

Abraham prays for a city

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 18. Some of you might be incredibly familiar with Genesis chapter 18, Abraham's prayer for Sodom.

Some of you may know the Sodom account where God rescues Lot and his family only for his wife to turn back. Some of you might remember that in the New Testament, in the book of Luke, we're told to remember Lot's wife.

That doesn't mean that we're told to remember that Lot had a wife. Much more is being said in that one statement than just remember that Lot had a wife. There's not much we can remember about her.

We don't even know her name. But the point here in this prayer is simply to shape our praying for a city. In other words, Abraham prays for a city, and we're going to try and work out why he prays for that city.

I mean, as you pray for the things that you do, the question is not so much why do you pray for those things, but why do you not pray for the things that you don't pray for? Again, that's not a criticism.

[1 : 2 1] It's just an observation as to whether or not we understand what directs our attention to the things that we actually pray for, rather than the things that we perhaps have never prayed for.

Pray for Tanzania. Morocco. There's a few places that you watch. I've never considered. I don't know anything about that. I don't perhaps even know if there are any Christians there.

And suddenly you begin to realize that the knowledge of the place can shape and determine what you actually pray for that place. Well, in exactly the same way, this is what Abraham does, we can surmise for Sodom.

The things that we have read here gives us clues to why Abraham prays for Sodom without actually telling us why specifically. In other words, Abraham doesn't tell us why he's offering these prayers up to God for Sodom.

And God, in his sort of conversation with Abraham, doesn't seem to reveal anything. However, when we read the Sodom account, we get to conclude in the surrounding chapters and the surrounding verses why Abraham might consider that particular city, a city known for its wickedness, as a matter of urgent prayer.

[2 : 4 0] Was it just because the city was a wicked city? Is that why he was praying for it? Or was it because he had family members in the city? And suddenly, all of a sudden, that becomes much more of an urgent issue.

Okay? So, we're not told that the reason why Abraham comes before God in prayer is because of his nephew Lot and his wife and his children in the city.

But when you get to chapter 9 and you read about what God does to the city and he rescues Lot and his family out, that it would be a fair, though we're not told, it would be a fair conclusion to say that's the reason why Abraham came before God in prayer for that city, because he had family members in it.

And if you look at the things that you pray for, it's probably because interest has been drawn to you, given the things that you pray for, family members, family concerns, countries with Christians in, or countries without Christians in, that information then begins to inform your praying life.

But things that you don't know about, as always, again, not a criticism, simply an observation, that we don't pray about them, because we don't know anything to pray about.

[4 : 01] So, as we read this, I want us to understand that what Abraham does is sort of wonderful before God, though his prayer, as you know, is not answered.

His Sodom is still destroyed, as we read on in the following verses. If God does save anybody, which he does, he spares Lot and his family.

And as I said, we're reminded in the book of Luke to remember Lot's wife. Why not Lot? Why not Lot's children? Why Lot's wife? Well, as you know, God told them that the moment they leave the city, they're not to look back.

Lot's wife, however, did look back, and she was turned to a pillar of salt because she sort of almost forsake or never really valued the mercy that God gave her. And she looked back at everything being destroyed and she missed it.

It's clear that she had an attachment to Sodom. And that's one possible reason why they ended up living in Sodom in the first place.

[5 : 11] So Lot may have been a righteous man, but his righteousness wasn't great enough to get his family out of a city that wasn't good for them.

Okay, he may have been okay, but the fact is, is that when Lot had the choice of land between him and Abraham, Lot chose the place near Sodom, a city already known for its wickedness.

A few years later, we read that Lot is actually living in Sodom, and we wonder why he made that decision. Why would you move into a city that's known for its wickedness?

Well, the next thing you find out is that as they leave in God's mercy, Lot's wife looks back, and then you get an indication of why perhaps they were in the city, because she loved it.

Okay? She loved the city, and she loved, you know, everything that the city had to offer, and she looked back longingly, and we're to learn from Lot's wife not to be like her, but to not be like her.

