

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Jesus, great and wonderful Lord; calm my spirit today as I place my hope in You. My past gives me sure evidence of Your great love and care, and my future is unknown but safe in Your hands; each day confirms that You will guide me faithfully and confidently. Stay close to me, Lord Jesus; so I may trust You every moment, and accept Your guidance in all things. Praise Your name, Lord Jesus; praise Your Name! ALLELUIA!

### Prayer Suggestions

**1. For yourself**

*Pray about your fears and ask the Lord to help you overcome them, especially things like the fear of death or the fear of illness*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray for those who are far away from you in distance, and who find it hard to meet with you because of this*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray for those who have charge of the money at your church; pray that they will serve God's people well*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray for the poor in your country and throughout the world; pray that their plight might be recognised and that help given them is given freely and without strings.*

### Meditation

Gracious Lord and holy God, You lift us up:

When we need Your help  
You respond immediately.

Jesus Christ our Saviour, You hold us close:

When we need Your touch,  
You come to heal and save.

Holy Spirit, comforter, You breathe new life in us:

When we need Your strength,  
You restore us by Your power.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, You care for us always:

Before we even know our need  
You are there to answer our call.

Gracious Lord and holy God, Your love overflows:

May Your people worship You  
And the world return to its Maker!

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 18:16-22

<sup>16</sup> Then the men left, and went to where they could see Sodom, and Abraham went along to accompany them on their way.

<sup>17</sup> The LORD thought,

‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am going to do, <sup>18</sup> as he will become a great and powerful nation, and through him I will bless all the nations of the earth? <sup>19</sup> I have chosen him to impress on his children and their families that they must keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, and then I will be able to do what I have promised him.’

<sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said,

‘The accusations against Sodom and Gomorrah are numerous and their sin is terrible! <sup>21</sup> I must go down and see for myself if what they have done is as serious as the allegations that have been made to me.’

<sup>22</sup> The men left that place and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing there with the LORD.

## Review

As you read these seven verses, it may seem as if there is little within them to excite us. Two men and the Lord have just visited Abraham and Sarah to confirm the birth of their son in a year's time (18:1-15), and all three then proceeded towards Sodom, where the sins of the people called for God's judgement. Our passage is like an interlude; mere reflections on a journey which go over past ground and point forward to events yet to come.

Nothing could be further than the truth! A careful reading of these verses indicates some helpful insights into the unfolding story of Abraham, and also some fascinating spiritual truths. Abraham begins (18:16) by continuing his role as a good host, which includes accompanying his visitors as far as the sight of their next destination, Sodom. On the way, scripture records the thoughts of God (18:17-19), which have some remarkable features. The first of these is this; God muses over whether to discuss what He is planning to do with Abraham. This is extraordinary in itself, because it is the first time in history that God contemplates sharing his sovereign authority with anyone, a person whom He has created.

Abraham and Sarah were certainly not God's puppets, merely responding to His great sovereign acts and will. From within the midst of a sinful world they were chosen (18:19) to be partners in God's plans for the blessing of the world, and now that God had seen the real evidence of faith in Abraham, he was prepared to talk with him about the tough judgements required if the nations were to be blessed through him and his descendants, or indeed whether they were to be cursed by God because of sin. All of this puts flesh on the original promise God made to Abraham (12:2,3), but it now becomes clear that what God wants is to work with his chosen people in a personal direct manner which requires conversation and discussion. It is not his purpose to manipulate them.

Importantly, God was prepared to work not just with Abraham, but with his descendants, providing they passed on the truths not just of faith, but of righteous and moral living, and of justice (18:19); these, of course, are the benchmarks of God's moral standards. Despite personal shortcomings, Abraham had shown growth in all these things and God therefore granted him the right to know his plans and discuss them with him. Indeed, the passage which follows this is a remarkable conversation between Abraham and God (18:23-33), and our passage closes with the two of them standing together over Sodom, about to discuss its future.

This is an important step along the long road of God's attempts to work through and with people in order to do His will, and it indicates closeness, even a friendship between Abraham and God. This shows that the spiritual and moral values upon which God's relationship with people is built are to be passed on through families (18:19), and it also tells us that although God will bless others through Abraham and his children (18:18) He will also curse other nations by acting with judgement when required (18:20,21). But more than this, He will work with people of faith as His partners.

