

HOW PRAYER WORKS

by Ray C. Stedman

We will continue our account of the pattern man of faith by reading the sixteenth verse of Chapter 18 where these three visitors (who came out of the hot desert into Abraham's tent and who were unknown to him at first) now go their way to accomplish the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Archaeologists are now convinced that it is the remnants of the ancient cities of wickedness -- Sodom and Gomorrah -- that have been rediscovered lying under the waters of the Dead Sea. Our next chapter takes up the amazing historical event of their destruction but now we are looking at the preview of it.

As Abraham's visitors leave his tent and go on their way eastward to the valley of the Jordan, Abraham goes with them. They come to a promontory at the edge of a steep ravine which leads down to the Dead Sea where they can see the doomed cities lying far below them in the afternoon sun. Tradition still marks the spot where Abraham intervened with God for the city of Sodom.

As we look at this section of Scripture, we can learn some valuable lessons on the nature of prayer:

First, we see that prayer begins with the proposal of God:

The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge 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." Then the Lord said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know. (Gen 18:17-21 {RSV})

This marks a very important fact concerning prayer: Prayer never begins with man; it begins with God!

True prayer is never a man's plans which he brings to God for him to bless. God is always the one who proposes. Prayer enters in when God then enlists the partnership of man in carrying out his program. In other words, unless we base our prayers on a promise, or a warning, or a conviction of God's will, we have no right to pray.

Some people feel that the prayer of faith is crawling out on a limb and then begging God to keep someone from sawing it off, but that is not real prayer, that is presumption. If God makes it clear that he wants you out on a limb, fine -- you will be perfectly safe there. If not, it is presumptuous of you to crawl out on a limb, expecting God to keep you there.

The difference is simply this: The prayer of faith is acting on a previous knowledge of what God wants. It is always founded upon a promise. It begins with a proposal which God makes, or a conviction he gives, or a warning he utters. On the other hand, the prayer of presumption is discovering something we would like to do, and then asking God to bless it. That kind of thing is doomed at the outset. In fact, this is why so many "works of faith" fail, when they otherwise might have been wonderfully blessed of God.

Now when God proposes something, as he does here in proposing to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he always enlists a man as his partner. So we have here a picture of God talking to himself; he says, "Shall I hide from Abraham the thing I am about to do?" and he begins to list to himself the reasons why he should include Abraham in his plan. The reasons God lists might be called, "the rights of friendship." Here is where Abraham earned the title which is given to him in both the Old and the New Testament, "the friend of God," (cf, 2 Chr 20:7, Isa 41:8, Jas. 2:23).

God says, "I won't keep this from Abraham for two reasons: first, because he has been given by grace a favored position in my sight. He is the man whom I have called out to become great. Through him all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. And second, I have chosen him in order that he might charge his household to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. I came into his life to show him how to do this, and because he has been taught by grace how to walk before God, this is the man to whom I want to tell my secrets."

Do you see the parallel of the Christian today? Every believer in Jesus Christ stands in exactly the same relationship with God. We have been given, by grace (not on our own merits), a favored position before God. We have been called into the family of God and made sons of the living God by faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we are being taught by grace how to walk righteously before him, and, as we learn that lesson, we become the people to whom God tells his secrets.

It is not enough to have the favored position. I think many Christians believe that because they have accepted Jesus Christ, all God has is now open to them. But there must be the walk, the daily appropriation of what he is, so that we learn to walk in righteousness. When we do, then God begins to share his secrets. I think the reason some people get a lot more out of the Bible than others is that they have learned this two-way relationship: God loves to tell secrets to his people.

God's proposal not only enlists the partnership of man, but is based on an impartial and careful justice. The Lord says to Abraham in Verse 20: "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me." This, of course, is the language of accommodation. God does not need to go down and visit any city in order to see what is going on. He is using Abraham's own language to express the truth which reflects his nature. He talks as though a great outcry has been coming up to his throne from these wicked cities.

