

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Lord God; when we are troubled, lead us into Your beautiful peace; when our minds are confused, lead us Your perfect understanding; when our hearts are broken, comfort us with Your unsurpassed love; when our strength is failing, build us up with Your powerful help; and when our feelings are bruised, touch us with the calming hand of Your Spirit; for in You, we are eternally blessed. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

**1. For yourself**

*Pray in silence, and do your best to place yourself into God's hands without necessarily using your normal language and speech. Let the Lord read your heart.*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Lift up to the Lord those within your family who are suffering; pray for their redemption*

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

*Pray that God's will be done by His people, so that the world might know there is a Saviour who loves His Creation*

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

*As you watch the news, pray quietly for each news item raised*

### Meditation

'Follow my steps' Jesus asked me;

'Confess your sins' Jesus urged me;

'Change your ways' Jesus warned me;

'Fight against the enemy' Jesus charged me;

'Love your neighbour' Jesus commanded me;

'Walk in faith,' Jesus directed me;

'Be bold and strong,' Jesus told me;

'Pray at all times,' Jesus advised me;

'Be close to my Word', Jesus implored me;

'Love the Lord your God' Jesus appealed to me;

For 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', Jesus revealed to me.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 18: 23-33

<sup>23</sup> Then Abraham came close to the LORD and said,

'Are You really going to do away with the righteous together with the wicked?' <sup>24</sup>

Suppose there are fifty righteous people in the city; will you destroy the place and not forgive it for the sake of fifty righteous people? <sup>25</sup> You could not possibly do such a thing, killing the righteous with the wicked so that they are both treated the same!

This must be impossible for You! Surely the Judge of all the earth must do what is just?'

<sup>26</sup> The LORD replied,

'If I find fifty righteous people in Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.'

<sup>27</sup> Abraham spoke up again,

'Please listen, for I have presumed to speak to You, Lord, even though I am just a man.  
<sup>28</sup> Suppose there are five less than the fifty righteous? Will you destroy the whole city because of five less?'

And the LORD said,

'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.'

<sup>29</sup> He spoke to him yet again,

'Suppose forty are found there.'

He answered,

'I will not do it for the sake of forty.'

<sup>30</sup> Then Abram said again,

'Please do not be angry if I speak again. Suppose thirty are found there.'

And the LORD said,

'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.'

<sup>31</sup> Abram continued,

'It is presumptuous of me to speak to You, I know; suppose twenty are found there.'

The LORD answered,

'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.'

<sup>32</sup> Then Abram said,

'One last time, I ask You not to be angry with me if I speak. Suppose ten are found there.'

And the LORD answered,

'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'

<sup>33</sup> When the LORD had finished speaking to Abraham, He went on his way, and Abraham returned home.

## Review

The stories of Abraham in Genesis become ever more fascinating. This passage reads like a form of haggling between Abraham and God for the salvation of Sodom, and the repetitive shape of the story builds up our hopes but is eventually unresolved (18:33)! It would be a great pity, however, if we were to so fix our eyes on this feature without delving into the deeper spiritual and theological principles the story contains. Salvation is a serious business and goes right to the heart of God's purposes for the world, even the Good News of salvation, which we now know is found through the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Abraham had matured in his journey of faith to the point where God shared his thoughts with him (18:16-22), and in turn, Abraham now responded by telling God what was on his mind. The Lord had made it clear that He intended to deal with the terrible sins being committed in Sodom (18:20,21), and although it was not said, Abraham correctly assumed that the penalty for the sins of Sodom which had attracted the Lord's attention would be death and annihilation. It was a reasonable assumption, for that is what God had done before at the time of the Flood (6:5-8); though after the Flood, God had promised by Covenant that He would never again wipe out all humanity (9:15).

Abraham showed his faith by questioning God about the justice of destroying a city if there was a chance that there were some 'righteous' people still living in it. Abraham had just been asked by the Lord to live a life of doing what was 'right' (17:1) and it seemed inconceivable to him, as it does to us, that God would do anything other than act with compassion and justice towards anyone who lived a good life even in Sodom. The manner of Abraham's questioning only serves to show how close a relationship there was between the Lord and Abraham, for he spoke again and again, apparently concerned as to whether his pointed questioning might be inappropriate or destroy the purpose of his enquiry. If we look closely at what Abraham was doing, though, our eyes should not be on the decreasing number of people over which the haggling took place or what this might mean, but the subject of the haggling, which was the future of the whole city. Abraham was not interceding on behalf of the decreasing number of people who might be 'righteous'; he was asking God to do something far more radical. He wanted to know the smallest number of people that might warrant the salvation of the whole city! What was the smallest number of righteous people that God would accept?

