

Praying for Sodom and Gomorrah

Genesis 18:16-33, Gal. 3:29, Luke 17:32

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My favorite family vacation occurred twenty years ago last month. On the two hundredth anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition, we retraced a large part of the explorer's journey west on the Missouri river across North Dakota, Montana and Idaho.



On the way back from this odyssey, which lasted over two weeks and was thoroughly enjoyed by each of us,



I finally gave the boys a decision on what our final destination would be before heading home. Would it be the badlands, or Mount Rushmore?

Neither of course! Our last stop HAD to be Wall Drug, home of the jackalope and free ice water.

Well, we're getting ready to say good-bye to our series on the opening chapters of Genesis, but as your congregational care and prayer pastor, I couldn't let us get this close to the first recorded prayer in the Bible without taking us down the exit ramp for a closer look. This passage from a distance may not seem like much, or even a bit wacky. Yet some time here will reveal important truths about WHO GOD IS, WHO WE ARE, and WHAT WE ARE TO PRAY FOR.

Who God Is

God initiates. (Gen. 18:17)

When someone says to you, "I wonder if I should tell you about this. . ." there's only one way for it to end. They've already made up their mind to spill the beans! God is more ready to meet with us than we are with Him, and he's ready to tell us what's on his mind. When it comes to prayer and a relationship with the Lord, He is always the

initiator. You may be asking, “how do I know what God is saying to me? How should I pray and what should I pray about?” The LORD speaks to us in numerous ways, such as through the Holy Spirit, perhaps in dreams, or in nature, but the clearest way to hear him is in the pages of Scripture. Use the Psalms as your own prayers to begin with, or read Paul’s letter to the Ephesians or Romans and pray God’s promises found there back to Him. When you take time to be with God as Abraham and Sarah did, and are generous with your attention and resources, you will find God meeting you over the things you need to know.

God is in charge. (Gen. 18:25)

The most famous part of this passage, of course, is Abraham’s prayer itself. At first glance, this appears to simply be no more than a merchant and a customer haggling over the price of red beans in the farmer’s market. But bear with me a moment. We’ve joked about how short Adam and Eve’s Bible was in the Garden of Eden. Frankly, Abraham’s Bible wasn’t much bigger! Like Lewis and Clark, he’s mapping out unexplored territory. He’s coming from a pagan background, where there was a belief in big gods and little gods of uncertain character and reliability. Abraham is discovering that there’s not one god for the sun and one god for the moon, or one god for the Cajuns and another for the Texans. He’s discovering it’s one mighty Lord overseeing everything! The tower of Babel in Genesis 11 can be considered mankind’s effort to squeeze God into their own image. In Genesis 12, God calls to Abram, and is basically saying, “Ok – it’s my turn. Over the course of your lifetime, Abraham and Sarah, I’m going to show you – and through you, the nations - what I’m REALLY like.”

In this prayer, Abraham is exploring uncharted spiritual territory with a combination of incredible boldness AND caution. Abraham already knows that evil actions can hurt and affect innocent people. He’s been to war, and he’s been in a family, both places where wrongs can get dished out to those who don’t deserve it! But now he’s asking: can it work the other way around? Can righteousness provide protection and blessing over a city where evil exists? “Suppose there are fifty righteous people? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous? And now the heart of his argument: “Will not the judge of all the earth do right?” (18:25)

This is an incredibly confident approach. Abraham is willing to boldly go where no man has gone before. “God, I know you care about justice, and keeping promises. But I also know you’ve been more merciful to me than I deserve. Can mercy triumph over

judgment”? But at the same time, Abraham speaks like someone approaching a ticking bomb. “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. . . I’ve been so bold once, but what if only twenty are there?. . . What if only ten?”

This is also an incredibly humble approach. Abraham knows God will ultimately do whatever God chooses, and that will be the right decision. He’s recognizing that God is God, and he is not. We’re often attempting to imagine the Lord as one who miraculously agrees with all of our wishes, our viewpoints, or our politics. But the real God will challenge our assumptions as we hear him speak in scripture. Every culture will face this challenge at some point. In western culture, we typically nod appreciatively when Jesus says, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you,” where that is seen as offensively scandalous or an impossible standard in many other parts of the world. Yet when we read sex is to be reserved between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage, that is taken to be offensively scandalous or an impossible standard here, where that is applauded elsewhere. Abraham here models for us that we can pour out our hearts and desires before our Maker, but we must recognize that the final outcome belongs to God – and that’s as it should be.