[6 : 14] Okay? It is possible for a Christian to enjoy a certain level of that which is ungodly, and then God to take it away, and instead of being pleased that God is moving you towards righteousness, you missed the sin you once committed.

You missed the sin you once enjoyed, and that seems like a perverted idea, but that's what we're told to remember when we remember Lot's wife. Another example of this would be Lot's interaction with the angels.

The angels come down, as you know, and of course I won't mention what happened because we have young people in the fellowship this evening, but if you read the story carefully, the angels come down, the people in the city want to do something with the angels, and they said, well, we'll sleep on the park benches overnight, and Lot says, no, you can't stay here.

You just cannot stay. You have to go. Eventually, Lot gets them into his house, but if you ever ask your question, why does Lot not want the angels to stay in a city that he's willing to live in?

And that there is point for point parallel for a lot of Christian living. In other words, I live in such a way that I wouldn't want other Christians to live in.

[7 : 35] Okay? Okay? In other words, it's okay if I do it, but I certainly want that. I certainly want my children to do what I'm doing. And that's the very thing that you've got with Lot.

He doesn't want the angels to stay in the city that he lives in. And you want to say to him, well, why are you living there, Lot? Why don't you move out? So any righteousness that he had was not righteousness enough to protect his family from that kind of environment?

The thing that we notice then about Abraham's prayer as he begins to pray for Sodom is a verse that's often quoted, but quoted to the wrong person.

So verse 25 says, shall not the judge of all the earth do right? And most people think that this is God speaking. But if you read it carefully, God's not saying this.

Abraham's saying it to God. Now it is true that it is something that God could say, but if you read it carefully, God is putting this before God as a rhetorical question because he knows that God knows that he will do only that which is right.

[8 : 47] Now God could say, shall not the judge of all the earth do right? But that's not how it's put. It's not a statement made to Abraham. It's rather a rhetorical question from Abraham to God concerning the city.

So Abraham is saying to God, well, shall not the judge of all the earth do right? In other words, I know your character, God, well enough to know that you'll only do what is right.

And I know you know your character well enough to know that you'll only do what is right. And then he begins his intercession. And that's what we need to bear in mind.

This whole prayer is shaped around, in many ways, that statement in verse 25. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?

And the reason why I think that's the case is because it's going to shape how you pray if you've really understood why Abraham asked that rhetorical question.

[9 : 46] God is only ever going to do that which is right. Okay? Now, you think about that concerning everything. God will only ever do that which is right.

Well, suddenly you think, well, hey, for some things, that's okay. But then things become a little bit more complicated. So we're going to begin with one heading. Here's the first.

First, know the God that you pray to. Okay? Know the God that you pray to. That doesn't mean eight different gods, but the God of Scripture, the trying God of Scripture, know who he is when you pray.

When Abraham asked this question rhetorical, shall not the judge of all the earth do right, he is telling God something he knows about God which is true, and hence why he frames his prayer the way that he does.

He understands the character of God. He understands that God will not do anything that is unjust. And so Abraham's prayer becomes more like someone arguing a point.

[10 : 53] In fact, if you read Abraham's prayer which we have done, it's a very strong argument. Okay? He understands what he's trying to do with God, but at no point does Abraham believe that he's got God over a barrel.

Okay? 50 righteous people. Now, right. Now you can't do anything. The moment he says, shall not the judge of all the earth do right, he doesn't think for a moment he has stumped God's character, that he stumped God's plans concerning Sodom.

He doesn't think for a moment that he somehow got God over the barrel where God now has to do what Abraham wants him to do. That's not what Abraham is doing and God knows that that's not what Abraham is doing.

What Abraham is doing, however, he's trying to make a really, really strong case for Sodom and we might conclude that he does this because he's got family in it.

Okay? Wouldn't you go out your way for family members if this was happening to you? It seems a fair conclusion that the reason why Abraham comes before God in the way that he does and makes this strong argument is because of the people in Sodom that are related to him.