There is a great deal more in this scripture, and although I do not normally make this plea, I strongly suggest that you read the rest of this study. The reason is this. What Abraham asked for, and what God accepted from him, was the principle of a plea to save sinners through the righteous! This is astonishing, because it is the principle of salvation by which God has saved us through Jesus Christ! Even more than this, most people reading Genesis 18 will know that no-one was found in Sodom who was righteous (see ch.19), but Lot was saved through the spiritual cover of the Lord and the prayers of Abraham (rather than any righteousness on his part), and Sodom was consequently destroyed.

To this day, no-one has ever been found completely righteous before God except Jesus, and the Good News of God is that by means of Jesus' death our sins are covered, and we are saved through Him! Abraham had been granted his righteousness by God Himself, but in this extraordinary text, Abraham was the first to ask the Lord for the salvation of many through the righteousness of others.

## Going Deeper

- The context of this passage
- The opening of the bargaining
- The bargaining, and God's walking away

So why was there a concern about the city of Sodom? Surely there must have been many other cities which had a great deal of sin? Firstly, it was the city in which Abraham's nephew Lot had chosen to dwell, and Abraham would have been keen to know whether Lot could be considered righteous. Nevertheless, the bargaining between God and Abraham avoids this question directly. We only find out the real truth as the story continues.

### ***The context of this passage***

In order to study this passage of scripture fully, we must be careful to keep close to the wider story of God's plan of salvation in Genesis, and only then will the study of the details of the text make sense. Too many people have offered extraordinary views of this episode which are ignorant of the general purposes of scripture at this point, and we should avoid the pitfalls. For example, the philosopher Voltaire poured scorn on Abraham as someone who could not stop himself haggling to 'cut a deal' with God, and suggested that his behaviour was 'comic'!

This story is the second time in scripture that Abraham defended the city of Sodom. The first was the war in Genesis 14, in which the city became caught up in the expansion and extortion plans of some larger Mesopotamian states. Lot was captured along with others from Sodom and other cities around the Dead Sea, and Abraham saved them through a daring military raid on the Mesopotamian army. Two things contributed to Abraham's concern for Sodom. Firstly, his natural unease at what might happen to his nephew Lot who still lived there, and secondly, Abraham's understanding of God's words that through him all nations would be 'blessed' (12:2,3; 18:18 etc). He had begun to show within Genesis 18 (see previous studies), a mature faith which accepted the promise of the birth of his son (18:1-15), and this was linked to God's promise of blessing. It was not surprising therefore that Abraham wondered how this might come about. If Sodom was a sinful city, could it in some way be 'blessed' by him and therefore saved by God? Both of these personal concerns were good reasons why Abraham should 'intercede' for Sodom and plea for its salvation, despite the evidence of its sinfulness.

### ***The opening of the bargaining***

It does look as if Abraham was rather bold in speaking to the Lord at the beginning of verse 23 as he began his intercession. However, the Lord had just told Abraham that he planned to deal with Sodom's sin, and Abraham only continued a conversation which was already begun (18:20ff). He asked 'Are You really going to do away with the righteous with the wicked'. This is an important question, for it exposed Abraham's sense of justice. From his point of view, if there were righteous people in the city, surely the principles of justice which God had told him to pass on within his family line (18:19) applied to God as well? (see also Ps 96:10, 97:1,2)

Abraham began his part of the discussion by citing a number that was then regarded to be a significant township or settlement, perhaps even a small 'city'; that is 50 people. Sodom was clearly much larger than this, but 50 would certainly have been considered as sufficient to sustain the 'new development' of a settlement in the instance of disaster or destruction. Having asked the question, Abraham spoke with the most extraordinary familiarity to the Lord (v25), the Hebrew indicating a tone of chastisement in Abraham's voice when appealing to the Lord 'You could not possibly do such a thing ... that is impossible for You!' We who read from the wider perspective of scripture know that God is just, but Abraham had to learn to see that work out in reality, and the Lord's acceptance of this challenge indicates his approval of Abraham's quest; despite the bold familiarity!

