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THE MAN WHO BARGAINED WITH GOD

Genesis 18:16-33

By

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OT Lessons on Prayer (2)

The Man Who Bargained With God
Genesis 18:16-33

One of the interesting things about traveling in a foreign country is the opportunity to bargain for goods in the marketplace. In America you know that if the price tag says \$19.95, you're going to pay \$19.95, so you don't bother to dicker about the price. But in Mexico, there's a chance that the merchant is willing to haggle over the price. If you're good enough at the game (which I'm not), you might only pay \$10 instead of \$20. You can get some good deals if you're good at bargaining.

But can you imagine being bold enough to bargain with God? When you're bargaining with a merchant, you hold the money and he holds the merchandise. You each have something the other person wants, so you have some bargaining power. But when it comes to God, He holds everything. Who could imagine bargaining with the God of the universe? Yet, surprisingly, the first instance of intercessory prayer found in the Bible shows Abraham bargaining with God!

At first you may think Abraham to be a bit brash to do such a thing. But as you examine the story, you discover that God was actually encouraging Abraham in this venture of prayer. God took the initiative by revealing His purpose to Abraham, His friend, who was moved to pray, based on what he knew of God's character, for a city that teetered on the brink of judgment. The lesson is:

The knowledge of God's purpose and God's person should move us to pray for a world under judgment.

I want you to know that I'm doing this series on prayer as much for myself as I am for you. I need to be encouraged to pray more faithfully than I do. I struggle with prayer. It gets squeezed out of my busy schedule. Frankly, I find it tedious to pray through a list of things that God already knows about and for which I've already asked Him repeatedly.

And yet prayer is absolutely essential to a walk with God. We cannot make progress in the Christian life without growing in

prayer. Wherever in church history or at present you see a genuine work of God, you can be assured that beneath it is a solid foundation of prayer. So I'm praying that God would use this study of some of the Old Testament saints and their prayers to stimulate us to be people of prayer.

Abraham was sitting at his tent door in the heat of the day when he looked up and saw three normal-looking men. In accordance with his custom, Abraham showered these men with hospitality. As he learned before the day was over, he was entertaining angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2). I believe that one of the three was Jesus Christ in a preincarnate appearance ("the Lord," 18:17, 19, 20, 22, 26, 27).

These men told Abraham that at this time next year, the long-awaited promise of Sarah bearing a son would be fulfilled. Then, as the men rose to go, they cast an ominous glance toward Sodom, where Abraham's nephew, Lot, was living. As Abraham walked a short distance with his guests, the Lord spoke, probably to the two angels, but deliberately so that Abraham could overhear, and asked, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" That got Abraham's attention!

Then He rehearsed the covenant promises He had made with Abraham (18:18-19). Speaking directly to Abraham, the Lord said that the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah's sin was very great, and (using human language) that He was going down to investigate the situation. Abraham picked up on God's purpose and, based on his understanding of God's justice, appealed to God to spare Sodom if there were but 50 righteous people there. From there Abraham bargained God down to sparing Sodom if only ten righteous people could be found there. The story reveals three lessons on prayer:

1. Prayer must be based on a knowledge of God's purpose.

Prayer is not to get *our* will done, but to get *God's* will done. To be effective, prayer must be in accordance with His will. If we want to be successful in prayer, we must grow in our knowledge of God's purpose. Okay, but how do we do that?

- A. God reveals His purpose to His friends.

Abraham was known as the friend of God (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). Verse 19 literally reads, "For I have known him

....” H. C. Leupold translates it, “For I acknowledge him to be my intimate friend” (*Exposition of Genesis* [Baker], 1:544). The Lord shares His secrets with His friends. Psalm 25:14 states, “The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant.” The Lord Jesus told His disciples, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15).

We see this principle in everyday life. If a person shares the intimate details of his life with just anyone, we rightly say that he is a bit strange. We share the secrets of our lives only with friends who have earned our trust. In the same way, God only reveals His will to those who are trustworthy, who won’t abuse the privilege. So if you want to know God’s purpose so that you can pray accordingly, you’ve got to live obediently in the fear of God so that you’re worthy of His trust.