When I read this, I can't help but think that every sin of man is like a voice crying out from earth to heaven. What kind of a cry must be going up from America today as a result of the terrible flood of pornography inundating our theater programs and our literature; and the tide of immorality that is sweeping across this country. God, according to this record, sees it all. God is walking in our streets and taking note of all that happens to us. He visits our homes and marks everything, misses nothing. He invades our most sacred privacy. Even our thoughts and subconscious ideas are naked and open before him.

Before he judges the cities of the plain, God carefully investigates the charges and probes to see what the conditions are. Then he tells Abraham that he is going to destroy these cities. Actually, he does not specifically tell Abraham what he will do, but when Abraham hears the ominous words, "I will know," then he knows what God will do. Abraham knows all the unbridled lust, the foul acts of homosexuality, and the open passion for obscenity, the lurid and salacious attitude that permeated all public and private life in these cities. Abraham knows that the cities doom is sure.

And this leads us to the next step in prayer, the passions of man:

So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom [that is, the angels left and went on to the city]; but Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near, and said, "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 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." He said,

"Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 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." (Gen 18:22-32 {RSV})

This is a remarkable account. It sounds as though Abraham is backing God into a corner and making him lower the ante every time. I wonder what we would have said if we had been in Abraham's shoes. I think some of us would have wrapped our robes of self-righteousness around us, and said, "Good for you, Lord; they've got it coming. I wondered just how much you could take. I've long since had enough." Or perhaps we might have said, "Lord, do you mean you are going to destroy the city? All these wonderful people -- I know they are evil, Lord, but they mean well. They have just been carried away a little bit. Don't be too hard on them." Perhaps we would have interceded in that way.

Abraham had no time for self-righteousness, smugness, or sentimental nonsense however. When these two angels left to go down to the city, this would have been the cue for Abraham to say goodbye and get back to his tent. But it appears that Abraham did not let the Lord go. He stood yet before the Lord. There was something on his heart, and we see in the following dialogue the emotion, the strong passion, that is awakened in this man's heart by God's proposal.

Several issues are of great interest in this account:

First, Abraham recognizes the mercy of God. Notice that he says, Lord, suppose there are fifty men in the city that are righteous. Wouldn't you spare the whole city for them? Notice the way he is arguing. This is so easily misunderstood. Abraham is not trying to shame God into doing the right thing by appealing to his self-respect in this reminder, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" -- as a mother might shame her child into doing right. God does not need anyone to remind him to do right, or to tell him it would be wrong to slay the righteous with the wicked. Rather, Abraham is basing his appeal on the knowledge of God's nature. He knows God would never destroy the righteous with the wicked. Now he is asking him to go further and spare the wicked for the sake of fifty righteous. Abraham is recognizing the basis of God's mercy in every age since then.

I remember a friend telling of walking past a church bulletin board one day and noting the announcement of the sermon: "If I were God." The man with my friend said, "If I were God" -- that's an interesting title for a sermon. "If I were God, I'd just lean down over the battlements of heaven, take a big, deep breath, and blow this earth out of existence!" Why has not God done that long, long ago, with all the shameful record of human defiance, rebellion, and depravity which history records? It is because of this very principle to which Abraham appealed: There are righteous here.

The Lord said to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth," (Matt 5:13a {RSV}). The reason for salt is to preserve from corruption. A little bit of salt in meat will keep the whole thing from being destroyed or corrupted. This is why God permits human history to go on, in its awful defiance, there are righteous on the earth -- not men who are righteous in themselves, but who have been given the righteousness of Christ by faith in him. Our greatest defense against any satanic force lies not in any of our political scheming or maneuvering but in the character of God who refuses to destroy the earth while there are righteous on it.

In addition to the recognition of God's mercy, we note Abraham's awareness of his own status before God. In Verse 27, Abraham answers: "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Lord, I haven't any right to ask this of you. You, Lord, are wholly righteous, true, and I don't need to tell you what to do. Who am I, a man, talking to you -- but Lord, I can't help but say this thing that is on my heart. Would you not spare the city if there are only 45 instead of 50?" This is the kind of language which delights God to hear and honor, for it is the very opposite of the pride and deceit that makes us think we can demand of God what we want.

