

XXXI. Genesis in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel of Christ from Genesis
“The Problem of Answered Prayer”
Genesis 18:22-33
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We’re going to get an opportunity to see Jesus here in Genesis 18. We’re going to be looking at Genesis 18:22-33 but before we get there look with me first of all In Genesis 18:16-21. I’d like to give just a word of explanation that these verses are speaking of three men. We’ve already learned in our previous study these are two angels in appearance as men and Jesus, a Christophany, an appearance of Christ Himself. So these three men have had table fellowship with Abraham and Sarah who were given the promise of a child in less than a year even though their ages were 100 and 90, God has made that promise. Now these men have set out. This is where we pick up our study.

Genesis 18:16-21 says *[16] Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. [17] The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, [18] seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? [19] For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.” [20] Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, [21] I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God stands forever and by His grace and mercy, may His Word be preached to you.

This has been an enormous couple of chapters where the Lord has come down in appearance as a man, with two angels. He has spent time with Abraham and we come now to a closing scene in this divine narrative of the Lord’s visitation of Abraham. As we come to this scene, we come to a very interesting and somewhat perplexing passage of Scripture. It has to do with prayer. In fact, we are just about to read the first recorded prayer in the Word of God. It is an intercessory prayer. I can always be assured that if I preach on prayer, people will be interested because I have never met yet a Christian that was satisfied with the prayer life that they have. I’ve never yet met a Christian that was satisfied with the frequency of it or with the effectiveness of it, because we read passages like James 5:16 that says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man prevails,” or “avails much.” We get this sense, “Is my prayer life prevailing? What does it mean to have a powerful, prevailing prayer life?”

Here we come to Abraham and Abraham is about to engage in a prayer that on the one hand, seems to be extremely effective because God keeps saying yes. Yet on the other hand, Sodom and Gomorra get judged. So what is going on here? What is the Lord teaching us in this, His Divine Word and in this text that obviously brings us to the subject of intercessory prayer? Prayer is intuitive, we just don’t do it. Have you ever noticed when you hit your hand you automatically start praying right then. Now some people don’t have a very good prayer because they take the Lord’s name in vain at the point. It’s amazing! I’ve even heard atheists call out to God in a time when they hit their

hand with a hammer. I say, “Why are you doing that? You don’t believe in Him.” It’s interesting how prayer is just built within us. It is intuitive. We automatically when put in a foxhole in danger, will go to prayer.

Biblical intercessory prayer is not intuitive, it is counterintuitive. It doesn’t come reflexively, it has to be learned. That’s why the disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray. We don’t pray like you. Teach us to pray.” He gave them this beautiful prayer to pattern their prayer life after. Notice how it’s God-centered, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Then notice how it then turns to intercession. “Give us this day our daily bread,” notice it doesn’t say, “Give me my groceries.” It says, “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread. Forgive *us* our trespasses, even as we forgive others who have trespassed against us. Lead *us* not into temptation.” See how He builds intercessory prayer?

I want to give you a thought from this text about prevailing intercessory prayer. Prevailing intercessory prayer requires three things. It requires the one praying to have been ravished by the love of Jesus Christ. Secondly, it requires to be motivated by the needs of others and thirdly, an utter reliance upon the intercession of Christ Jesus, the Righteous One. Prevailing intercessory prayer will never be found unless we have those things in our life. First of all, we have been ravished with the love of Christ. If you haven’t been ravished with the love of Christ you’ll see the needs of others and in self-righteousness you’ll look at them and say, “Why don’t they just buck up and do better?” But when you are a trophy of grace and have been ravished by God’s love, then when you see others in the need, you are moved to pray for them. So that you’re secondly, moved by the needs of others and thirdly, you are then utterly reliant not upon your prayer, not upon your faith, not upon the way you said it, but upon the intercession of Christ Himself, the Righteous One.

Now I’d like for us to get there by taking a look at this text. Remember earlier when Abraham had set down with Sarah, he had a meal with now we know the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, and two angels. The book of Hebrews says, “Some have entertained angels without knowing it.” So Abraham becomes an example of the power of hospitality as he sits down and he entertains the Lord and two angels. Then a promise is given, “I’m going to give you a son.” We find the laughter of unbelief with Sarah, but the Lord brings Sarah to faith and now the Lord is rising up and he’s going east from Abraham down into the valley. He is going to visit the valley of the five cities led by Sodom and Gomorrah.