To the pagans living in the surrounding towns, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an unfortunate natural disaster. If it had happened in our day, there would be footage on the evening news, along with explanations from geologists about how this sort of thing occurs. But no one on the news would say, “This event was the judgment of a holy God on a people whose iniquity was filled up” (Gen. 15:16), unless it was just to ridicule such a crazy religious fanatic. The world cannot appreciate God’s purpose.

But Abraham knew that Sodom’s destruction was not a natural disaster. It was the direct judgment of a holy God on a people who had spurned Him. He knew that it was a warning for people of all time that, while God is patient, He will certainly judge all sin. Abraham could rightly interpret the events of his world because he knew the purpose of God because he was the friend of God. If you want that kind of insight into our modern world, you’ve got to take the time to grow as God’s friend.

- B. God’s purpose is to bless all nations through Abraham’s seed, but not to save all from judgment.

God rehearses His covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 12:3) as the reason for sharing with him His purpose in judging Sodom. God’s purpose is that all nations would be blessed through Abra-

ham, especially through the Savior, Jesus Christ, who would be Abraham's descendant. But if that is God's purpose, why would He destroy the people of Sodom and Gomorrah? Why, in Moses' day, would He command the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites? How can His purpose of blessing be fulfilled if people are destroyed?

God is showing Abraham (and us) that though He will have some from every tribe and tongue and nation bowing before His throne, it is not His purpose to save every person from judgment. It would violate the holiness and justice of God if everyone were someday saved, in spite of and apart from their response to the Savior. The Bible clearly teaches that God will be vindicated and glorified, not only in the salvation of His elect, but also in the damnation of sinners who have proudly spurned God.

The subject of God's eternal judgment is not popular in our day. A few evangelical theologians are arguing that sinners will be annihilated rather than suffer forever in the lake of fire. But, in addition to being unbiblical, such thinking grossly underestimates the infinite holiness of God and it grossly overestimates the goodness of man, which is as filthy rags in God's sight.

In his sermon, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:668-679), Jonathan Edwards argues that since God is an infinitely perfect and holy being, any sin against Him is an infinitely horrible offense that justly deserves infinite punishment. He shows how all sinners tend to have too high a view of themselves and too low a view of the infinite perfection and holiness of God. By the end of the sermon, he has powerfully shown that none are deserving of heaven and that God would be perfectly just in damning us all to hell. But, in His mercy, He has made a way through Christ to save all who put their trust in Him.

Note that Abraham began his encounter with the Lord with an over-inflated view of the people of Sodom. He figured that there must be at least 50 righteous people living there. But as he proceeded, he grew less and less sure of his figures. Finally he whittled his most hopeful number down to ten. As it was, there was only one barely righteous man in the whole city.

As you grow closer to God in prayer, He reveals to you both His own holiness and the horrible sinfulness of the human race. You begin to see that there is none righteous, not even one. If the Lord should count iniquities, none could stand before Him. So you begin to pray that God would mercifully call out from this sinful world a people for His own glory. As you realize that God sees every sin in every nation and city, even as He saw the sin of Sodom, you cry out for His mercy on our land, that He would not enter into judgment with us. And you recognize that when He does enter into judgment, it is always based on His complete knowledge. The Judge of all the earth always deals justly.

Thus God reveals His purpose to His friends. His purpose is to bless some from every nation through Abraham's seed, but not to save all from judgment. Thirdly,

- C. God's purpose is handed down through the families of His elect.

Verse 19: "For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." Notice the interplay between God's sovereign, gracious covenant with Abraham and the requirement for Abraham so that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. There is always this tension between God's sovereign purposes and our responsibility to bring about those purposes.