There is one other possible explanation of Abraham's quest, along with intercession for the righteous and the principles of justice. The only times that the word 'righteous' had been applied to individuals up to this point in scripture were to Noah (6:9; 7:1) and to Abraham himself (15:6; 18:19). It was extremely rare for God to declare that anyone was 'righteous'. Therefore, by asking the question of God as to whether there were 50 'righteous' people in Sodom, it is possible that Abraham was trying to find out if the blessing he had was unique. God had said that Noah 'alone' was righteous (7:1), but had never said this to Abraham, although we presume it. We can look back on Abraham's life and accept that God's choice of him was unique, but it may not have been so obvious to Abraham.

### ***The bargaining, and God's walking away***

As the story unfolds, it does indeed sound humorous if it were not deadly serious, for it is inconceivable that the Lord and Abraham did not know the consequences of their discussion. Abraham kept returning to the Lord with a lowered figure for the righteous, and each figure was agreed in turn. In bargaining one might expect to come down initially by a large amount and then successively smaller increments as a settlement is reached. In this case, Abraham decreased the number initially by small amounts (5) and then higher (10), giving the sense of plummeting towards zero! Perhaps the reality was that no-one was righteous in Sodom!

This may have been the assumption at the close of the story as the Lord went on his way and Abraham went home after the figure of ten was accepted by God. If this was the case, then Abraham left with the assurance of his own unique place as 'righteous' before God, and this was a confirmation of the calling that had been placed on his life. It may also have filled him with dread for he knew what would happen next, and was concerned about his nephew Lot.

Never again do we see a person quite so intimate with God in the Old Testament. The only exception may be the occasion when Moses 'sat down' with the Lord together with the elders of Israel for a meal (Ex 24:9-11; but here, we know little of what was said!). This passage appears to be a direct and challenging conversation between two people of ancient times about justice, and the fact that one is the Lord and the other is Abraham is extraordinary.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

As we have already seen, this passage of scripture is the first to give an indication of the general plan of God's salvation; this is to save sinners through the righteousness, ultimately, not of ten people, but of only one; Jesus Christ. As part of this, Abraham made the fascinating move of asking God that the destiny of sinners be in the hands of the righteous, rather than the other way round, in which the righteous would be destroyed with the sinners. We owe Abraham considerable thanks for raising this with the Lord, and we owe the Lord our complete thanks for acting according to the righteousness of Jesus for the salvation of our souls.

What Abraham did was to talk to God in a manner which we would describe as 'intercession'. It was not his own life he was pleading for, but the lives of sinners in Sodom, as well as the lives of his nephew Lot and his family. Tomorrow we will read of what happened to Sodom and to Lot, but it does appear from our study today that neither the Lord nor Abraham really believed there were any righteous people in Sodom; in which case, the rescue of Lot, or at least him and two daughters, has added significance. It is possible that their salvation happened through the spiritual intercession of Abraham and God's work through his angels. Intercession is a powerful tool with which to express spiritual coverage of our loved ones. God may choose to save those for whom we intercede despite their problems and sins, especially those under the care of our spiritual cover (as Lot was under the spiritual authority of his adopted father Abraham). God alone is the righteous Judge, and He hears our prayers.

These two themes also come together in Jesus, who both intercedes for us (Hebrew 7:25) and also saves us through his death and resurrection. His unique suffering in a totally sinful world has been used by God for our salvation in fulfilment of many scriptures, from the experience of Moses (Ex 32:30ff etc.) to the great prophecies of the suffering servant (Is 53), but also Genesis 18:23-33.

### **Questions for groups**

1. This passage of scripture is quite well known. Discuss the different themes within it which a preacher could preach upon.

2. What do you make of Abraham's familiarity with God? In what circumstances could we address Him in the same way?
3. The principle that a righteous person should save the sinner is one that works out in our lives today in many different ways. Can you give examples?

## Discipleship challenges

- *The nearest we may come to this experience of Abraham is in intercession. Praying for other people may be something you do quite naturally, but it may be something of real difficulty for you. This passage encourages us that God hears our prayers, especially those for family members who are spiritually close to us.*
- *Go for a long walk and consider what the Lord is saying about the sinfulness of the world today. Does He prophecy doom against sin today in quite the same way? Think about this and pray about it.*

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## Final Prayer

Father, You have shown in Jesus Christ Your complete mastery of the Universe. Remove from us our natural fears about evil and the works of Satan. As we submit to You, replace these fears with a faith that is content to trust You for everything: I ask this through Jesus Christ, my Lord. AMEN

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