As He is rising up to go down there He says, “Shall I tell Abraham what I’m about to do?” That’s very interesting because we have just learned something from three passages of Scripture about this passage that this passage tells us that Abraham was “The friend of God.” Friends don’t conceal, friends reveal and so now what does the Lord say? “Shall I reveal to Abraham what I am about to do? As I am going down to see.” What is He going down to see? He’s going down to see the outcry of sin has risen high. Is the depth of sinfulness as deep as the outcry is high? Is the rebellion of Sodom and Gomorrah as limitless as it seems to be? The Lord says, “I am going to see that and if it is, I will know. Shall I keep this from Abraham?” Well, you know he goes on to share with Abraham but once he says, “Am I going to conceal this from Abraham” and Abraham’s standing there, once he says that you know he’s not going to conceal it.

You know if you're standing there next to me and I say to you, "You know I wonder if I should tell you this?" I just started telling you this as soon as I said, "I wonder if I should tell you this." So the Lord is not going to conceal. No, this is the Lord's way of drawing Abraham into the innermost and intimate thoughts that He has concerning what He is about to go and find out about Sodom and Gomorrah. Now Abraham is well aware of Sodom and Gomorra. He has already rescued the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Sodom and Gomorrah once when they had been captured by an invading king. He is well aware of them because his nephew who had pitched his tent near Sodom is now in Sodom. He is well aware of Sodom and Gomorrah and so as he gets this information from the Lord, what does Abraham the friend of God do? Well, he enters into intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now let's look at the text for this study and see what happens here. Genesis 18:22-33 says [22] *So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD.* [23] *Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? [24] Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? [25] Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" [26] And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."*

[27] Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. [28] Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." [29] Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." [30] Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." [31] He said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." [32] Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." [33] And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

Wow, what an interesting encounter that takes place there. We obviously see here Abraham as a man of grace. Now, notice it said earlier, "Abraham whom I have chosen," and because he is chosen by grace he is now set his mind and his heart to command his families to be found in righteousness and justice, but down from him, down in the cities below there is an iniquity that is of sexual immorality, sexual promiscuity, sexual perversity and the outcry is rising out to the Lord. The Lord is going down to see if the sin is as great as the outcry that's coming up and he reveals this to Abraham. Abraham, this man who has been saved by grace, ravished by the love of the God is now moved to intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah. He steps into the place.

In fact, notice it said, "He stands before the Lord" and then it said "he draws near to Him." Some of your Bibles rightly translate that as "he approached the Lord." That's a good translation because the Hebrew word translated 'draw near' there can also be translated 'approach.' Remember God says "Draw near to Me, I'll draw near to you." It means to come with humility. It's a legal term. We even have it in our culture today and

if you're in a courtroom and as a lawyer you want to ask something on behalf of your client, you stand up at your desk, you face the judge and then you say, "May I approach the bench?" It's the same word, the same concept. So now Abraham is taking a legal intercessor's position for Sodom and Gomorrah and approaching with humility the judge of all humanity.

When he comes, he begins this process, "If there are 50, will you spare Sodom and Gomorrah? If there are 40, would you spare Sodom and Gomorrah? 45? If there are 40? 30? 20? 10?" And every time he makes a request God says, "Yes." I remember listening to Tim Keller speak on this one time and it gave me my idea for my title, "The Problem of Answered Prayer." He keeps saying 'yes' and Abraham is a man that won't take yes for an answer. He keeps going down in his counting. He gets to ten and gets "Yes" again. He stops and he goes home. The Lord goes on His way and Sodom and Gomorrah will be put under the hand of judgment. Now that's something else for us to study, but Abraham stopped and went home.

What is there for us here? For the sake of time I'm going to move into our takeaways from this text so I can give you some practical encouragement here concerning intercessory prayer. Here's the first I want to share with you from this text. This doesn't directly deal with intercessory prayer but it's imbedded in the text and it's something that is very appropriate that we need to understand today. I meet people all the time who try to convince me that the United States is kind of like the new Israel, where God has chosen this country for a special relationship with Him. I have to confess to you I do not believe that. I do not hold that. Do I believe this country has enjoyed the blessings of God? Yes I do. Now I'm about to tell you why.