[12 : 14] He could care for the whole city. That's possible as well. Okay? Let's not rule that out. But it does seem in light of what God does with Lot and his family that Lot is the person in question that Abraham perhaps cares the most for.

Abraham understands then that whatever God does God is not going to do something that's not right. And I've often said and I wish I was wish hoped looking back you know that I was told this when I was growing up as a young Christian that whatever you're dealing with in life you're always dealing with God.

Always. Whatever you're dealing with in life you're always dealing with God. Now whether you're a Christian or not that's true. But Christians in particular ought to learn that really really quickly.

That whatever I'm dealing with in life I'm always dealing with God and the judge of all the earth God will always do what is right. Now suddenly my life becomes shaped by that knowledge.

I am shaped then I'm not controlled but I am shaped as to what will happen and what will not happen in the light of God who does everything right.

[13 : 29] God then when he spares Lot and his family does it out of mercy. Does it out of mercy. So when we look at the cross we may use words like mercy.

grace. We may use words like love but we could never use words like it's right. We could never use words like it's righteous.

We could never use words like it's justice. Because how can an innocent man dying for the sins of sinful people be just? Okay?

It doesn't make any sense that an innocent man who's done nothing wrong should die for any reason. To lay down his life for any reason. Now it's just in the sense of how God achieves their salvation but an innocent man dying for the sins of somebody else is not a just act.

It's an act of total mercy. And so in the same way Lot and his family are saved from Sodom, it's not because they just happen to be the right ones. No, it's a total act of mercy.

[14 : 39] If you imagine ten men on death row and the governor walks in and pardons all ten, okay, the judgment still stands.

The mercy spares them from the judgment that they're to face. Okay? It doesn't mean that the judgment still isn't the right thing for them to receive, but rather mercy is triumphing over that judgment.

In the cross, what we have is that because God can't let the judgment go, okay, because sin has to be punished, the cross takes care of the judgment and we receive the mercy.

That's the beauty of the cross. That's why it's so tremendous. And so as Abraham prays for this city, and remember, Abraham is justified, made righteous with God by faith, Romans 4, that's how he's made right with God, he must understand some of these things to be true already.

Hence why we read in the New Testament and Hebrews of Abraham's faith. So the second thing we need to know is understanding the things that God won't do as we pray.

[15 : 48] As you pray to God for the people that you do, you need to have a good understanding of the things that God will not do. So Abraham comes before God and his prayer begins, if I can find 50 righteous people in the city, will you destroy the whole city if I can find 50 righteous people in it.

And God, of course, understands what Abraham is saying and he says, no, I will spare the whole city if 50 righteous people, in a whole city of people, if 50 righteous people are in it, I will spare the whole city.

And at this point, the problem becomes immediately apparent. The moment Abraham has to drop from 50 to 45 and from 45 to 40 and from 40 to 30, you can see he has a problem on his hands.

Okay? He knows there's not 30 righteous people in the city. He also knows that God knows there's not 30 righteous people in the city or 20 righteous people or 10 righteous people because if God did, he would have never revealed to Abraham that he's going to destroy Sodom.

So Abraham knows, as he considers his way down through the list, that he knows that God already knows this. But nevertheless, we get to see the beauty of Abraham's argument for a very specific reason.

[17 : 15] So he goes to God. What about 45? And God says, for the sake of 45, I will spare the city. But this carries on and on. 45 can't be found.

What about 30? And Abraham realizes that he's pushing it a bit with God. So he asks God, says, look, I'm a man of the dust. I understand where I come from. But would you please hear my prayer?

What about 30? And God says, of course, for the sake of 30 righteous people, verse 30, I will spare the city. I can't find 30. Okay, verse 31.

What about 20 righteous people? Yes, for 20 righteous people, I'll spare the city. Abraham recognizes, I can't find 20 righteous people. Okay, let's take it down.

