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Sermon Notes

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## **Abraham Intercedes for Sodom & Gomorrah**

**Genesis 18:16-33**

### Introduction: The Mystery of Prevailing Prayer

Prayer is the channel of intimacy, fellowship and communication with the true and living God. It is the greatest source of power we have to accomplish God's purposes in our lives and in the world. It is God's gift to be enjoyed. Any believing man or woman can do anything God ordains when he or she learns to pray according to His will in the name of Christ.

Prayer is where the mortal, weak, sinful, finite human being meets the all wise, omnipotent and ever loving Creator. It is the meeting place where Divine and human desires are discussed.

Prayer has no substitute. At least 190 times in the Bible, God promises to answer our prayer when we follow His guidelines.

***James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.***

***"Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." 1 John 3:21-22 (NKJV)***

***"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." John 15:7 (NKJV)***

***"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." Matthew 21:22***

Prayer is a proven, active and prevailing reality. It is not an empty formality of religious exercise. Prayer is a personal contact with God Himself. Again and again in Church History, God has moved mightily in direct answer to prayer.

The heroes of the faith through the ages have always been diligent, vigilant, and constant in prayer. They humbled themselves before God with prayers, petitions, and supplications always acknowledging their utter dependency upon His mercy and grace. Historical anecdotes abound. Athanasius, for instance, prayed five hours each day. Augustine once set aside eighteen months to do nothing but pray. Bernard of Clairveaux would not begin his daily activities until he had spent at least three hours in prayer. Charles Simeon devoted the hours

from four till eight in the morning to God. John Wesley spent two hours daily in prayer--beginning well before dawn. John Fletcher regularly spent all night in prayer. His greeting to friends was always, "Do I meet you praying?"

Martin Luther often commented, "I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer." Francis Asbury rose each morning at four in order to spend two hours in prayer. Samuel Rutherford began praying at three. If ever Joseph Alleine heard other craftsmen plying their business before he was up, he would exclaim, "Oh how this shames me. Doth not my master deserve more than theirs?"

John Calvin, John Knox, and Theodore Beza vowed to one another to devote two hours daily to prayer. John Welch thought the day ill-spent if he did not spend eight or ten hours in prayer. The extraordinary thing is that such fervent praying was not considered to be particularly extraordinary.

In our text this morning, we see Abraham, our father in faith, standing before the eternal God in prevailing prayer

It is an amazing account of his deep thirst for intimacy with God

Context: Genesis 18, a chapter of intimacy

I. God's Intimate Meal with Abraham

II. God's Intimate Personal Revelation to Abraham About Sarah

Now...

III. God's Intimate Public Revelation to Abraham About Sodom (vs. 16-21)

**vs. 16-21** *When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. 17 Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." 20 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."*

A. Angelic Mission to Sodom and Gomorrah

1. Personal investigation: God says "I will go down to see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry..."

a. "anthropomorphic language"... common in Genesis

- Genesis 3: Adam and Eve hear the sound of God walking in the cool of the day

- Genesis 11: Let us go down and see this Tower they are building
- Here: I will go down and see if the outcry is as great... if not, I will know
  - b. to give a sense of immediacy and human involvement
  - c. NOT because God didn't already know exactly what was going on in Sodom

God is NOT “nearsighted”... “I will go down to see...”

God knew every filthy, excruciating, repulsive detail of the thoughts and actions of every man, woman, child who had ever lived in Sodom and Gomorrah!!

***Job 31:4 Does he not see my ways and count my every step?***

***Proverbs 5:21 For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths.***

Why, then, does God speak like this?

Why does He take the time to send the angels to investigate?

2. Purpose #1: to show God's absolute commitment to justice
  - a. God does nothing in wrath and judgment except what is deserved
  - b. God is meticulously careful about protecting His reputation as a just judge

***Romans 3:4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge."***

***Romans 3:19 ... so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.***

3. Purpose #2: to involve the angels in His work [He doesn't need to use them, but chooses to, just like He chooses to use us...]

***Revelation 19:10 At this I fell at [the angel's] feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!"***

B. The Outcry Against Wickedness: How Long Must God Bear It

1. The issue: Sodom and Gomorrah's horrible wickedness
2. The “Outcry”... like the earth, crying out about Abel's blood... the outcry of injustice, and wicked perversion, the outcry of prosperity gone bad
  - a. clamor of wickedness... boisterous noise of parties, screams of wounded brawlers, groans of sick drunkards, squeals of wild laughter

- b. even worse, the outcry of blood from the ground, of helpless victims murdered
- c. especially the cry of the earth that has had to bear Sodom and Gomorrah all these years

### C. God's Deceptive Silence

1. Wicked people are often deceived by God's silence... as though He doesn't exist, doesn't care, or is evil like them
2. NOT TRUE... this quiet encounter with Abraham is the calm before the second most terrifying storm in history, after Noah's flood

### D. God's Desire for Intimacy with His People

1. God cannot hide from Abraham what He is going to do
2. Fascinating: **internal deliberation** in the heart of the Lord: "Shall I hide...???"

