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PREVAILING WITH GOD

Genesis 18:16-33

By

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Genesis Lesson 39

PREVAILING WITH GOD Genesis 18:16-33

A bank president was standing in front of the automatic teller in the lobby one day while it performed a transaction rather slowly. After a brief wait, he was heard to say, "Come on--it's *me!*"

Automatic tellers treat bank presidents the same as everybody else. But what about God? Can I expect Him to respond to my prayers in a special way because it's me? While it's true that God is no respecter of persons, it's also true that some are friends of God in a special sense. They know God and they see answers to prayer more consistently than others. The old saying, "It's not *what* you know, but *who* you know, that counts" is true. Connections make a difference. Being the friend of God is the ultimate connection.

Abraham was the friend of God (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). In Genesis 18 we see him entertaining the Lord and two angels who appeared in bodily form. After he served them a meal, they told him and Sarah that the next year the promised son would be given, as Sarah would bear Isaac. Then the men arose, looked down toward Sodom, and began to walk in that direction, as Abraham accompanied them. The Lord spoke so that Abraham could overhear Him, and let Abraham know about the impending judgment of Sodom. Then, as the two angels proceeded toward Sodom, Abraham stayed alone with the Lord and engaged in the first instance of intercessory prayer recorded in the Bible.

It's a remarkable scene, as Abraham takes the role of a defense attorney for Sodom, arguing before the bench of divine justice. He gets God to agree that if there are 50 righteous people in Sodom, He will stay the execution. Then he cautiously moves to 45. God agrees. Abraham dares to move to 40, then 30, 20, and finally to ten. There Abraham rests his case, having prevailed with God. While God did not find ten righteous people in Sodom, He did honor Abraham's prayer by rescuing Lot and his family before destroying that region and all its inhabitants (Gen. 19:29). We learn that ...

God wants His friends to prevail with Him as the righteous and merciful Judge of all the earth.

The passage reveals the role of God's people as the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13). Because of Abraham, God would have been willing to spare Sodom if only ten righteous people could have been found in it. Wicked societies tend to despise righteous people, and yet it is because of the righteous that God's judgment is often withheld. There are times in history when God declares that a wicked nation has filled up the measure of their sins (see Gen. 15:16). When that occurs, even the godly cannot deliver that people from judgment (Ezek. 14:14, 20). But until that point of no return is reached, God's people are the safeguard of a nation, as they pray and live righteously before God.

Sodom and Gomorrah had gone over the brink. God had determined to judge those evil cities and hold them up as a warning to all future generations of His coming final judgment. Since that day is drawing near, this passage applies to us all. God wants us, as His friends, to prevail with Him concerning His plan of righteousness and justice for all nations. As we pray, God will be pleased to save many before that great and awful day. The first thing we learn is that ...

1. God reveals His plan of righteousness and justice to His friends.

Verse 19 can be translated as either "I have chosen him," or "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. 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). Abraham here is shown to be God's friend, as the Lord reveals the divine plan to him.

- A. God's plan of righteousness and justice is to be spread to all nations, beginning with the family.

Abraham was God's chosen channel of blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:3). The fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham centered in Jesus Christ, the Savior, Abraham's descendant through

Isaac. God's purpose is to bless all the nations through Abraham's seed, but not to save all from judgment, as seen here with Sodom. Verse 19 shows the interplay between God's covenant and Abraham's responsibilities in light of that covenant. While God's promises to Abraham were unconditional, at the same time Abraham's training his family in God's ways was an essential part of the fulfillment of those promises.

Note the importance of the family in God's plan. God states that He had known Abraham as His friend "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" (18:19). Fathers (the biblical commands for training children are most often directed to fathers, not mothers) are responsible to instill the Lord's way, which involves righteousness and justice, upon their children.

Righteousness refers to conduct which conforms to the ethical or moral standard stemming from God's character. Justice points to the administration of God's righteousness in human affairs, such as government and society, through honest and consistent application of the law. In other words, we are to teach our children through both example and instruction how to live so as to please God both as individuals and in society.

The context of verse 19, where Abraham pleads with God concerning the impending judgment of Sodom, implies that we are to show our children the importance of prayer, especially prayer for a lost world that faces God's judgment. One tool I have found useful is Frontier Fellowship's "Global Prayer Digest" (1605 Elizabeth St., Pasadena, CA 91104, available in our narthex), which gives a story and prayer need of a different people group for each day of the month. As parents, we should be praying both for and with our children frequently, especially for the lost.

A Senator was speaking at a church men's dinner when the subject of prayer in public schools came up. The Senator asked the men how many of them believed in prayer in the public schools, and almost every man raised his hand. Then he asked, "How many of you pray daily with your children in the home?" Only a few hands were raised!

