

The Intercession of Abraham in Genesis 18.

Scripture readings: Genesis 18. 1-2a, 16-33; 19. 27-29; 2 Peter 2. 4a, 6-9.

Abraham was certainly no stranger to intercession, to praying on behalf of others.

He has earlier pleaded for Ishmael in chapter 17: 'Oh that Ishmael might live before you'.¹

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 (Sarah), for she is a man's wife". But Abimelech ... said, "Lord, will you slay a righteous nation ...? 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'.²

And Abraham now responds to God's revelation of the forthcoming destruction of Sodom with what must rank as one of the most impressive intercessory prayers of all time.

It hardly needs to be said that 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 primary importance)', Paul urged Timothy, 'that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made on behalf of all'.³

And, frankly, it is unnerving to read of God's reaction when His people fail to intercede for one another. Two Old Testament prophets in particular, Isaiah and Ezekiel, give it to us straight from the shoulder.

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'.⁴ It is 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 advertised position. There was 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, that 'it displeased the Lord that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and he *wondered* that there was no intercessor'.⁵ But, frankly, the translation 'wondered' is a very tame rendering. 'He was appalled/stunned/horrified that there was no-one to intercede' captures the meaning far better. The poor moral condition of His people *displeased* and *distressed* Him, but what '*devastated* Him' was the absence of anyone to intercede for them – that there was no one ready to step in between Himself and sinful Israel to plead on their behalf – that, in effect, there was no-one to do an Abraham!

In many ways, Abraham's prayer is a model of intercession. But one of the most striking features of Abraham's praying was that he stopped when he did. So, **why did Abraham stop when he had successfully negotiated the Lord down from fifty righteous to ten righteous?**

Well, certainly God hadn't told him to stop praying; as He would later tell Jeremiah more than once, 'Do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them'.⁶

Nor did God cut Abraham off when he reached ten. True, we read in verse 33⁷ that 'the Lord went His way as soon as He left communing with Abraham'. And, in that sense, it was the Lord who terminated the conversation. But we note that, by then, Abraham had already stopped asking. His sixth and last plea ('suppose ten should be found there') was preceded by his assurance and promise, 'I will speak but once more'.⁸

Then why did he stop? Did 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 righteous men. Would it have been any more just for God to destroy one righteous person than to destroy fifty – or ten? And, indeed, centuries later, God spoke through Jeremiah in terms of pardoning and sparing the city of Jerusalem if He found only *one man* who practised righteousness.⁹

My suspicion is that Abraham was confident that God would find at least ten righteous souls in Sodom. After all, would he not find (i) Lot and his wife; and, as I understand the angel's words in verse 12, (ii) their sons (plural), and, according to verse 8, (iii) their two virgin daughters (no small achievement in itself in Sodom!¹⁰), and, according to verse 14, (iv) their married daughters (again, plural), and (v) their sons-in-law. But, alas, if that was Abraham's expectation, he was to be sorely disappointed.

This brings us now 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 certainly didn't do that. For, in the words of Moses centuries later, 'Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim were overthrown by the Lord in His anger and in His wrath',¹¹ to which Jeremiah adds concerning Sodom, 'as in a moment, with no hand to help her'.¹² And, *on the face of it*, Abraham's concern and plea *were* for Sodom to be spared. Certainly *if* that was 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 in flames.¹³ Sodom most certainly had not been delivered by his prayers!

But did Abraham's real, underlying concern actually lie with the city of Sodom itself?

I think not. I find it hard to 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'.¹⁴ And, no doubt, when Abraham brought Lot and the rest of the captives of Sodom all the way back from near Damascus in chapter 14, there had been ample time for Lot to inform 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 had not the Lord Himself only just emphasized to Abraham that 'the cry of Sodom is great,' and 'their sin is very grievous'.¹⁵ I conclude from his opening words in verse 23 that Abraham's real concern lay elsewhere; not with the city itself but with those he terms 'the righteous' who he believed were 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 just two verses to '*righteous Lot*', '*that righteous man*', and '*his righteous soul*'.¹⁶ I see no reason to doubt therefore that Abraham had *Lot and his family* particularly in mind when he prayed. For who else in Sodom would he have had reason to expect merited the description 'the righteous'?

Abraham's concern did not lie then with the impending fate of the men of Sodom, which he had every reason to believe was well-deserved on account of their filthy lifestyle. His concern lay rather with the outcome for one of his own immediate family, for one of his own kith and kin, having (along with his father Terah) once brought Lot with him out of Ur of the Chaldees,¹⁷ and for whom to some extent he no doubt therefore felt responsible.