***vs. 17 Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"***

God has the right to hide anything from us that He wants to!!!

He is under NO OBLIGATION to reveal Himself or His plans to us

***Daniel 4:35 All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"***

***Romans 11:33-34 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"***

God decides what He will reveal and what He will conceal...

***Deuteronomy 29:29 The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.***

All that God reveals to us is simply GRACE on His part... He doesn't owe us insight, explanation, prediction, warning, permission... He is God, He is the King

AND YET, for all of that, God delights to reveal Himself and His plans to us

3. God reveals Himself to His people

**ESV Amos 3:7 "For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.**

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has far greater impact if God predicts it and explains His reasons for it ahead of time to Abraham and to the world through him

God desires relational intimacy and will not hide this from us

**NASB John 14:2 "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.**

"If it were not so I would have told you" implies that God delights to open His mind up to His servants

D. God's Reasons for Intimacy: from Generation to Generation

1. Already seen this in detail... Abraham chosen by God to be God's instrument for the blessing of ever nation on earth

**vs. 18-19 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."**

2. From generation to generation Abraham will direct his household to walk in the ways of the Lord

3. VITAL VERSES ON GOD'S MULTIGENERATIONAL PLAN FOR THE FAMILY

- a. why does God reveal Himself? Ans. Abraham will become a mighty nation and all nations on earth will be blessed through him

Definitely referring to the Jews generally, and to Jesus Christ specifically

- b. connection between verse 18 and verse 19: the blessing to the nations is in direct connection with Abraham teaching his children to "keep the way of the Lord"
- c. Abraham's true seed are a godly nation, who keep the way of the Lord

Application: Godly fathers MUST follow this same example with their children

This is what God delights in in a family, in a godly father

**19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."**

The start of it all is personal ELECTION...

### **19 For I have chosen him**

The result of election is Abraham's godly parenting, godly training of his son, and his household to be holy

The result of Abraham's obedience: fulfillment of all promises

4. As part of that, it is good for Abraham to understand God's fierce wrath against the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah... as a warning to him and his descendents forever

***Ephesians 5:3-7 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5 For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be partners with them.***

Intimacy here reveals God's holy wrath and serves as a safeguard for us:

***Exodus 20:20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."***

#### E. God Reveals His Plan to Abraham

***vs. 20-21 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."***

1. More than just a simple fact-finding mission
2. Abraham knows full-well that the wrath of God is coming on Sodom and Gomorrah
3. In fact, he's probably been expecting it for some time
4. Note human language:

***I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."***

5. God includes Abraham in the anguish of the destruction of human beings, just as Christ included the disciples in the hunger of the 5000

***"They don't need to go away, you give them something to eat!"***

- God could have saved the animals without Noah's Ark... but He chose to use Noah's obedience

- God could have delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt without Moses' staff, but He chose to use Moses' obedience
- God could have destroyed the inhabitants of Jericho without Joshua's orders to walk around the walls for seven days, but He chose to use Joshua's obedience
- God could have killed Goliath with a bolt of lightning from the clear sky, but He chose to use David's slingshot and stone
- God could have chosen to save the nations without missionaries risking their lives, but He chose to use the Moravians, William Carey, Adoniram & Ann Judson, Hudson Taylor, Lottie Moon, and countless others as obedient vessels to carry Christ's name to the ends of the earth
- God has always chosen to INVOLVE His children in His work by means of their faith, their obedience, their prayers, their generosity

#### F. God's Perfect Holiness and Wrath

1. More than anything, intimacy with God means understanding God's perfect holiness
2. Isaiah's vision: the seraphim continually cry "Holy, holy, holy...", and Isaiah's intimate vision of Christ brings him to cry against his own wickedness

***Isaiah 6:5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."***

3. Anyone drawn close to God soon feels the searing brilliance of God's pure light

***1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.***

## IV. God's Intimate Intercession with Abraham

### A. God Initiates Prayer

1. Remember: this entire encounter was initiated by God Himself
2. We would have no access, no prayer life, if God had not granted it

***Isaiah 59:1-2 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.***

3. ALL prayer is heard through Christ... were it not for Christ's death on the cross, no man would be righteous enough to stand in God's presence

***Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.***

Intimacy in prayer is an IMMENSE privilege, very costly... it was bought with the precious blood of Christ

God here initiates the prayer encounter... theologically understand: God is the Alpha and the Omega of prayer... God begins prayer by initiating the encounter

The initiative is also the potency of God's threatened wrath against Sodom and Gomorrah

The terror of God's eternal wrath against lost sinners should motivate us to passionate prayer as well

## B. Abraham's Three Great Concerns in Prayer

### 1. God's Reputation

***Genesis 18:25 Far be it from you to do such a thing-- to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"***

Abraham's central concern here is God's name, God's honor, God's glory as a righteous judge... the salvation of the righteous is secondary!!!