Who We Are

Chosen by God. (Gen. 18:18-22, Gal. 3:29)

But when we recognize God for who he truly is, look what happens to us! Following the Lord’s little hide-and-seek game, he gives Abraham one of the most amazing blessings in all the Bible. Listen to this, because you’re involved! Here it is. “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” (18:18-19a) Let me cut to the chase. We who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord are that great and powerful nation. The church is that great and powerful nation that bless all nations on earth. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians, “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (3:29) Now, the church has gotten in trouble through the centuries when we define the words ‘great’ and ‘powerful’ in the ways the world or the devil define them. But when we live into the blessing of Abraham, and become great at serving and powerful in faith, hope, and love, we’re really onto something.

If you were here last week, you’ll remember Gerrit preaching on 2 Kings 6, and Elisha’s servant terrified at Syria’s chariots coming for his boss. I never realized Elisha’s servant

looked just like Don Knotts, but you learn something new every day 😊. At any rate, it was rightly pointed out that the evangelical church in the west often feels under siege, and we're not quite sure we're going to survive. But listen to this promise! "I have chosen Abraham, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." That's a promise for Ellie Kate – she is a covenant child of that great and powerful nation. The Christians in the smallest storefront church in the humblest part of Baton Rouge are a part of that great and powerful nation. The Sudanese refugee believers running for their lives are a part of that great and powerful nation. God's choosing is not based on Abraham's merit or your merit or wealth or anything else we're tempted to trust in, but on God's goodness and mercy. His willingness to meet with Abraham – and us – can encourage in our prayers.

Committed to God FIRST. (Luke 17:32)

Let's turn to these notorious cities that Abraham is interceding for. If you compare and contrast Genesis 18 and 19, you'll find a fascinating juxtaposition between Abraham and Sarah, on the one hand, and Lot and his family on the other. At the beginning of chapter 18, Abraham meets the Lord while sitting at the entrance of his tent. At the beginning of chapter 19, Lot meets the two angels while sitting to the entrance of the city. Abraham and Sarah put together a great feast for their guests. Lot also insists on housing and feeding the guests, although his meal is more like fast food. Sarah laughs when she hears she is to bear a child, but Lot's sons-in-law, when told that the Lord is about to destroy the city, think he is joking and scoff. Sarah repents of her unbelief and receives a gentle rebuke, Lot's in-laws to be don't repent and lose their lives. ¹ Sarah, despite her struggles, believes God and is promised a son who arrives the following year, Lot's wife can't tear herself away from the city she is devoted to and is turned into a pillar of salt (19:26).

Any of you who memorized Bible verses at Summer camp know John 11:35, the shortest verse of all, "Jesus wept." That's a great verse. But the next shortest verse is also worth knowing, and it comes straight from Jesus' mouth: "Remember Lot's wife!" (Luke 17:32)

What's so important about Lot's wife? And why the huge contrast between Abraham and Lot's outcomes? After all, they both believed in God. There's even a verse in the New Testament that describes Lot as righteous (2 Pet. 2:7), although his behavior certainly doesn't reflect that. The important difference between these two families'

¹ See additional comparisons in Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 273.

actions is Abraham put trusting God in FRONT of loving the city, where Lot and his family's actions put the city and its pleasures in front of trusting God. Lot and two of his daughters escape, but only by the skin of their teeth.

Are we more like Abraham, and committed to God first? Or are we more like Lot's wife, and unable to tear ourselves away from our world when judgement comes? A line from an old Caedmon's Call song comes to mind: "This world has nothing for me, and this world has everything/ all that I could want, and nothing that I need." Remember Lot's wife! Throw in your lot with Abraham and his children in praying for Sodom and Gomorrah – not by playing there.