The family is at the heart of God's plan to bless all the nations through Abraham's descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Pray for your children and train them so that they grow up with a vision of taking the gospel to those who have not yet heard. To do that, we must understand God's plan of righteousness and justice:

- B. God's plan of righteousness and justice means that no sin escapes His notice and judgment.

The Lord tells Abraham, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave" (18:20). When Cain killed Abel, the Lord said, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). Sin cries out to God. Just as right now there are many sounds surrounding us which we can't hear without a radio to tune them in, so we are not aware of all the sins around us; but God is. It cries out to Him for His righteous judgment. In speaking to Abraham, God adopts human language in reference to Himself (18:21), but He's making a point: Whenever He inflicts judgment, He does it on the basis of His perfect knowledge and justice.

The world rejects the notion of God's judgment. Sodom had a taste of it 15 years before, when the kings of the east conquered the city and captured all the people and their goods. But Abraham had rescued them and restored all their possessions. Most of them shrugged off the incident as bad luck and continued full bore with their sin. But it should have served notice, that they needed to repent of their sin before it was too late.

In Sodom, everybody got up that final morning assuming that it would be like any other day. If you had asked the man on the street, "How's it going?" he would have replied, "Great! The stock market's up, the city's not at war, I've got a good job, life is good!" And yet 24 hours later, he and everyone else were dead and the city was destroyed. To the pagans living nearby, 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 by geologists about how this sort of thing occurs. But no one would be saying, "The holy God of heaven has judged a wicked people."

While God's judgment always comes suddenly, it never comes without ample warning. These examples have been given to warn us, so that we won't be deceived into thinking that because God's judgment is delayed, it's not coming. I believe the current AIDS epidemic is God's merciful warning that an even more terrible judgment is going to follow. Our world glibly shrugs it off with the optimism that we'll find a cure. Meanwhile, make sure that you protect yourself in your immorality by using condoms! You may be safe in your immorality and escape AIDS. But AIDS is mild compared to the terrors of hell! God's plan of righteousness and justice means that no sin escapes His notice and His judgment. When you stand before God, either your sin will be upon Christ because you have fled to the cross, or you will stand condemned by the holy God.

God has revealed His plan of righteousness and justice to us, His friends. What are we to do with this knowledge? We've already seen that we are to do righteousness and justice and teach our children the same. But also,

2. God wants His friends to prevail in prayer with Him.

The two angels start off on the path toward Sodom. The Lord hasn't directly told Abraham that He is going to judge that wicked city, but Abraham puts two and two together. So he cautiously approaches the Lord and argues his case. Here we see both the heart of God, who delights in the prayers of His people, and the heart of Abraham, who pleads God's mercy for these sinful people.

There are four principles of prevailing prayer in these verses:

A. To prevail with God we must draw near to His presence.

Abraham was still standing before the Lord and then he came near (18:22-23). Only those who are close to God can intercede with Him on behalf of others. Abraham was separate from Sodom; Lot was living in it and caught up in its sinful ways. It was Abraham, not Lot, who interceded for it. There is a distinct contrast between Abraham, living peaceably in his tent, where he entertains the Lord and the angels, and Lot, living in a house (which Abraham never had), in the fast lane of wicked Sodom.

Donald Grey Barnhouse observes, "The longer one remains in the presence of God, the more proper perspective he gains on the world and all that is therein" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], p. 158). How true! You don't have to wallow in the mud of the world to understand it. The Bible gives us an adequate understanding of sin and its consequences. If we walk in holiness before God and meditate on His Word, we'll have enough insight on the world and on people, so that we can pray for and counsel them properly.

B. To prevail with God we must appeal to His Person.

Abraham appeals to God based on who God is, namely, the just "Judge of all the earth" (18:25), and that He is merciful. Since He is merciful, Abraham could ask that He spare the whole wicked city on behalf of the few righteous. And yet He is just: He will not ultimately treat the righteous and the wicked in the same manner. When we pray, we must keep both aspects of God's character in view. In Paul's words, we must remember both the kindness and severity of God (Rom. 11:22), and pray accordingly.

Underlying this is Abraham's concern for God's reputation, or glory. He's concerned that if God wipes out the righteous with the wicked, others will question His justice. Abraham was not quite right, in that sometimes God's temporal judgment falls on both the righteous and the wicked (Luke 13:1-5). God *always* does right, no matter how it appears to sinful men. But Abraham's motive was right, to appeal to the reputation of God and to desire that God look good (= "be glorified") in the world.