What about 10? What about 10? And you get to 10 and all of a sudden the prayer ends. God goes his way and Abraham goes his. And you never get to hear the end of the prayer.

[18 : 13] Well, you never get to hear, why did you stop at 10? Why did you stop at 10? Well, Abraham knows, and he also knows that God knows, that he could have gone all the way down to one.

Okay, because eventually that's where it would have had to have worked itself out. Abraham needs one righteous person to save the city, and he can't find him. One righteous person is all that Abraham needs for the city to be spared, and he can't find him.

One righteous person is all that Abraham needs for the people in the city to be saved by God and escape the coming judgment, but he cannot find the one righteous person.

You might remember, if you don't, I'll remind you now, in Isaiah 55, you have that wonderful verse where God is saying, you know, my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways.

You know, that verse again can also be read incorrectly, as if to say that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and God's ways are higher than our ways, and there's no way that we can get to where God is.

[19 : 27] Well, that's certainly true, but in Isaiah 55, when God says, my thoughts are not your thoughts, he's expecting them to be. When God says in Isaiah 55 that the people's ways are not the same as God's, they ought to be.

In other words, God is saying, I'm criticizing you, I'm challenging you, you ought to be thinking about the things of life in the same way I do. You ought to be doing things in the ways of life in the same way I would.

Your thoughts are not my thoughts, your ways are not my ways, but they ought to be. They really ought to be. Well, Abraham here, in his prayer before God, hasn't made that mistake.

His thoughts are clearly on par with God. He knows that God does exactly what is right, and he recognizes in his intercession that he might as well stop at 10, because he can't take it any further.

And as we read on into chapter 19, the city's not spared, the city is destroyed. Abraham prayed, but God did the very thing that God said he was going to do at the beginning.

[20 : 38] Why? Because Abraham considered everything God had already considered, everything that God thought about the city, Abraham came to with a little sort of figuring out.

It didn't take him long. And so he begins to realize that if I can figure out that there's no righteous people in the city, then God already knows that. The judge of all the earth that does right already knows that.

And so when he judges the city, he's only going to be doing that which is right. Mercy then is shown to Lot, his children, and his wife, but his wife didn't appreciate the mercy she was shown.

She looked back to all the things that she enjoyed being destroyed and she was turned to a pillar of salt. Now if Lot's wife was doing something innocent, nothing would have happened to her.

If Lot's wife, looking back, was an innocent matter before God, nothing would have happened to her. If she was doing nothing wrong, then nothing would have happened to her.

[21 : 39] But clearly there was something about her looking back that was clearly offensive to God and against the mercy that she had been shown.

It'd be good for us to recognize then why Abraham stopped at 10 and why you don't have to. Okay?

It'd be good for us to recognize this evening why Abraham stopped at 10 and why you don't have to. Abraham couldn't find the one righteous person for the sake of the city.

He didn't know who he was. But here we are sitting in the very mercy of Christ Jesus himself, having found the one righteous person, having experienced the mercy of the one righteous person, and hence why we know that we can pray for any city, any place, and any person.

The one righteous person that Abraham was looking for, for the city to be spared, is the one righteous person that saved us, Christ Jesus. Jesus is the one righteous one who we intercede through to God that our prayers are received by him for the sake of others.

[22 : 49] Okay? The only reason my prayers are heard before God is because of the merits of Jesus Christ. The only reason I can pray for this city and for loved ones in the city is because Jesus Christ makes my prayers heard before God.

And God, in great grace and mercy, has given huge amounts of time for men and women, boys and girls, in any city, in any land, to turn to him because of the one righteous person, Christ Jesus.

That's why our prayers don't need to stop. The reason we can make effective prayers to God is because we have the one righteous person that Abraham was looking for.

We can pray for whoever we like, whenever we like, for any city, because we have the one righteous person. And we know that God has given great grace and mercy, withholding judgment, withholding judgment until he comes, so that men and women, boys and girls, would turn to him.

Here's a couple of considerations then as we begin to wrap this up. When we pray, we've got the same conflict that Abraham has.

