

Genesis 18:16-33 *Effective Prayer* 2/11/18

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."

Abraham Intercedes for Sodom

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.

(Pastor prays)

The truth of the matter is that most of us are probably still not very good “pray-ers.” We have prayer lists, we have prayer concerns. Facebook even has cartoon praying hands to let people know you are praying for them. But what we don’t have is hordes of praying people. We have good people, working people, smart people and theological people. We have all the fuel ingredients but so often we actually lack the fire that makes hearts burn, and we need that.

It’s why I am thankful that God in His providence has brought us to this passage, a recorded conversation between Abraham and God that’s put here to teach us to pray, to expose our need, to challenge our busy-ness and to quench our thirsty souls.

In this passage before us, we have the first full-scale prayer of the Bible and it comes from an imperfect man of faith who is saved by grace and knows he needs God.

Do you actually know that you need God? Abraham did. He was frank and straightforward with God. He was humble with God. He prayed to God based on what he knew about God’s character and integrity, and we pray not based on what we know about ourselves. But we know nothing about ourselves. Our prayers are cries of trust to a good and holy God who loves His children in Christ and, in this passage, Abraham teaches us plenty about prayer... and I’m glad of that because I need to get better at it. Abraham is going to show us what effective prayer looks like. Simply put:

Effective Prayer Means *Really* Talking to God

Let’s build off that statement.

To Talk to God, You’ve Got to Know God

Let’s pick up the story in context. Abraham and Sarah have just met with God and been promised a son and they know the due date. Verse 16 has the angels leaving with Abraham. While walking them out, Abraham hears some divine deliberation. The Lord is speaking and there is a lot going on here. Let’s read verses 17-18.

*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? Verse 18 is a direct prophecy of Jesus. Paul took the verse and in Galatians 3:8 said, *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the**

Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." That is a fascinating reminder that Abraham points us to Christ. And as spectacular as that is, verse 19 opens up the grace of God for us. Let's read it, talk about it and apply it. Look at what the Lord says. *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.*" What a beautiful verse. This is why in 2 Chronicles, James and Isaiah 41, Abraham is called a "friend of God." Abraham could talk to God because he *knew* God. How did he know God? The same way you and I can know God.

We Know God by Grace

Notice how verse 19 says, "I have chosen him or I have known him." This is God's initiative, God's moving, God's doing. The glory of knowing God is that he sees us in our sinful, wretched state and loves us in spite of it. We are not chained to the grind of trying to earn God's affection and love. He comes to us and shows us our sinful messed up lives and at the cross of Jesus, He pays our debt. By faith He adopts us as His children. We know Him by grace. Do you? Have you been changed by grace at the cross of Jesus? Religion is the slavery of trying to work your way to God. Freedom is being adopted in Christ through the power of the cross. It's grace.

We Know God by Discipline

We talked about God's grace and awakening us, but it doesn't stop there. We are called into the rigors of discipleship. Read the first 2/3 of verse 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,* The way of the Lord which, of course, is distinguished from the way of the world. This is a picture of the discipline of following Christ. Forget what lies behind and strive forward. This is resisting temptations and seeking forgiveness.

This is you dropping excuses and actually practicing some self-denial. How can you ever really know God if you can't deny yourself? How can you love the beauty of Christ if you are constantly swayed by the fool's gold of this world? And I'd like to call you back this morning to the joyful intense freedom of giving yourself over to Jesus Christ. We know God by His grace and discipline.

We Know God by Trusting His Plan

Let's read verse 19 to the end. *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.*" See the plan, so the Lord might bring Abraham the thing He has promised. God chose Abraham and He's working through Abraham's discipline to bring about His plan. How many of you here believe that God has a plan for your life?

God doesn't make plans like we make plans. Nate and I planned to wash and wax the cars together yesterday, but rain ruined those plans. Our plans depend on outside factors that we can't control – not so with God. There are no outside factors that He doesn't control. He is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything.

God says in verse 19, "I'm doing all of this so that I can bring about what I promised." Isn't that the very same thing the New Testament tells us about being in Christ? Ephesians 2:10, *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* Or what Paul said in Philippians 1:6, *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

I just want to encourage believers here. In Christ, God has chosen and purchased you. He loves you with an undying everlasting love. He has forgiven you and cleansed you. In Christ, He has accepted you and planned your life and is working through prayer and providence His plan for you. You can trust him. Do you? Do you trust him? That's a big piece of knowing God. We know God through His grace, through discipline and we know Him by trusting His plan. Prayer is talking to God, and to talk to God you have to know God.

When You Know God, You Understand the Problem of Sin and Judgment

Right there in verses 20 and 21, God and Abraham are walking toward Sodom, look what the Lord says. *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."*

This is a forgotten piece of the Gospel. God is going to Sodom to *see*. Now obviously God can see everything, but this verse is illustrating for us the intimate nature of God's knowledge of our sin. Why is He going down there? Verse 20 tells us why, the outcry is great and the sin is grievous.

God is not ignorant of any sin. He is not indifferent to any wickedness. He hears the cries of the oppressed and abused and cheated on. The way this is phrased sounds a lot like Genesis 4 when Cain killed Abel. God says to Cain, "What have you done? The blood of your brother cries to me from the ground."

It's important to think on this a little bit. There is not one sin that has ever failed to cry out to God. There is not one wrong that has ever gone unnoticed or unrecorded by God. Every single sin has a voice, and the voice is crying out to Heaven for judgment, and if you are not in Christ, all of your sins have gathered like a foul choir calling out for God to plunge you into infinite judgement. Worse than that, God is now walking our streets and riding in our cars with us. He comes into our homes and He marks everything. He misses nothing. He invades our most sacred privacy, even our thoughts and ideas and intentions. All our lives are naked before Him and the weight of that sin is crushing.

The crying out of our sin is like the crying out of Sodom or like the crying out of Abel's blood. It's a cry for vengeance and judgment, a cry for punishment and destruction. The wages of sin is death and our sin cries out to the Judge. This is a horrifying truth that our sins are crying out like Sodom's for judgment or like Abel's for vengeance.

What, then, do we do? We trust what Hebrews 12 tells us, *Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*. That word is "forgiven," that although you and I deserve the crushing judgment of God, Jesus Christ came and lived perfectly without sin and fulfilled the law of God, earning righteousness. And on the cross, He took the crushing judgment of God, dying in the place of sinners.

God raised Him from the dead, declaring forgiveness for any man or woman, boy or girl, who trusts in Christ.

To talk to God, you've got to know God. When you know God, you understand the problem of sin and judgment and you come to the cross of Christ. It's where real prayer begins.

Believers, I hope you have been reminded of this forgiveness. For the unsure, come to the cross and find out what it means to receive the free love of forgiveness of God in Christ.

(Pastor prays)