Alexis de Tocqueville one time when he came here and toured this country, he was amazed at this burgeoning democracy and what was happening. When he went back to France he wrote this, "America is great because her churches are great. As long as her churches are great, she will remain great." He had his finger on something and that was our whole system is very much built upon the requirement of the leaven of Christianity; its virtues, its principals, et cetera. He was well aware of that, saw that and articulated that. I agree with him and I think it is at this point that we need to understand something. God's providential blessings upon nations are most often directly related to the welcomed presence of His people in those nations. Here is a city-state Sodom, a city-state Gomorrah and the Lord says, "If My people are found there welcomed, I'll spare them." It is for that reason I think God has blessed America with; legally and actually the welcomed presence of the Lord's people in her midst.

Of course that immediately gives me a concern because it doesn't take anyone a great amount of discernment, insight, or intuition to notice that there is a deconstruction movement in this country that doesn't accept freedom of religion but now is pushing for a freedom from religion, specifically Christianity. When that day occurs and the Lord's people are no longer welcomed legally and actually, there is no special relationship that the United States has at the hand of God that would not stop a judgment and it can come quickly. Would I ever have believed in my lifetime, early in my lifetime, that I would have seen the Berlin Wall fall and the Soviet Union crumble? No. The Lord's hand can move very quickly, as He desires. You might be thinking, "Pastor, if you're right and the people of God are not welcome and the people of God are not legally and actually being

welcomed any longer, what must we do?" We must do what Abraham did, we must pray. That is our first, not our only, but it is our first movement.

Let's take just a moment to look at the profile of intercessory prayer. When Abraham learned this, what did he do? He prayed. He went immediately to intercessory prayer. I mean here we are talking about a day of prayer and even when we talk about a day of prayer that our president has requested we even say to the church, "Can you give an hour?" We sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer" yet according to George Barna the average Christian gives four and a half minutes to prayer a day. The average conservative evangelical Christian gives four and a half minutes of prayer a day to prayer. Where is prayer on my horizon? I mean it's there and I want to do it. I want to do it right and I want to be engaged in prevailing prayer. What does it look like? Here Abraham in the very first recorded prayer gives us a marvelous picture. Here are four little duets on this.

The first thing is that intercessory prayer is both bold and humble at the same time. I think one of the mistakes we make in Christianity is we talk about walking a balanced life when in reality the Christian life is more of an elliptical life. An ellipsis, unlike a circle which is held by a core, an ellipsis is held together by two poles. An ellipsis is something that is configured because it has two poles that hold the whole thing into existence and that's the Christian life. It is truth and love. It is not 50 percent truth and 50 percent love; it's 100 percent truth and 100 percent love. When I worship, how am I supposed to worship? I'm supposed to worship with joy, with 100 percent joy and a 100 percent reverence in my worship. There is to be reverence and not 50 percent of the time I'm joyful, 50 percent of the time I'm reverent; but all in my heart. You see the Christian life is this supernatural thing that can't be done by formulas. It's the living Spirit of God that produces it. As the living Spirit of God produces in our life we find ourselves holding to two poles with complete abandonment.

So it is when we go to the Lord in prayer, on the one hand humble, He drew near, "May I approach the bench? Lord I'm but dust and ashes." Three times he says, "Can I now speak to the Lord?" No presumption, no arrogance. It is with humility. Yet at the same time, there is boldness as he stood before the Lord. As he began to inquire of God concerning His justice and His righteousness and what that should look like in terms of Sodom and Gomorrah, there is both boldness and humility.

Secondly, you'll notice that he is both persistent and reasonable. It's not a stubborn persistence, "Well, I've got something on my mind, I'm just going to beat God to death with it until He gives it to me." Oh, he's persistent, "50? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10?" Notice how persistent is about the matter of delivering Sodom and Gomorrah from the judgment to come. He stays at it. Yet notice, it's not a stubbornness, there is a reasonableness that is there. He begins with the very attributes of God. He says, "God, You are the righteous Judge of all mankind. Can You explain to me about Your judgment upon those who would be in rebellion if the righteous are there? Will You punish both the just and the righteous?" He has entered into dialogue with the Lord, just go read the Psalms. Watch how David dialogues with the Lord. He is bold and humble and persistent yet reasonable.

Who do you think in the Bible would be the intercessor prayer warrior that would typify this matter of boldness more than anybody else other than Jesus? I'll give you a hint, how about Moses? "Moses, I'm going to give you all the Promised Land, but I'm not going with You." "God, You can't do that." Now, that's pretty bold. "God, You

can't do that." Now notice, that's not because Moses came up with a better idea than God, he said, "You can't do that because You said this" and he brings back to God His Word, which God delights in. So there is this boldness where Moses comes and says, "Lord, You've given me these people. Do You know what these people are like? How am I going to get these people through the wilderness?" Yet the Bible tells us that Moses was the meekest man in all the earth. Or John the Baptist, look at his boldness. It cost him his head in front of Herod, yet what is the statement of his prayer life? "He must increase and I must decrease." Boldness and humility are like two threads and then you have two more threads that come, there's this persistence and reasonableness in prayer.