The point here is that the family is essential in God's purpose of blessing all nations through Christ, the seed of Abraham. Parents whom God has chosen and called to salvation are responsible to teach their children to live according to God's ways, including the importance of prayer. If we're not praying often with our children and showing them how to take all things to God in prayer, especially prayer for missions, we're not being faithful to hand off our understanding of God's purpose to the next generation as He has commanded us.

To sum up, to pray according to God's purpose is to pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is to pray for nations and individuals, that God would graciously withhold His judgment

until a people be raised up that will give praise to Him because they have experienced His blessing through Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ. It requires training our children to follow the Lord so that they will grow up to be the channel of God's blessings to others as they learn to pray. We cannot pray as we ought until we grasp God's great purpose of glorifying Himself in human history through the salvation of His elect and the judgment of sinners.

2. Prayer must proceed according to the knowledge of God's person.

Being the friend of God, Abraham knew God, including His character and attributes. This knowledge drew him on in prayer, to the point where he was bold enough to bargain with God.

A. God's grace encourages us to draw near in prayer.

At first glance, it seems as if Abraham was taking the initiative with God. But a more careful look reveals that the Lord took the initiative with Abraham. He first broached the subject (18:17-21), He then waited for Abraham's appeal after the two angels left (18:22), He drew Abraham on from 50 on down to ten (18:24-32), and then He chose when to end the conversation (18:33).

The picture here is that of God as a delighted parent, holding up his infant and then letting go and stepping back a pace, so that the child has to take a step toward the parent. Then the happy parent says, "Good, good!" and repeats the process until the little one learns to take steps on his own.

Abraham's prayer wasn't perfect. He was concerned that if God struck down the righteous along with the wicked, He would look bad in the eyes of the world. Abraham erred, in that God's temporal judgment sometimes falls on both the righteous and the wicked (Luke 13:1-5). The Judge of all the earth always does right, no matter how it may seem to sinful men. But even though Abraham's prayer wasn't perfect, God was graciously nudging him along. In the same way, His grace encourages us to come before His throne, knowing that He will receive us as our loving Heavenly Father, even if our prayers aren't perfect.

B. God's holiness and power check us from irreverence in prayer.

Even though God graciously receives us as His children, we dare not come irreverently or brashly before His throne. He is the holy God who judges all sin. He is the powerful God who can easily call down fire and brimstone to wipe out a sinful city. Thus while we, as His children, can come confidently before His throne, like Abraham, we need to keep in mind that we are but dust and ashes (18:27), while He is the living God who spoke the universe into existence.

True humility—seeing ourselves as absolutely destitute and seeing God as all-sufficient—is the foundation for all true prayer. We don't come to God as competent people who just need a little help. We dare not command God what to do, as those in the "name it and claim it" heresy brashly do! We come with an awareness of our frailty and desperate need and with reverence for God's awesome power and holiness, yet with the confidence that because He is gracious, He will hear our prayers.

C. God's mercy and justice give balance to our prayers.

Abraham was aware that God is both merciful, in that He will spare even the wicked on behalf of a few righteous, but He is also just. He sees and will judge all sins, even those done behind closed doors, in every sinful city in the world. This knowledge of God's person tempered Abraham's prayer. Some fault Abraham for stopping at ten, saying that he stopped asking before God stopped giving. But I think that Abraham sensed that he was at the limit at ten. If he went beyond there, he no longer would be pleading according to God's will. God answered Abraham by rescuing Lot and his family, even though He destroyed Sodom. Abraham's prayer was balanced by his understanding of God's mercy and justice.

We err when we think that prayer is a way to make everyone happy. People will say to me, "So-and-so is in the hospital; please pray for them." The assumption is that I should pray that he will get well. But is that God's purpose? Perhaps the person or a loved one has been running from God and this illness or accident is God's way of getting his attention. Maybe God is graciously trying to teach some other lesson. His purpose is not that we get instant deliverance from suffering, but that He may be glorified. An understanding of God's mercy and justice will lead me to pray that God

would graciously use this situation to glorify Himself, perhaps by bringing someone to salvation or into submission to Jesus Christ.

