

Always Pray Boldly!

Genesis 18:20–33 (NIV) 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.” ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 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?” ²⁶ The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” 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, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.” ²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.” ³⁰ Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” ³¹ Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.” ³² Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

In Christ Jesus, who is the answer to all our prayers, dear fellow redeemed,

The seventeen-year-old sat on the steps of his parents’ home. His eyes filled with tears as he listened to his father shouting inside, his fist pounding the table every so often to punctuate his angry words. The dad had been drinking again. The son just wanted it all to stop—the drinking, the anger, the shouting—all of it. So, he did what he had been taught to do. Like so many times before, he prayed. He asked God to help him, to help his family, to make it all stop once and for all. But it didn’t stop. In fact, over time it got worse.

What was that young man to think? That God wasn’t listening? He didn’t care? He couldn’t help? Or was there something wrong with the teen and his prayers? Maybe that’s why God wasn’t stepping in. Have you ever had anything like that happen – where you prayed and prayed for something, and it just didn’t come about? Why does that happen? Today the Scriptures offer us some insight into the matter – a lesson in prayer presented by Father Abraham himself who teaches us: Always Pray Boldly! 1) Trusting God’s listening. 2) Trusting God’s answer.

Abraham has just gotten some amazing news, hand delivered by God himself. In fact, the news is so fantastic that the Lord and two of his angels take human form in order to announce that in less than a year’s time, 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah would have a son. Amazing, right? It gets even better! The world’s Savior from sin would be born a descendant of this promised child. In Romans we are told that **“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:3)**. In other words, not by works, but through faith alone in God’s promise, God declared Abraham right with God. He does the same for all believers. Keep this in mind.

While God is still with Abraham, he shares some other news. **“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.” (Genesis 18:20)**. After Cain had killed his brother Abel, God said to Cain: **“What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:10)**. I mention this because it helps us to understand one of the reasons why God gets so angry about sin. Sin always hurts the people that God has made

for himself. The suffering that sin causes hurts God's ears and heart. The outcry of suffering caused by the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great that God has come to check it out. Abraham knows that if God finds it as bad as it appears to be, he will stop the sin by wiping out the sinners. He's done that before.

What was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah? Those cities were infamous for perverting God's gift of sex in unspeakable ways. The two angels that accompanied the Lord learned this firsthand as they themselves became the objects of men's twisted lust. This shameful activity wasn't some deep, dark secret practiced only in backrooms and basements. Centuries later when God denounces the sin of his people in Judah he says: **"...they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves."** (Isaiah 3:9). God won't stand for it when sinners celebrate their sin.

How does this truth make you feel? I suppose it might leave us feeling a bit smug as we look at the brazen attitudes about sin in this present time and place. Let's be honest. There are sinful, shameful things going on around us that turn our stomachs. Maybe God will finally step in and do something about all of it. We'd welcome that, right? Or would we? At which sins would we have God draw the line? The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? Before you answer, we should make sure we have the entire picture of what was happening in those cities. In the Book of Ezekiel, God takes to task the inhabitants of Jerusalem, pointing out that they are guilty of the same sins as those who lived in ancient Sodom. He tells them: **"...this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen."** (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

God doesn't rank sin the way we often do. As it turns out, our arrogance and pride, our tendency to overindulge our cravings will ignoring the needs of others, these and all our sins are all just as detestable to God as any sin that offends our own sensibilities. If God is going to act against sinners, why wouldn't he start with us?

This question must have been on Abraham's mind. He understood the damning nature of sin – his own sin and that of Sodom. But if that had been all he understood, he would have run for cover. Instead, he stood his ground and prayed. He prayed because, with hands of faith, he was holding on to God's promise of a Savior. That promise is the window to God's heart, a heart that beats with love and mercy. Abraham found that so inviting. You can too. In fact, you can pray just like Abraham.