I listened to a faith healer one day praying for people on the platform and I was appalled at the way he spoke to God. He ordered him about as if God were a sort of magic genie obliged to do what this man said. It reflected the awful pride of his own heart. This is not true prayer. Abraham's approach is right: "Lord, who am I to

Speak to thee?"

The third consideration is for the protection of the righteous in Sodom. Abraham continues his dialogue until he comes down to ten people and stops there. Why does Abraham stop at ten? Because there were ten members in Lot's family. We learn in the next chapter that he and his own children and the ones they were to marry constituted exactly ten people. Abraham knew that, and he had Lot and his family in mind all along. He thought if he could just get the Lord to agree to save the city for ten, Lot's family would be saved -- reasoning that, by this time, Lot must have won at least his own family to the Lord.

Abraham never asks God to spare Lot and his family, but out of compassion for the wicked, he keeps trying to save the whole city for the sake of Lot and his family. He appeals to God on whatever ground of mercy he can find. The evil of this city must have often revolted Abraham, this righteous man, but he is anxious to give it every last possible chance he can. The passion that speaks through true prayer is this recognition of God's mercy and an awareness of man's uncertain vision and his limited wisdom. God has a deep concern for the protection of the righteous, and, simultaneously, compassion on the foolish, lustful men who inflict the hurts. God seeks the slightest opening to show his mercy.

In one verse here at the end, the purpose of prayer is suggested to us:

And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. {Gen 18:33 RSV}

It does not say, "And the Lord went his way when Abraham had finished speaking to him." It says, "when he had finished speaking to Abraham." In other words. Abraham did not quit here, God did.

Some people say that Abraham's faith failed him when he got to ten and he did not dare try for any more, but that, if he had, he would have saved the city of Sodom. I think that is highly unlikely because the next number he would have tried for would probably have been five, since he was diminishing the number by fives all along. If he had asked for five that still would not have saved the city. The next chapter tells us that only three people got out of the city alive. They were the only righteous within the whole city.

No, the verse here suggests that God had initiated this whole conversation with Abraham and led him along all through it, and when he had responded in fullness as God desired, God terminated the dialogue and went his way. In other words, Abraham was not asking God to do something for him; it was God who prayed in Abraham and set the limits of the conversation.

This agrees fully with what we read in the New Testament about prayer. In Romans Paul says, "For we do not know how to pray as we ought," (Rom 8:26b {RSV}). Do you know what to pray for about yourself or about anyone else? No, you do not. But, he says, "the Holy Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings which we cannot express, but which are nevertheless there in the heart," {cf, Rom 8:26c-27}. True prayer, therefore, is never man talking to God, but God talking to God through man. It is God who is causing Abraham to feel his own compassion and to reflect his own desire for an opportunity to show mercy. This is the reason for prayer.

Admittedly, in talking about prayer, we are treading at the edge of mystery, but, through the mists, certain things are clear from this account we have been studying:

Prayer makes possible, first of all, the joy of partnership. Did you ever see a little boy come into the house and say to his mother, "I'm going to help daddy build the house!" He is all filled with pride about it and he goes out and passes up nails and holds the boards and pounds his fingers. Daddy could have done the job better by himself but he loves to have his son help him. And the son loves it, too. There is a sense of partnership there. This is what prayer does. God never moves all on his own. He loves to gather us in and have us help pound the nails. If we pound our fingers a little bit, he is there to soothe us, and to comfort us. This is why the apostle said we are called to be co-laborers with God, workers together with him. I read recently of a man who prayed, "Lord, break my heart with the things that break the heart of God." That is a hungering after this partnership with God.

Prayer also enables us to appropriate the character of God. Abraham is never more like God than at the moment he is praying for Sodom. His prayer did not save the city, and it was never intended to do so, but it did make Abraham manifest in his own life the mercy and the compassion of God. This is why God asks us to pray, that we might take upon ourselves something of his own character.