What We Pray For

The Wider Community

Yet this gets us to an essential point of today's passage. Abraham knows that the Lord is considering the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The note here about the "two men" going to see firsthand the situation is simply a way to describe to us that God carefully weighs all the evidence before judgment (18:20-21). Some of your study Bible notes will say Abraham is praying simply to get Lot and his family out of another fix. I respectfully but strongly disagree. If that's all that Abraham wanted, he could easily have prayed for that specifically. Instead, he's doing what the community of faith has always done when they are resident aliens, wanderers in a foreign land. They pray like Jeremiah: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile (Babylon). Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer. 29:7) Or Peter: "Live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor." (1 Pet. 2:17) Or Paul: "I urge then, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." (1 Tim. 2:1-2) None of these places were bastions of holiness; the exact opposite is true. Yet God's people are instructed to pray for the wider community, not just their friends and family members. That's still true today.

Why is God ready to judge Sodom and Gomorrah? Yes, of course, the sexual sin that is so graphically described in Genesis 19 is part of it, but that's not the root reason. The prophet Ezekiel spells it out for us: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and

needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them.” (Ez. 16:49-50)

To the extent people in Baton Rouge are crying out for justice in the face of leadership that is “arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned,” this is to be on our hearts and in our prayers as the children of Abraham.

A few weeks ago, I was driving on an unfamiliar road that parallels I-10 and I saw a small church there with a message on the sign out front that simply pleaded, “STOP THE VIOLENCE.” The cries of our cities for peace and hope are going up to heaven to this very day. Is there enough of a faithful portion of the body of Christ to intercede for Baton Rouge before it is swept away?

Now, just as Abraham acted to rescue Lot and others (back in Genesis 14), so we are called to pray and act. When Whitney leads summer soccer camps at Abounding Love ministries and regularly takes a group of men out to Angola prison for Bible study and relationship building, that’s a form of praying for the city. When many of you read stories or put together backpacks for children at Buchanan, now McKinley, or launch educational initiatives like Manners of the Heart and Gardere Christian school, that’s a form of praying for the city.

I learned this week about Jennifer Richardson, and #keep Tiger Town beautiful that is not only cleaning up litter but providing help for hurting homeless people in our city. When you move from apathy to involvement in the name of Jesus Christ, you can act out your prayers for the city. Now, if you promote God’s ways and his Lordship, especially in the areas of sexual purity and faithfulness in our current culture, there will be those that criticize and slander you. If nothing else, let Genesis 18 and 19 enlighten you that this opposition isn’t new – and it doesn’t mean that you are to stop praying for God’s perfect mercy and justice to fall on our city, our state, our politicians, and every aspect of our shared life in this nation. We are called to pray and act on those prayers, and it’s desperately needed.

The Wilder God

Men, let me take a minute to address you directly about this. Do you only find your sense of adventure in getting out in nature, fishing for speckled trout or hunting for black bear or elk? Do you put yourself in the “yellow zone” with some danger in your job or your vacationing? Those experiences are awesome, and shouldn’t be passed over, but there’s something even better. Does your heart beat faster only when you’re in the corporate boardroom or making a large financial decision on which direction Tesla stock

is going to move today? Are you leaving the spiritual adventures of bold prayer to others, while you stick with “rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub?” I challenge you – don’t miss out on the biggest adventure of your life. Tim Keller put it this way: “Prayer is awe, intimacy, struggle – yet it is the way to reality. There is nothing more important, or harder, or richer, or more life-altering. There is absolutely nothing so great as prayer.”

Perhaps you think praying for your messed up city that God has placed you in is only for the truly sanctified. That God won’t hear the prayers of someone who has your struggles and distractions. Well, let’s explore the possibility of why Abraham stopped his intercession at finding ten righteous people in Sodom. Perhaps it dawned on him as God amazingly kept granting his requests that perhaps it wouldn’t be possible to find fifty, twenty or even ten who could stop just judgment from coming. Perhaps it dawned on Abraham that there wasn’t even one righteous person in Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, there wasn’t one righteous person on planet earth. Yet.

Centuries later, however, one righteous person DID come. He interceded for people in the sister city of Sodom and Gomorrah – a place called Jerusalem. There was a lot of evil in that city as well, enough evil that the political and religious authorities conspired to execute this one righteous man in the most heinous way possible. But then, after three days, what Abraham discovered centuries before in the first prayer of the Bible happened! One righteous man’s death provided the means for eternal life, not just for a city, not just for a day or a year, but life for a new family from every tribe and nation and generation, called to love and serve and pray for a broken and hurting world until he comes back to bring us home. To quote our Lord Jesus: “Remember Lot’s wife!” Are you playing in Sodom and Gomorrah? Or are you praying there?