My daddy, I'll never forget as I was growing up he was my Sunday school teacher, officer in the church, he was everything, we had devotions in the home and then all of a sudden he's gone. They called it a midlife crisis. Gentlemen, let me just tell you because of my experience in this one, if that becomes your syndrome of choice, don't come talk to me. I'm not too good when I see you show up with permed hair, a gold chain, lost 60 pounds and you just bought a Corvette. I am not too good right there. I remember watching my dad go into the depths of sin and I didn't know what was happening. Every day for 15 years almost I would go to the Lord, "Lord, is he saved? Has he fallen down? Then God, send the bloodhounds of heaven after him. God if he's never been saved, save him." Then I'd give God all of these lists of things as to why I thought He ought to do it. Now by no means did I ever think that God was up there and I would say, "Now, God, there's these 6 guys that if my daddy got right with You, whether he gets saved or reclaimed whatever it is, when You do that –" and I would list the people because my dad was very influential. Not one time in my life did I think that God was up in heaven saying, "Oh, Harry, great idea. I didn't think of that one. I'll do that now. Boy I'm glad you thought of that, I didn't think about that." No, I'm not informing God, I am dialoguing with God. God delights in the communication of His people. "Come, let us reason together," says the Lord.

Prayer is that conversation of humbleness but boldly through the way that it's been sprinkled clean by the blood of Jesus coming to the throne, anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication making our requests known unto Him. It is reasoning with the Lord and persistence. You have to be persistent. Remember God has three answers to prayer. They are yes, no, and keep praying. That's that the third answer. Sometimes God wants you to keep praying. So there is being bold and humble, persistent and reasonable and now let me give you a third one.

The third one is you're motivated by both the glory of God as well as the needs of others. This text shows us how Abraham is motivated by the glory of God. "God, what will the people say about You as we consider the disposal of Sodom and Gomorrah?" He is directly concerned with God's glory and he is concerned with the needs of Sodom. Here is where I depart with some commentators. There are some commentators that say Abraham is interceding to get Lot out. If Abraham was only motivated by the need of Lot, it'd be very simple. "God, listen, can You give me about a day and a half? I'm going to go get Lot and his family out and then I'll go get them." No, he's not praying just to get Lot out. He is praying for this sexually promiscuous, immoral, perverse nation-state that the cry of sin has gone up in violation of God's law. He is interceding for them. Wow! He's interceding for the pornographer, the abortionist and for God's grace and mercy to find them out, not, "Just let me get mine out of the way and then nuke

them.” No, he’s not doing that. He’s praying for them because Abraham has been ravished by the love of God. Abraham knows he is just 25 years away from worshipping pagan idols, but God in grace and mercy set him free. Because this is love of God found him out, he now is interceding the love of God would find these people out and deliver them to faith and repentance. He is moved by being ravished in the love of God, therefore now he’s ready to pray for the needs of others, beyond his own family, his own personal concerns, he is interceding for Sodom.

The fourth thing is whenever you pray remember you pray because God invited you and God instigated you. Have you ever heard someone pray when they say this, “You know I just don’t whether God hears my prayers or not.” I like the way one preacher said, “You just give yourself too much credit.” You wouldn’t be praying if God had not invited you and moved you to pray. God has invited you. “Shall I come see you?” “No, I’ll tell Abraham.” He has invited him into His presence and so the Lord has invited us. We have a nation that is on the death-spiral of decent. What will we do? Will we pray? Or do you think the answer is in some political party? Do you really believe that? Do you believe the answer is in some other movement? My country needs my king. My country won’t have my king without judgment beginning in the household of God. Therefore, God’s people must pray. We must pray.

That brings me to the final take-away. Abraham went home. It seems so anticlimactic, doesn’t it? I read literally scores of commentators on this. For the longest time I’m almost looking like Abraham and God are into a Middle East market bazaar here, “50? How about 45? 45? 40? 30?” I’m feeling like haggling’s going on here. Then I realize no, that is not what Abraham is doing. Abraham has just come in stark reality to the majestic mountains of God’s looming justice upon Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham is not haggling. He is exploring, thinking is there a path of deliverance through this mountain range of God’s righteous judgment? Is there a path to deliver sinners? Abraham has already found it in Genesis 15:6. That’s why I believe he goes to what he knows is the answer. The answer is someone else’s righteousness to be given to sinners. See Abraham knows Adam sinned and because of Adam’s sin from Adam comes a sin nature and a sin record imputed to all of his seed.