All of this raises questions about our own relationship with God. Certainly if we are led to believe that God is someone who simply makes demands upon us, then we have the wrong picture of Him. God is not a mere autocrat treating us as if we were instruments of His will; He engages with us and wants to share the meaning of what He is doing. He accepts blind faith, but He longs to engage us with understanding and all the faculties of the mind, and we should not forget this.

## Going Deeper

- What was the Lord doing, going to Sodom?

- The thoughts of God
- Standing with the Lord

As we explore this passage further, we will discover that it contains the seeds of a very important feature of the Old Testament, which is 'prophecy'. The story of Abraham is one which is designed to illustrate the relationship people may have with God, so the personal aspects of this passage are very important.

### ***What was the Lord doing, going to Sodom?***

After fulfilling their mission in speaking to Sarah and Abraham, the two 'men' and God set off for Sodom (18:16) and the whole of the passage today is set against this journey. God was going to examine the sins of the people there, because 'The accusations against Sodom and Gomorrah are numerous and their sin is terrible!' (18:20). It may appear strange to us that God, who is present as 'the Lord' (18:17,20) in this scenario, does not know the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah for Himself without having to 'go down' in person. In the end, the Lord did not go to the city, but stayed to discuss it with Abraham, and the other two 'men' went to the city by themselves, acting as the two 'witnesses' required by scripture to testify to any sin sufficient for a death penalty (Deut 17:6). However, we are still left wondering why the Lord needed to seek out and verify sins which he must know were being committed.

There are two possibilities as to why the Lord intended to go to Sodom in person. Firstly, was to meet and talk with Abraham on the way, which is certainly an important part of the story. The other reason is because this is how the Lord chose to act in human affairs at that time. This is one of a number of stories in the Old Testament where God is described as doing things or speaking just like any other person (e.g. God 'walking' in the Garden in Gen 3:8; or when the Lord showed Abraham the land of Israel in Gen 13:14ff). These personal appearances of God remind us of the life of Jesus, who was God, yet allowed Himself to be limited so that He could live a human life and relate to people. In the Old Testament, then, these stories give us the feeling that God has temporarily and voluntarily 'limited' His knowledge and presence so that He can be present with His people; in this case, with Abraham, to discuss what He will do with Sodom. God is not compromised, of course, and remains all-sovereign, but His ability to appear in this way was vital to the experience of the forefathers such as Abraham, and certainly points forward to the more complete work of His son Jesus.

### ***The thoughts of God***

There are a number of occasions in scripture when God is reported as thinking about something (1:26; 3:22; 6:6,7; 8:21; 11:5-7). This, however, is the last of them in Genesis, and it comes at a critical time in the Old Testament and the story of Abraham, for having seen the growing maturity of Abraham (18:1-15), the Lord then decided to reveal his thoughts to him. For the first time, He decided not to hide His thoughts, but share them, and we now know them through Abraham and the stories told about him through the generations! This is the true beginning of 'prophecy' in scripture, for prophecy is precisely this; the 'word of God' conveyed through someone to whom God chooses to reveal it. It is a maxim of scripture that the Lord does nothing without revealing His plans to His prophets (Gen 20:7; Jer 23:16-22; Amos 3:7, John 15:15), and this is one of the reasons why Abraham is credited in Israelite tradition as being a 'prophet'.

Within the thoughts of God, prophetically revealed to Abraham, a number of intriguing spiritual issues are raised. The first of these is the inclusion, for the first time, of the word 'powerful' within God's promise to Abraham, which was formerly stated as 'I will make you a great nation' (12:2; 17:2,4). The more faith and spiritual maturity Abraham showed, the more God was able to show him about the future, in this case the future power of the nation made up of his descendants! We now know that through Jesus, this power is so great that death is defeated, but the revelation of this amazing truth took generations, and each stage of God's revelation was important, teaching us particular truths about God's purpose and work.

Verse 19 is a fascinating scripture because it highlights the way in which God's relationship with His people must be passed on from one generation to another. The whole story of Abraham and Sarah has so far been dominated by the difficult matter of the birth of their son, but since Abraham and Sarah had accepted God's will by faith and begun to grow in righteousness, they were able to hear more; and God told them that what they had received from the Lord must be passed on to each generation family by family. This has always been an important principle of Israelite and now Jewish faith (Deut 6:6 Prov 1:8), but it has too often dropped out of the life of the Church. Indeed, in many Western countries, parents expect their children to learn of God and of Jesus at school or at Sunday school. This is a large and difficult subject, but the command of God is clear, and should not be ignored.