But there was much more to this than mere family connection. Abraham's keen sense of justice recoiled at the thought of *righteous* Lot perishing along with the guilty men of Sodom. And he therefore based his plea to God, not on Lot's *close family relationship*, but on Lot's *personal righteousness*. How could God punish the *righteous* with utter destruction, simply because the righteous happened to be living among the notoriously wicked? The very thought was 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'.¹⁸ And so he didn't plead God's *mercy* (though God did show mercy {pity, compassion} towards Lot¹⁹) but His *righteousness*. Abraham rested his case foursquare on the justice of God.

This wasn't, of course, the first time that Abraham has set out to deliver Lot. Back in chapter 14 (perhaps 15 years before) Lot had found himself in hot water (in very serious trouble) when he had been taken captive by none less than Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, and his confederates.²⁰ Initially, Abraham had shown no inclination whatever to get involved in the clash and conflict between Chedorlaomer and the kings of the cities of the plain.²¹ But everything changed when he was notified that his nephew was involved; 'when Abraham heard that his brother (his kinsman, his near relative) was taken captive' that was different!²²

This is then the second occasion when Abraham intervened to rescue Lot. Back in chapter 14, he had delivered Lot from bondage in Elam by his sword. Now in chapters 18 and 19 he delivered him from being barbecued in Sodom by his supplications.

And this combination of events raises several serious issues for us all, beginning with what I will 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 his nephew to his prayer list. No way! He (together, of course, with his allies Mamre, Eshcol and Aner, and his 318 trained and armed men) sped in hot pursuit, routed the foreign invaders at night, and did absolutely everything necessary to deliver Lot. The point being that, when Abraham could meet the need himself, he did so.

Yet *now* Abraham's sword and personal army were of no possible use. Only prayer could possibly save Lot from the inferno of God's judgement. Note carefully: *Abraham did not expect God to do for Lot what he could do for him himself*.

But now that Lot's situation was beyond human help, Abraham was fully entitled to go to God for His help. So that, if God had responded, 'Tell me, 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 back in chapter 14 had proved just that, when he had taken on Chedorlaomer's coalition – a most formidable foe which had previously defeated several terrifying tribes of giants, the Rephaim, the Zuzim and the Emim.²³

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves how much we are prepared to do for the folk for whom we often pray so casually.

Might God sometimes have occasion to say to us:

'Your words are all very fine, but how earnest are your prayers in reality? Have you done what you can? Frankly, it's no good, for example, you asking me to meet so-and-sos financial needs. You are the one with the money; you 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 other restricting circumstances), I still have a question for you. 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 come knocking my door to ask me to intervene on his or her behalf?'

But did God grant Abraham's request? I said just now that '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 certainly didn't do that'. Ah, but if we are referring to the underlying request of Abraham's heart, we can 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 sent Lot out of the overthrow*'.²⁴

The implication is clear; Abraham was the reason that Lot was spared.

We have only to note (i) 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; the Lord being merciful to him',²⁵ and (ii) the word of the one angel, 'Hurry and escape. For I cannot do anything until *you* reach there (the place of safety)'. Indeed, the angel's words, 'Lest you be destroyed ('swept away', 'consumed', KJV)',²⁶ explicitly recall the words of Abraham's prayer, 'would you destroy ('sweep away', the same word) the righteous with the wicked?'²⁷ 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'²⁸), 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 afterward would live ungodly (who in later generations propose to live in an ungodly manner)'.²⁹ Jude agreed, 'Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them are set forth as an example'.³⁰ That is, God both (i) *destroyed* Sodom and Gomorrah and (ii) *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's sin or its destruction (or both) are referred to in no less than seven later Old Testament books³¹ and in six books of the New Testament³²

(featuring as late as Revelation 11. 8, where we read of 'the great city called spiritually Sodom and Egypt'), ranging from the first book through to the very last.

But, as Peter made clear, **God wanted to teach two lessons, and not just 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'.³³ In other words, God wanted to demonstrate that He is able both (i) to deliver ***the just from judgement*** and (ii) to deliver ***the unjust to judgement***.

Abraham feared the destruction of the righteous (and he knew Lot to be 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, 'Will you destroy ('sweep away') the righteous with the wicked?'³⁴ No, God ('the Judge of all the earth') would never 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 go about delivering the righteous.

From where he stood, Abraham saw the future in terms of an 'either-or' situation; *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.³⁵ 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 (i) the just from judgement and (ii) the unjust to judgement.