Could it be reversed? Could there be a righteousness to be imputed to others? The Bible says in Genesis 15:6 “Abraham believed in the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Is there a righteousness that can deliver Sodom and Gomorrah? Here is where Abraham finds the pathway through God’s mountain range of judgment and justice. The pathway is righteousness by someone to be given to someone. He finds the path, but he goes home because he has no one that can walk that path. There aren’t ten righteous. There’s not even one righteous. The Bible says, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” Abraham found the way, the path, and he went home. Today you and I have a city to pray for. We have state to pray for. We have a nation to pray for and we know the pathway is a righteousness from God for His people. We know there is a pathway. We know even more for there is One beyond Abraham, One greater than Abraham who does not go home but left His home and came to the Sodom and Gomorrah of this world. He went to a cross to pay for all of our sins and gives us a righteousness. *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

There is a way and there is One who has walked that way. It is the One through whom our intercession goes, Jesus Christ. Romans 8:31-34 says [31] *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.* We have the righteous One, Jesus Christ. Now, will you pray or go home? Will you pray for our city? Will you pray for our nation?

Now, granted, that's not all that's done. This isn't the first time he has interceded for Sodom. Remember when the kings came in and captured them, he rose up with an army, went out and he delivered the king of Sodom. So I ask you on the one hand, rise up on the charger of Jesus Christ. Rise up with the armor of God with the weapons not of this world. The answer for our nation is not in Washington. It's not in Montgomery. It's not in a capital building. It's right here in the lives of God's people who rise up and enter into the fray, into the battle with the weapons of the Spirit, with the armor of Christ, putting on Christ, proclaiming Christ, living Christ with truth, love, grace and mercy. Then this army goes to its knees in intercessory prayer, "Lord, we can't do this. You must do it. Lord, do it with me. Do it here in the House of God first."

A day of prayer? It is a life of prayer. It is intercessory prayer that is bold, humble, persistent, reasonable, motivated by God's glory and motivated by the needs of those around us. "Oh God, we were there, You saved us. Will You not save them? Oh God, we come to You in the name of the Righteous One Jesus Christ that He would deliver us from our sin." I think it has to begin here.

I was reading recently the Spurgeon biography again and the account that his wife gives of the moment when he came to lead the church in worship and six pastors who had just graduated from the pastor's college had found their way to the front row. Early in the service, there was going to be five services that day and this was the third one and they got their spot. Then this short dumpy man comes up to them and he says to them, "We're glad you're here. What brought you to our church?" And they said, "Oh, we hear that this place is one fire for the Lord and doing great things for the Lord. We're going into the ministry and we wanted to hear Spurgeon preach before we go into the ministry and we're taking this opportunity before we go." And he said, "Well, that's great. This place does get hot. Would you like to see our boiler room?" And they said, "No, we don't want to go. We don't want to lose our seats." He said, "I'll save your seats for you, don't worry. Come on with me."

They all walked down two flights of stairs and he opened the door and there on their knees were 500 people who had just finished the previous worship service and went to prayer for the next one. He said, "This is how the fire is stoked in this church. This is the boiler room." We have not, because we ask not. When we do ask, we ask amiss to consume it upon ourselves but if we ask for the Lord to deliver us, our city, our nation, will not the Lord do it one more time? Not home, go to your knees. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, what Abraham anticipated, we have. Abraham found the path, we've got the Person and that's Jesus Christ the Righteous One. Father, would You allow us to have

the heart of Abraham? With a nation on the edge and the precipice of judgment, we want to rise up with the armor of the Lord to stand firm and to take captive for Jesus Christ and we would go to our knees to intercede with all our hearts, reasoning with You, calling upon You, persistently, boldly, and humbly. God, will You for the sake of the righteousness of Christ do a work in us, through us, and in this world beginning with our nation? God, we do not want the idols of this world. We are not asking for a prosperity gospel of more money, wealth, and health. We're asking for the deliverance from sin, the forgiveness of sinners, for transformation, for renewal and for the power of the living God to fall upon a people that they might adore Him, love Him, and serve Him. We ask, drawing near in the Name of the Righteous One Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.