Finally, the 'way of the Lord' (v19) which must be passed on is identified as 'doing what is right and just'. For Abraham, this was the morality which came from the faith he had in God because of his Covenant relationship with Him. It was a morality which was about to be tested as Abraham entered into a discussion with God about the punishment of Sodom (18:23-33), but it is also frequently attested by the prophets and

the Psalms (Deut 6:18; Micah 6:8; Psalm 15:2; Isaiah 16:5 etc). This morality is God's truth about 'good' or 'righteous' behaviour in the world, which is different from the sin he found in Sodom, or even in the world prior to the Flood. Adam and Eve had attempted to find the truth about good and evil by grasping the fruit of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil', but they and their generations were seduced by the evil they touched. In this passage, God began to trust another man, Abraham, with the revelation of the true knowledge of good and evil which comes from the Lord alone, not the Evil One. It is little short of a turning point in the Bible.

### ***Standing with the Lord***

The 'accusations' against Sodom and Gomorrah (18:20) required action. Although it is not obvious to us when we read the Bible, the Hebrew indicates that those who were calling out for help had no-one else to call to except God, and this is exactly the kind of situation in which God acts in judgement and justice, rooting out the evil and being merciful to the innocent (see also Jer 20:8; Job 19:7; Hab 1:2). This is what He was prepared to do in Sodom, and he stood with Abraham to talk about what would happen, for Abraham's nephew Lot was still there.

There is some debate about verse 22, because ancient documents in our possession indicate that the original verse reads 'The Lord stood before Abraham'. This offended the ancient copyists of the text so much that they altered it. How could God 'stand before' any man? This was the question that perplexed them, and they consequently changed the Hebrew round to 'Abraham stood before the Lord' and these amendments are clearly visible in the manuscripts! This has caused disquiet amongst translators for centuries, and you will find both these possible translations in different versions of the Bible. I have translated it 'Abraham remained standing there with the Lord' because I believe this is the general sense of the original. It does not mean to make the Lord appear to defer to Abraham, it simply describes the two of them standing together, looking at Sodom. This, clearly, both summarises what has happened in this small but significant passage of scripture, and also places Abraham and the Lord side by side, ready for the fascinating discussion which takes up the rest of chapter 18.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

Several things arise directly from this text; firstly, the duty of God's people to pass on the faith they have received through their families. This duty may well not suffice for evangelism and mission, but it is the bedrock of the on-going life of God's people. A family life in which God is shared through prayer at significant times (meals, bed-times) and within which bread and wine is broken and shared is perhaps a start, and nearly all the major Christian festivals have a 'family' element which could be developed in different cultures as means of passing on the faith in the context of the family. These are contentious issues in many 'western' churches, but it is essential that they are addressed, for verse 19 is not far short of a command of God.

Secondly, God chooses in this scripture to discuss with His people (through Abraham) his judgement of the nations. A moral duty is therefore placed upon us to intercede for the nations and to engage with the issues of morality and justice by which a nation is judged by God. If we take this duty for granted, we ignore the great privilege we have been granted to share with God in His work. Indeed, through Jesus He now gives even us the moral authority to forgive sins or to deny forgiveness; 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (John 20:23) The fact that God shares with us this judgement of the world is an extraordinary privilege, begun in this ancient text from Genesis.

### **Questions for groups**

1. Many famous incidents in the Bible happen 'on the road'. Can you name a few of these? What do they teach us?
2. Why do you think that the people of Israel became a 'powerful nation' and then declined so badly in history?
3. In what ways can we fulfil the ways in which the Lord asks us to pass on our heritage of faith and morality?

### **Discipleship challenges**

- *Are there any ways in which you can model the Christian faith in your own home and family life, based on what we have found out from this scripture? Home life may be a problem for many people today, but the challenge does not go away*
  - *How often have you been aware of the Lord 'taking you to one side' as it were, helping you to see something which you did not previously see? Remember, the Lord longs to spend time with us , if we are not so busy we prevent Him!*
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## **Final Prayer**

Jesus, Your love is amazing. You help us deal with difficult situations, You encourage us when we feel depressed, You challenge us with exciting possibilities, and You rescue us when we are in trouble. Thank You Jesus for Your love. AMEN

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