor. 12. 7-10. The context shows that his underlying concern was his continued usefulness in the Lord's work – and the Lord needed to teach Paul that the thorn and Paul's resultant weakness were essential if this converted Pharisee was to avoid being lifted up in pride – 'exalted above measure' – and so disqualified from any effective service.

In the event, the Lord granted Paul what was in his heart – by denying him what was on his lips – by leaving the thorn where it was, but in promising him the necessary grace to continue serving Him with the thorn – promising, in effect, not to remove the burden from his back but to strengthen his back to bear the burden.

The story of **Augustine's conversion** in the fourth century illustrates the very same point. Augustine lived in Carthage in North Africa but, as a godless and heretical young man, was allured by the attractions of Rome. His Christian mother Monica – who longed passionately for Augustine's conversion – did all she could to persuade Augustine not to go – following him even to the harbour, from where he planned to sail. But he deceived her and set sail at night for Rome. From Rome he moved to Milan, where – largely as a result of the preaching of Bishop Ambrose – he was converted. In his 'Confessions', written long after, Augustine records the events of the night of his departure for Rome : 'That night my mother was not behind in weeping and prayer. And what, O Lord, was she – with so many tears – asking of you – but that you would not let me sail. But you – in the depths of your counsels and hearing the main point of her desire – *regarded not what she then asked, that you might make me what she ever asked*'. Often, we are at our most effective in prayer when we simply tell God what is on our hearts and resist the temptation to dictate to Him precisely how He must go about granting our requests.

It is clear from 2 Peter 2 that the salvation of Lot was part of God's purpose all along. And here no doubt lies – not the only – but one of the chief reasons that God revealed to Abraham His intention to destroy Sodom. He knew Abraham – His friend – well and had every confidence that Abraham would react as he did. In other words, **Abraham's prayer was God's means of putting His will into effect.** And isn't that what prayer should always be? It is quite breathtaking to realise that God doesn't want to work independently of us – He wants us to work with Him. And He therefore first lays on our hearts what we should pray for – and then delights to grant our prayers.

We need to ask ourselves whether, when we pray, we see ourselves as *being used by God* or as *using Him*. We need to remind ourselves constantly that prayer isn't a way of getting God to run errands for us. Alas, when I analyse many of my prayers, they come perilously close to this. Prayer isn't some magic wand, and God isn't some kind of fairy godmother. We should be roused to engage in intercessory prayer because it offers us **the amazing privilege of working with God in the fulfilling and putting into effect of His will.**

Isn't this what John says towards the close of his first letter? – 'This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him', 1 John 5. 14-15. Prayer is most truly prayer then, **not when God responds by answering a prayer which originated with us – but when we respond by asking a prayer which originated with Him.** Such intercessory prayer plays a vital role in the furtherance of God's work. **It is God's way of getting things done.**

We need then to take away at least four simple points from this evening's meeting:

- God expects us to intercede for one another – remember how He was appalled in the days of Isaiah 'that there was no-one to intercede' about the spiritual condition of His people.
- We need to ask ourselves how much we are prepared to do for those for whom we pray. Have we the right to pray for them?
- There are many occasions when it's best for us to simply tell God what is on our hearts – and resist the temptation to dictate to Him how He should go about granting what is on our hearts. In answering prayer, as in all else, 'the Lord knows how', 2 Pet. 2. 9. Make a good fridge magnet!
- Prayer opens up to us the amazing privilege of working with the God of heaven in putting His will into effect here on earth.

Footnotes

¹ Yet see Gen. 19. 30-38. His drunken stupor resulted in Lot doing the very thing which he had invited the men of Sodom to do!

² See <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.net/patriarchs/genesis14.asp?item=3&variant=0>

³ To show that the rescue of Lot was in response to the prayer of Abraham, the angels' words explicitly recall Abraham's prayer in behalf of the righteous in the previous chapter. Abraham had prayed, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (*ha'ap tispeh saddiq `im-rasha`* 18. 23); and similarly the messengers warned Lot and his family to leave the city, "or you will be swept away when the city is punished" (*pen-tissapeh ba`awon ha`ir* 19. 15), and again in v. 17: "or you will be swept away" (*pen-tissapeh*). [From the *Expositors Bible Commentary*.]

⁴ Deuteronomy (29. 23), Isaiah (1. 9; 13. 19), Jeremiah (23. 14; 49. 18; 50. 40), Lamentations (4. 6), Ezekiel (16. 56), Amos (4. 11), Zephaniah (2. 9).

⁵ Matthew (10. 15; 11. 23-24), Luke (10. 12; 17. 29), Romans (9. 29), 2 Peter (2. 6), Jude (verse 7), Revelation (11. 8).