Note: MIT class on Bible... professor's question: is God Himself also under a standard of righteousness higher than Him

Answer: Not "higher than" God, but intrinsic to God's very nature

"God is love", not merely "God is loving"

"God is light" = God is the standard of righteousness

Abraham's internal sense of right and wrong comes from being created in God's image... the moon is reflecting the light back to the sun who gave it and saying, "Shall not the sun be bright?"

### 2. God's People

NOTE: Abraham is NOT praying for the wicked people of Sodom, primarily

He is there on behalf of the righteous... certainly he has Lot and his family in mind

### 3. God's Creation



***Jonah 4:11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"***

In a final sense, Abraham IS concerned with the whole city of Sodom and Gomorrah... concerned because it is God's creation that He will destroy

### C. Abraham's Character in Prayer

#### 1. Faith: Word-based response

It started with God revealing His plans to Abraham... "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"

#### 2. Intimacy

***NIV Genesis 18:22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.***

***NAU Genesis 18:23 Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"***

***Hebrews 10: 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith***

#### 3. Compassion

Concerned for the welfare of the righteous in the city... afraid for them, lest they be swept away in the wrath of God

#### 4. Boldness

Abraham is willing to challenge the Lord's righteousness

***Vs. 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing-- to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"***

Abraham senses the incredible boldness he is showing by pressing God again and again

***Genesis 18:27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes***

#### 5. Humility

To call Himself "dust and ashes" is very humble

#### 6. Perseverance

Abraham is relentless in prayer... 50 people, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10... six times he intercedes for the righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah

## 7. Reverence

For all the boldness and perseverance, Abraham remembers to whom He is speaking... the JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH

By faith he understands that every single human being who has ever lived will someday stand before this holy judge... Abraham himself will stand before Him to be judged

This is the character of Abraham in prayer: faith-filled, intimate, compassionate, bold, humble, persevering, and reverent

### D. Abraham's "Failure" in Prayer?

#### 1. E. M. Bounds's assessment

E.M. Bounds, passionate, Christ-like Methodist pastor in the nineteenth century in Tennessee and Alabama; arose every morning at 4 a.m. for three hours of prayer... once while staying at a friend's house in Brooklyn, NY, he inadvertently awoke the whole house at 3 a.m. with the intensity of his praying and weeping over the lost... he was 76 years old at the time!!

An expert on prayer, he wrote passionately and frequently about the subject... however, like many Methodists following Wesley's example, he was sometimes too man-centered in his thinking on prayer

His basic idea: God does nothing except in answer to prayer; if something is not happening, it's because believers are not praying for it sufficiently

He said:

"Sodom's fate was for a while stayed by Abraham's praying, and was almost entirely relieved by the humility and insistence of the praying of this man who believed strongly in prayer and who knew how to pray... Perhaps the failure to ultimately rescue Sodom from her doom of destruction was due to Abraham's optimistic view of the spiritual condition of things in that city. It might have been possible—who knows?—that if Abraham had entreated God once more, and asked Him to spare the city if even one righteous man was found there, for Lot's sake, He might have heeded Abraham's request."

Idea: Abraham stopped too soon... he should not have stopped at ten righteous people in Sodom

E.M. Bounds subtly blames Abraham for Sodom's destruction!!

#### 2. The witness of Abraham's own eyes

***Genesis 19:27-28 Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.***

Abraham himself may well have felt he failed in His prayers for Sodom...

Have you ever felt this way in your prayer life? You ask for one thing and get what seems to be the exact opposite??

### 3. But did he really fail?

#### E. Abraham's Success in Prayer

##### 1. Clear statement in Scripture

***Genesis 19:29 So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.***

At the very moment when Abraham was looking at the dense cloud of smoke, Lot was safe in a cave with his daughters...

“God remembered Abraham” ALMOST CERTAINLY refers to Abraham's prevailing prayer

##### 2. All the righteous were saved, and some who were not

Remember, Abraham was NOT praying for the wicked people of Sodom, but rather that God would save the righteous

And all the righteous WERE saved... all ONE of them! Plus two daughters who were not so righteous

##### 3. Refuting E. M. Bounds: It was God who began the encounter, and it was God who ended it too

Abraham didn't begin the prayer encounter... God did

Neither did Abraham END the prayer encounter, but God did

***Genesis 18:33 When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.***

Illus. When a servant stands before a King, the servant is not free to end the encounter... the servant cannot simply walk away. Rather, it is the King who ends the encounter.