We've seen that prayer must be based on the knowledge of God's purpose. It must proceed according to the knowledge of God's person. Finally,

3. Prayer must be on behalf of a world under judgment.

A few years earlier (Gen. 14), Abraham had rescued his nephew Lot along with the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah after they had been taken captive by some warring kings. He had returned all their goods to them. It would have been easy here for Abraham to see himself as better than those ungrateful, sinful pagans and to say, "They should have learned their lesson! They deserve God's judgment!" But there is no hint of such an attitude. Abraham humbly prayed as a sinner on behalf of other sinners, that they might be spared from God's righteous, but terrible, judgment.

That's how we should pray. It's easy out of pride to look down on sinners who are suffering God's judgment and think, "It serves them right! If they didn't practice immorality, they wouldn't get AIDS! If they wouldn't use drugs and if they'd just go out and get a job, there wouldn't be all those drive-by shootings in the ghetto!" I'm not suggesting that people aren't responsible for their sin and its consequences. I am saying that apart from God's grace, we all would be under His judgment. We who know Christ are fellow-sinners who have been called out from our sin by God's mercy. We should have compassion on other sinners by praying that they, too, might experience God's grace in Christ.

Conclusion

In 1872, D. L. Moody made a trip to England for rest, with no intention of preaching. While he was in London, a pastor spotted Moody and asked him to preach for him the next Sunday and Moody agreed. On Sunday morning the church seemed indifferent to his message.

But when he spoke that evening, the response was completely changed. After the sermon, Moody asked those who wished to become Christians to stand, and hundreds stood up. Moody thought that they must have misunderstood him, so he asked them to sit down and he repeated the invitation more clearly, asking all who

wanted to become Christians to step into the inquiry room. So many people crowded into the room that extra chairs had to be brought in. Moody was amazed, thinking that they still did not understand. So he asked all of those who were in earnest to meet the pastor there the following night.

The next day, Moody sailed across the Irish Sea, but he no sooner reached Dublin than the pastor sent an urgent message for him to return, because more inquirers came Monday night than had been present on Sunday! Moody returned and preached for ten days, during which 400 people made professions of faith and joined that church.

Moody sensed that someone had been praying for this church. He began asking and finally was led to a bedridden girl, Marianne Adlard. She lay twisted and distorted by her suffering, but she spent many hours daily in prayer. She had been asking God to send revival to her church, which she never could attend because of her illness. She had read of Moody's work in Chicago, and she specifically asked God to bring this man to her church to preach.

When her older sister returned from that lifeless morning service and told Marianne that a man named Moody from Chicago had preached, she spent the afternoon in prayer until the Lord gave her assurance that He would bring revival. Marianne Adlard prayed daily for D. L. Moody as long as he lived (taken from Lyle Dorsett, *A Passion for Souls* [Moody Press], pp. 161-162; and D. Edmond Hiebert, "The Significance of Christian Intercession," *Bibliotheca Sacra* [Jan.-Mar., 1992, pp.20-21).

I don't understand why or how God works out His eternal plan in cooperation with the prayers of His saints, but He does! Knowing God's purpose, to call out a people for Himself from every nation; and, knowing God's person, that He is both merciful and just; we who have experienced His mercy have the privilege of praying for a lost world. Someday we will have the joy of meeting in heaven those who were delivered from God's judgment through our prayers! What could be more joyous than that!

Discussion Questions

1. If God is going to accomplish His sovereign plan anyway, why do we need to pray? Can our prayers have any real impact?
2. If it is not God's purpose to save everyone, why does the Bible say that He is not willing for any to perish?
3. How can we pray for the salvation of the lost since we don't know if they are elect?
4. How can we know if a catastrophe is God's temporal judgment or just a "natural disaster"?
5. Chew on Matt. 11:20-30 in light of God's sovereignty and our responsibility. If God knew that Sodom would have responded to miracles, why didn't He send Abraham to do some?

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