Abraham prayed for the righteous within Sodom. Remember, the righteous as we heard moments ago, are those who trust in the Savior from sin. In other words, Abraham was praying for his fellow believers. **"Then Abraham approached [God] and said: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?'"** (Genesis 18:23). I want you to notice that Abraham was very bold in prayer and yet at the same time, very humble. How is that possible? Abraham is humble because he knows that, in and of himself, he has no business praying. As he goes on to say, **"...I am nothing but dust and ashes."** (Genesis 18:27). He knows his place. He's the creature, a fallen creature at that, made of dust, talking to his Creator. And yet, Abraham can be bold, not because of who he is, but because of who God is. Abraham knows God to be THE JUDGE who will do what is right. This Judge, in his love, is sending sinners a Savior whom he will punish in their place. This Judge would never double-dip when it comes collecting on sin's penalty. He will punish only the sinner's Substitute, never those who believe in him.

You will also notice that Abraham prays for the unbelievers of Sodom and Gomorrah. What a powerful prayer lesson for us who tend to see the unbelievers around us only as enemies to hate and fear. Abraham saw them as they are, prisoners of war, slaves of Satan who can be freed only by the good news of the Savior from sin. And so Abraham haggles with God. His prayer sounds strange to us, but it must have been music in the ears of him who wants all people to know Jesus and be saved. So yes, God will spare the "sin-city" of its day for the sake of 50 righteous, knowing that even so few

believers could win over so many souls for Christ with the power of God's gospel in their hearts and on their lips. And yes, he would spare the city even if there were five less righteous. In fact, he'd spare the city if there were only ten believers there to serve as his salt and light – so powerful is his Word.

So what have we learned about prayer so far? First, you can trust that God's listening to you when you pray. He doesn't dismiss you because you're dust. He doesn't grow annoyed with you even when you repeat your requests over and over. He wants you to be bold and to ask great things of him not just for yourself, but for others, including the unbelievers of our world. This is in keeping with his will and brings him great joy.

When Abraham finished his prayer he went home. He had put the matter in God's hands and he would trust God's answer. The next morning, he awoke to the sight of smoke and the smell of sulfur. God had destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Did God go back on his word? Not at all. As Abraham would learn, God did even more than Abraham had asked or imagined. There were not ten righteous people in the cities. There was Abraham's nephew, Lot and his two daughters. God rescued them. The righteous did not perish with the wicked. I realize that we might swallow hard at the thought that so many people died. How is that ok? Here's where trusting God's answer to prayer is so important. What do you know about our God? More than anything you know his love in Christ. In that love, God always operates with our eternal good in mind. When the wickedness of the world became so great that it threatened to ruin God's plan of salvation, God kept his promise of a Savior alive and well, in the safe keeping of Noah and his family, the only people to survive the flood. In the same way, as the evil of this age threatens to do away with God's church on earth, God promises to take action, telling us in his Word: **“If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.” (Matthew 24:22).**

We can trust God to answer every prayer with our heavenly good in mind. That is how he answered Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Son of God prayed: **“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42).** How did God answer? It was his will to save us, so he didn't take the cup away. Instead, he sent an angel to strengthen Jesus so that he could complete his rescue mission. Hours later, Jesus offered another prayer – this one from the cross: **“Father, forgive them...” (Luke 23:34).** God answered this prayer too according to his will. Not for the sake of 50 or 30 or even 10, but for the sake of One—the One who died and came to life again, God has declared sinners forgiven and assures us that all who believe, have eternal life.

How inviting! God always hears our prayers and always answers them with his saving will in mind. Doesn't that make you want to pray all the time? Doesn't this make us bold to pray for the eternal well-being of our loved ones as well as our neighbors near and far? How I wish I could go back in time and share these truths with my 17-year-old self. I would tell that tearful young man that all those prayers offered on behalf of my troubled father and family were not a waste of breath. God heard every word and knew just how and when to work his will. I was so impatient. I wanted immediate relief. I wasn't thinking about how God might be timing matters to assure my dad's safe homecoming to heaven 30 years later. I wasn't thinking about how God would use those troubles to steer the course of our lives or how God would use the lessons we learned to bring encouragement and hope to people we would meet in future years.

I wish I could tell you that based on experience, I now am a prayer-master who always prays with patience and deep spiritual insight. That's just not the case. As in all other aspects of my spiritual life, I remain a work in progress. We all do. But don't be discouraged. Instead, pray all the more, because the One who hears and answers our prayers is not put off by our failures. He forgives them and more than that, covers them with the perfection of his Son in whose name we are always bold to pray. Amen.