When we pray, we should appeal to Him on the basis of His glory and His person, as revealed in His Word, especially the balance between His mercy and His judgment. Sometimes people will ask me to pray for a loved one who is ill. When I ask, "What should I pray?" they're taken aback. They assume that we should pray that the person be healed. But the illness may be God's way of bringing the person to repentance and faith. Our prayers should be in line with God's glory and His merciful and yet holy person.

C. To prevail with God we must maintain a right perspective.

Abraham displays a reverent boldness toward the Lord, but never presumption (see 18:27, 30, 31, 32). In verse 27, he uses the

word "Adonai," meaning Lord or Master. He is quick to acknowledge that he is but dust and ashes. Note that the Lord doesn't correct Abraham by saying, "You need to boost your self-esteem!" John Calvin points out "that the nearer Abraham approaches to God, the more fully sensible does he become of the miserable and abject condition of men" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], 1:490). God has told us to come boldly before His throne in prayer, but only that we may receive mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16). We draw near only as unworthy sinners who appeal to Him on the merit and worthiness of Jesus Christ.

Abraham also maintained the proper perspective toward those for whom he prayed. There is no hint that he thought of himself as better than those in Sodom. He knew many of these people from the time he rescued them from the kings of the east. He easily could have looked down on them: "I risked my neck for these no-good bums and now look at them! When are they going to wise up?" But Abraham prayed for Sodom with the very real awareness of his own sinfulness. We need that same perspective in our prayers. We need a reverent boldness in coming before the Lord and arguing our case. But we need to remember at all times that we're unworthy sinners who have found mercy. As Leupold comments, "A man who has himself received mercy seeks to secure mercy for others" (1:549).

To prevail with God we must draw near to His presence; appeal to His person; maintain our perspective; and,

D. To prevail with God we must persevere in our pleading.

Abraham continued on from point to point, daring to ask God for more, until he went as far as he dared. Someone has said that Abraham ceased asking before God ceased giving. My opinion is that Abraham sensed that he was at the limit at ten, and that if he went further he would no longer be pleading according to God's will. God answered Abraham by rescuing Lot and his family before destroying Sodom. We need to remember that prayer is *not* getting God to do *my* will, but rather *His* will.

And yet Jesus taught that we need to persist in prayer. He told the parable of the man whose friend came late at night asking for bread. The man and his family were already in bed, but this

"friend" kept banging on his door. Jesus applied it to our need to keep knocking on heaven's door (Luke 11:8-10). He also told of the judge, who would not listen to the repeated pleas of the widow. But finally, to get some relief, he gave her what she wanted. How much more, said Jesus, will God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him (Luke 18:4-8). Persevere in prayer!

Conclusion

If we could read a transcript of our prayers over the past week, I have a hunch that many of them would be for personal needs: "Lord, help me with this exam, help me get a job, heal me of this disease," etc. These are legitimate topics for prayer, of course. But in the Lord's prayer, the first item of business is the honor and purpose of the Father: "Hallowed be Your name; Your kingdom come, Your will be done" (Matt. 6:9-10). After that comes prayer for our needs. Our prayers, like Abraham's, should center on what God is doing in the world. Pray for God to be glorified by showing mercy to lost family members, lost friends and neighbors. Pray for lost nations and the missionaries who are seeking to reach them with the gospel. Pray for this church, that God would be glorified here. Pray for our lost city and nation, that God would stay His hand of judgment and that many would turn from their sin and trust in Him.

Years ago, the China Inland Mission discovered that the number and spiritual strength of the converts at one station far exceeded anyone's expectations and could not be accounted for by anything exceptional about the missionary personnel there. The mystery remained unsolved until Hudson Taylor visited England. There, at the close of Taylor's message, a man from the audience stepped forward to greet him. In the ensuing conversation, Taylor learned that the man had detailed knowledge of this station.

"How is it," asked Taylor, "that you are so conversant with the conditions of that work?" "Oh," he replied, "for four years I have corresponded with my missionary friend there. He has sent me the names of inquirers and converts, and I have daily taken these names to God in prayer." Taylor realized the answer to the puzzle: the daily, specific, prevailing prayer of this man had brought eternal fruit for God's glory. God wants us, His friends, to

prevail with Him concerning His plan of righteousness and justice for the nations.

Discussion Questions

1. If God is going to accomplish His sovereign plan, why do we need to pray about it?
2. Some say that since there is no biblical command or example of praying for someone's salvation, we should not do so. Your response?
3. Why is God not unjust if the righteous suffer along with the wicked? How would you answer a skeptic?
4. How can we know when to persevere in prayer and when God is saying "no"?
5. What do you find most difficult about maintaining a consistent prayer life? What has helped you most in your prayer life?

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