Lesson: Abraham did not fail in prayer, but rather God granted His request by rescuing Lot

Our faithful prevailing prayer is effective EVEN if God hides the effectiveness from us... it may seem like our prayer life is up in smoke, like Abraham must have felt the next morning... but God heard Abraham, and God hears us

When we pray 1) for His glory and name's sake 2) for the accomplishment of His purposes and the salvation of His chosen people

## V. Application

Passionate, Prevailing Prayer for Spiritual Power, for Boldness in Evangelism, for the Moving of the Spirit's Wind and Fire

When Hudson Taylor went to China, he made the voyage on a sailing ship. As it neared the channel between the southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, the missionary heard an urgent knock on his stateroom door. He opened it, and there stood the captain of the ship.

"Mr. Taylor," he said, "we have no wind. We are drifting toward an island where the people are heathen, and I fear they are cannibals."

"What can I do?" asked Taylor.

"I understand that you believe in God. I want you to pray for wind."

"All right, Captain, I will, but you must set the sail."

"Why, that's ridiculous! There's not even the slightest breeze. Besides, the sailors will think I "m crazy." Nevertheless, the captain finally agreed. Forty-five minutes later he returned and found the missionary still on his knees. "You can stop praying now," said the captain. "We've got more wind than we know what to do with!" )

Errol Hulse, editor of *Reformation Today*:

Throughout history, the church has been revived and enlarged through outpourings of the Spirit. Jonathan Edwards, a leader in the First Great Awakening, writes; "It may be observed that, from the fall of man to our day, the working of redemption in its effect has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God...at special seasons of mercy." Without periodic, extraordinary visitations of God, the church inevitably degenerates.

Nearly a century has passed since the church has experienced widespread revival. Although the gospel has advanced into more places and nations than ever before, the church faces defeat in many ways. Glowing statistics can never measure the spiritual climate of the church.

In our generation we have increasingly suffered from spiritual lethargy and powerlessness. There is a high percentage of weak and lukewarm Christians in western churches who evidence little interest in growing in grace and knowledge. The church may be bustling with activity and at the same time be infiltrated and permeated with the world's thinking and doing. It is sometimes the case that our forms of worship camouflage a dead spiritual condition.

Today the church world-wide is struggling. The impact of our churches upon the spiritual state of the world as, with all too few exceptions, been minimal. The missionary effort among us is feeble. The enemies of the gospel are winning the say in almost every area of the world.

Our paramount need is for heaven sent revivals of the kind that have adorned the history of the church. Nothing less than the powerful work of the Holy Spirit on a massive scale will meet the desperate spiritual poverty of our age, and remove the gross darkness that covers the nations. Only the

manifestation of God in the midst of His people can give the church victory, making her the "*praise of the earth*."

Jonathan Edwards said elsewhere that when God has something very great to accomplish for his church, it is His will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of his people, quoting from Ezekiel 36:37 — "*I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them.*" In Zachariah 12:10 it is revealed that, when God is about to accomplish great things for His church, He will begin by a remarkable pouring out of "*the Spirit of grace and supplication.*" It is the invariable constitution of the kingdom of heaven that blessings of great magnitude are not imparted except to prayers of the deepest urgency.

History demonstrates this principle. The common precursor to revivals has been prevailing prayer. Pentecost, which was the first Christian revival, followed ten days of intense prayer characterized by whole-hearted unity (Acts 1:14, 2:1-4).

Before the Second Great Awakening (late 1850's), Jeremiah Lamphier called a prayer meeting in downtown New York. Within six months, 10,000 businessmen were praying for revival, and within two years about 2,000,000 people were added to the churches.

The same pattern is found before the 1859 revival in Ulster, Ireland. James McQuilkin and three others began to meet in a school house every week for prayer and Bible study. They kept themselves warm with armfuls of peat gathered on the way to the school house every Friday evening. While peat warmed their bodies, the Spirit kindled the fire in their hearts. By the end of 1858, the participants at the prayer meeting had grown to fifty. Intercession without distraction to other subjects was made for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on themselves and the country. Their prayers and possibly many more were wonderfully answered in 1859 when an estimated 100,000 were added to the churches in Ulster.

- First Baptist Church needs to dedicate itself anew and afresh to prevailing prayer
- Quarterly Corporate Prayer meeting is just a start... but a good one
- Sunday morning prayer is refreshing for the twenty or so people who come
- Wednesday evening prayer is sparsely attended
- We need MORE, LONGER, MORE FERVENT, MORE EFFECTIVE PRAYER!!!