[24 : 00] That we see people in the city that we're related to, may not be in this city, it may not even be in a city, it may be in a town or a village or a different country and a different town or village in that country.

And we find ourself in the same situation that Abraham does. That we have loved ones there that don't know Jesus. Or that we have loved ones there that have actually rejected Jesus.

And now we know because of how the story ends, what's going to happen, that there is a coming judgment. And so we feel that necessary conflict of knowing that loved ones are going to not be able to escape the coming judgment unless they turn to Jesus.

We know that we've got that to deal with. Not only then do we have to tell them what's going to happen, but we have to come before God and plead on his mercy that he spares them just like he spared Lot and his family.

That's how we are to come before God in prayers for loved ones in the city. But at the end of the day, we know that if God judges them in the city, that he's done that which is right.

[25 : 11] Okay? He's not done anything that's unjust. If God judges my unbelieving brother, however much I love my unbelieving brother, God has not done something which is wrong.

God has done something which is right. And that's what Abraham understands. His prayer before God is before a God who always does that which is right.

But the motivation to pray for Sodom is because he loves his nephew. And so the motivation you have to pray for the people that you do is because of your knowledge of them and your love for them.

And you plead them before God because of the one righteous person, Christ Jesus. That's why you pray and you don't stop. Because you found the person, you're able to plead to God that God in his mercy of Christ Jesus would save them.

Challenge yourself then as you leave here this evening to ask yourself why you pray for the people that you do. And more importantly, why do you not pray for the things that you don't pray for? And it will probably come down, as I said at the beginning, to what you know about God and how seriously you take the future.

[26 : 22] And more importantly, what you know about the present and the people there as to whether or not they actually belong to Jesus, have rejected Jesus, or have yet to hear about Jesus.

Abraham challenges us in many ways with the question of why do we intercede to God for the things that we do? Why do we pray the things that we do?

And it seems clear without perhaps saying it pointedly, that he prays for Sodom, not because Sodom was a place that needed to be saved, but because there are people in Sodom that needed to be saved.

Abraham comes before God then because of his knowledge of those in the city and his knowledge of what God is going to do to that city because they will not change.

God then, Abraham then recognizes that God will only do that which is right. Shall not the judge of all the earth do that which is right? He will only do that which is right.

[27 : 27] So we sit here this evening in the absolute privilege of knowing that we escape the coming judgment. Right? We are the lots. We have been brought out by the mercy of Jesus, by the one righteous person that has been found in the world.

We have been brought out and spared. And now we have been brought out to look back on into the place that we have been brought out from to pray for it. Okay?

We're no longer of the world. We're in it, but not in it in the sense that everyone else is. But we're left in it so that we don't lose the sight and the fact that there are people still here that don't belong to Jesus.

God leaves us here because if he didn't, we would forget about them. Okay? The reason why God leaves you in this world is for multiple of reasons, I'm sure.

But one of those reasons can clearly point it out that out of sight is out of mind. Okay? If you don't know about it, you don't pray about it. And so God leaves you where he does and he allows you to see the things that you do that you may plead Jesus, that you may pray to God through the merits of Jesus Christ for the loved ones in the city.

[28 : 41] We need to take into consideration the coming judgment and we need to take into consideration the righteousness of Christ who exchanged his righteousness for the sinfulness of men as we pray for those in this city.

Here's the final thought then as we close. How might this passage, if you read it again and again and again, get you to pray more? Well, the first thing it'll do is that it will remind you that what God is going to do is always going to be the right thing.

What God does will always be the right thing. And more importantly, what God does in Christ Jesus allows us to see that he is the only way to escape the coming judgment.

Okay? So what God does in the future will be right, the coming judgment. But what God has done in Christ Jesus is the only way to escape the coming judgment. And because of that, we recognize the importance of not only telling people about Jesus, but praying for them in Jesus' name that God would show them mercy so that they can be brought out of the city unharmed.

Amen.