But, thank God, He isn't constrained by the words we pray either. 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**.³⁶ The context shows that the apostle's 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 absolutely essential if this converted Pharisee was to avoid being lifted up in pride (to avoid being 'exalted above measure'), and so being disqualified from any future 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 by promising him the necessary grace to continue serving Him with the thorn ... by promising, in effect, not to remove the burden from his back but to strengthen his back to bear the unwelcome burden.

The story of **Augustine's conversion** in the fourth century illustrates very much the same point.

Augustine lived in Carthage in North Africa (present day Algeria) 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 did 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 sometime after, Augustine records the events of the night of his departure for Rome:

'That night I slipped away secretly, but she (Monica) remained to pray and weep. And what was it, O Lord, that she was asking of you with so many tears, but that you would not allow me to sail? But you, in the depths of your counsels and hearing the real point of her desire, *did not grant what she then asked, that you might make me what she had always been asking*'.³⁷

And, 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'³⁸) very well, and He 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.***³⁹ And isn't that what prayer should always be? It is 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.

And 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. 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'.⁴⁰ 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 our study:

- God expects us to intercede for one another, and He holds us responsible to do so. 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. Do we really have the right to pray for them?
- There are many occasions when it is best for us to simply tell God what is on our hearts, and to resist the temptation to dictate to Him how He should go about granting our desires. In answering prayer, as in all else, 'the Lord knows how', 2 Pet. 2. 9.
- Prayer opens up to us the amazing privilege of working with the God of heaven in putting His will into effect here on earth.

Notes

¹ Gen. 17. 18.

² Gen. 20. 3-17.

³ 1 Tim. 2. 1.

⁴ Ezek 22. 30–31.

⁵ Isa 59. 15–16.

⁶ Jer. 7. 16; 11. 14.

⁷ Much as back in Gen. 17. 22, following the making of the covenant.

⁸ Gen. 18. 32.

⁹ Jer. 5. 1.

¹⁰ Yet see Gen. 19. 30-38. His drunken stupor resulted in Lot doing the very thing which he had not permitted the men of Sodom to do!

¹¹ Deut. 29. 23.

¹² Lam. 4. 6.

¹³ Gen. 19. 28.

¹⁴ Gen. 13. 13.

¹⁵ Gen 18. 20.

¹⁶ 2 Pet. 2. 7-8.

¹⁷ Gen. 11. 31.

¹⁸ Gen. 18 . 25.

¹⁹ Gen. 19. 16.

²⁰ Gen. 14. 8-12.

²¹ Perhaps on the principle later stated by Isaiah, 'Let the potsherd [fragment of pottery] strive with the potsherds of the earth', Isa. 45. 9 KJV.

²² Gen. 14. 14.

²³ Gen. 14. 5; cf. Deut. 2. 10-11, 20; 3. 11.

²⁴ Gen. 19. 29.

²⁵ Gen. 19. 16.

²⁶ Gen. 19. 15.

²⁷ Gen. 18. 23. '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 tispah 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*), J. H. Sailhammer, 'The Expositors Bible Commentary', on Gen 19. 15-16.

²⁸ Gen. 15. 16.

²⁹ 2 Pet. 2. 6.

³⁰ Jude 7.

³¹ Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Amos, Zephaniah.

³² Matthew, Mark, Luke, 2 Peter, Jude, Revelation.

³³ 2 Pet. 2. 6-9.

³⁴ Gen. 18. 23.

³⁵ Gen. 18. 24.

³⁶ 2 Cor. 12. 7-10. Paul went to the One who knew all about thorns (Mark 15. 17), who knew well what it was to be buffeted (Mark 14. 65), and who knew what it was to plead three times for something to be removed from Him (Mark 14. 35-42)!

³⁷ 'The Confessions of St. Augustine', book 5, chapter 8, paragraph 15. I consulted the translations by E. B. Pusey (1838) and by A. C. Outler (1955).

³⁸ 2 Chron. 20. 7; Isa. 41. 8; James 2. 23.

³⁹ See 2 Cor. 1. 11; Philemon 22. 'One of the greatest lessons I've learned about prayer is this: the prayer that gets to Heaven is the prayer that starts in Heaven. Prayer is the Holy Spirit finding a desire in the heart of the Father, putting that desire in our heart, then sending it back to Heaven in the power of the cross ... Our part is just to close the circuit', Adrian Rogers, '*Prayer and the will of God*'.

⁴⁰ 1 John 5. 14-15.