In that great verse about prayer in Philippians 4:6 {RSV}, Paul says, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And what happens? God will do the thing you ask? No, that is not the promise. "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding" (Phil 4:7a {RSV}), which you cannot reason out, which you cannot explain, which no circumstance will permit you to understand, the peace that rests at the heart of God, "will possess your hearts and minds," {cf, Phil 4:7b RSV}. Circumstances will not be any different. You rise from prayer and find your mother-in-law just as nasty as ever, your boss just as unreasonable, your children just as irritating, your husband just as stubborn, your wife just as bossy. Ah, but you have the peace of God that passes all understanding, which keeps your heart and mind through any circumstance.

The third consideration: Prayer focuses the power of God on an individual place or person. I don't understand this, but Chapter 19, Verse 29 says,

So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow. {Gen 19:29 RSV}

Lot received salvation, although Abraham had never mentioned Lot by name. God remembered Abraham and saved Lot.

Now I don't know why prayer makes such a difference, but I know it does. You can plan a program, think through all the details, set up all the committees, get all the things you need, instruct everybody, rehearse it and run it through -- and at the final presentation it may fall totally flat. But if you involve others in the ministry of prayer concerning it, though the preparations may be similar, the difference in the presentation is that it comes with power, with impact, with full strength and lives are changed.

One of our staff was telling us about a high school conference. Many of the young people said they hadn't planned to go, but something just made them go. When they got there, hearts which had been resisting the work of the Spirit, indifferent, and letting things slide, were now open and listening, allowing the Lord to speak to them through the Word. They were changed -- simply because all through the intervening weeks women had been gathering in homes and praying for that conference. I don't understand it, but I know it works. Prayer focuses the power of God.

The last principle here is that prayer affects the timing of God. Now this is a mysterious thing, but I am sure it is true. Certainly prayer does not change, nor alter, the will or purpose of God. Prayer is not a way to make God change his mind. When he announces something, he will do it. When he declares he will move in a certain direction, he always moves in that direction and no amount of prayer will ever change it. However, prayer can defer judgment, and prayer can also speed up blessing. It affects the timing.

Have you ever noticed that time is one ingredient that God reserves for his own control? He tells us plainly, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority," (Acts 1:7 {RSV}).

We have such an example of how prayer affects God's timing in the case of Nineveh. When Jonah went there and announced "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4b), the whole city went to prayer and repented, and God postponed the destruction of Nineveh. He waited until almost one hundred years later when the city was finally destroyed.

Also, Hezekiah in Judah had a severe illness of terrible carbuncles, boils that were eating away his very life. God sent the prophet Isaiah to him and he announced, "Fix up your light in your house, you're going to die," {cf, Isa 38:1}. And Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and wept and prayed and said, "Oh, God, spare my life." God heard and stopped Isaiah as he was going out the door and told him to turn around and go back with

another message. Isaiah went back in and said to the king, "God has heard your prayer and added fifteen years to your life," {cf, Isa 38:5}. Prayer doesn't change God's purpose but prayer does affect the timing.

There is a very fascinating verse along this line which relates to our own lives today. In Second Peter, speaking about the problem of why God delays judgment, Peter says:

The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. {2 Pet 3:9-10 RSV}

Then he says these words:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, (2 Pet 3:11-12a {RSV})

That means that if we are walking before the Lord as Abraham did, and our hearts are available to God to pray through us, and to reflect through us the very passion that is in the heart of God, we can actually hasten the coming of Jesus Christ back to earth again. We can hasten the day when the earth will be delivered from its oppressions and its burdens, and the golden age will break forth and righteousness will cover the earth.

Prayer

Our Father, we have learned great lessons today on prayer. We see indeed prayer is not a means by which we dictate to you or summon you to do what our will is, but rather it is the means by which we put our shoulder to the wheel to which your shoulder is put and are enlisted in a partnership with you in your great enterprise and endeavors on earth. Lord, we would pray that we may understand what we read, that we may have ears to hear, hearts that are willing to obey; and that we may therefore stand in the line of succession to those of whom it is said, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man releases great power." We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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