

PRAYER'S ANCHOR

by Ray C. Stedman

Many people in this country today are struggling with the question raised by one of the leaders of the Moral Majority group recently as to whether God hears the prayers of Jews or not. Many are asking, because of the Jews' rejection of their Messiah, does God listen to their prayers or not? My answer would be that God hears the prayers of all people everywhere. There is a verse in the Psalms that says, "O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come," (Psalm 65:2 {KJV}). We have an indication of this in the New Testament also. Cornelius was a pagan Roman who was influenced by the Jewish communion. He learned something about God and began to pray to him, and an angel was sent to him to tell him that his prayers and his alms had come before God for notice. The angel was sent to lead him into greater truth (Acts 10:4). So there is much evidence in Scripture that God hears all prayers. In fact, we learned in our first study that God himself initiates prayer. Even atheists pray at times.

An old sea captain told me once about many of the storms he had been through. He said of one particularly terrible storm, "God heard from many strangers that night!" So there is an instinctive feeling for prayer that sometimes arises within us.

In this series of studies on prayer we will be looking at the amazing relationship believers have with God. I hope these studies will be progressive, i.e., we do not want to forget what we learned last time, but add to it what we learn today. I trust too that we will have our questions about prayer answered as we go along.

Today we want to look at the mystery and the myths of prayer. There are things we have learned from childhood, myths, misunderstandings, and concepts about prayer that are wrong, and need to be righted. Yet, when we have learned all that we can, there still remains a mystery about prayer.

Prayer is initiated by God, as we learned. He begins the conversation always, whether we know it or not. And prayer is expected to be an intimate and relaxed conversation with God. No matter what our motive for prayer may be, its form ought to be one of talking with him directly. Only two people are ever involved in prayer, you and God. Others may be listening, but you yourself are confronting the divine Being himself.

Then prayer, as we also saw in our last study, is intended to be instructive; we learn from our prayers. God asked questions of Adam and Eve, and in seeking the answers, they learned much about themselves, as well as about God, and life itself. I do not know of any aspect of prayer that is more important than that. If we pray we will learn; if we do not pray we do not learn; we remain in ignorance.

Today I want to look at a familiar prayer, found in the 18th chapter of Genesis. This is the well-known incident when God let Abraham into the secret that the hour had come for the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, those cities of the plain where Lot, Abraham's nephew, was living. The account tells us that God had sent two angels to Sodom to destroy the city. Evidently it was to be destroyed by a natural catastrophe. The account suggests very strongly that it was destroyed by a volcanic eruption, for fire and brimstone, that is, sulphur, rained upon the city and destroyed it and its inhabitants. To this day there are evidences of such an occurrence in the valley where Sodom and Gomorrah were located. Those of us who remember last May 18th, when Mt. St. Helens suddenly erupted and devastated a huge area with clouds of hot ashes, can certainly believe that this might well have been the means by which the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. Now they called it then, in Abraham's time, as I am sure we would today, a natural disaster, but God is behind nature. He announced to Abraham that he was about to destroy through a natural judgment these cities of evil.

In the account we are told that the angels,

... turned from there, and went toward Sodom; 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." (Gen. 18:22-26 {RSV})

As you know, the account goes on with Abraham lowering the ante each time until he gets down to ten righteous people.

In our last study we referred to this incident as an example of one of the widespread myths about prayer. I have heard messages on this incident that suggest that this is the way to pray -- determine what you want God to do, then come before him, lay hold of him and do not let him go until he gives in to what you want. It is a way of arguing God into doing something. Now, that is not prayer, and that is not what is going on here either. We greatly misunderstand this account if we read it in that way. We must remember that all through the Scriptures we learn that it is the Spirit of God who moves people to pray. It is God, therefore, who has moved Abraham to intercede for the city, and especially for the righteous who are in it. All these biblical accounts of men laying hold of God must be understood in that light. It is God who has moved them; it is God praying to God through the agency of a human being.

This is what we are clearly told in Paul's letter to the Romans, where we have a great promise and a great revelation on prayer:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. (Rom 8:26 {RSV})

The literal words are, "with groanings that cannot be uttered." All of us have felt at times some deep, throbbing concern of our spirit which we hardly knew how to put into words. We did not know what to pray for, but the very concern we felt was a form of prayer. The Spirit was praying within us, without using words.

Then in the verse which follows we are told,

And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:27 {RSV})

That is what was happening with Abraham, and that answers the question, "Why did he stop with ten righteous?" doesn't it? I have heard messages that said, "If Abraham only had the faith to go on! If he had dropped it another notch, to five, perhaps the city would have been spared. Why didn't he go on?" Well, the answer is because the Spirit of God who was in him did not go on, that's why. It was God's will to destroy these cities. These people had reached the place where their wickedness and their resistance to truth called for judgment. We do not know how much exposure to truth they may have had before this, but surely Abraham had had contact with the city of Sodom. He knew the king; he had saved the inhabitants of this city from an invasion some years earlier. He had no doubt told them of the God he worshipped. And Lot dwelt within the city. He must have told them, but there was resistance to this word. At last they had reached the place of judgment.

Now judgment from God is never intended to be wipeout. In Romans 1, we are told that judgment comes only to make people listen, to arrest their attention. God was destroying these two cities so that the rest of the world might listen, so that others, hearing of their fate, might give heed to what is going on in their lives and in the particular form of sin in which they are involved. This city had reached the place where, in the mind, and, obviously, in the thinking of God, there was no use trying to reach it any longer. They had resisted to the point of hardness of heart, so judgment came. The Puritans used to put it this way,

"There is a line by us unseen which crosses every path:
The hidden boundary between God's patience and his wrath."

Here is a city which had crossed that line.

It is wrong for us, however, to get the impression from this account that homosexuality, which was the predominant evil of Sodom, is the worst possible sin, and that people who give way to that are very close to the judgment of God. That is not what this suggests at all. Jesus preached in two cities, Capernaum and Bethsaida, and said that their judgment was worse, because, he said, "If the mighty works which had been done in you I had been done in Sodom and Gomorrah. they would have repented long ago," {cf, Matt 11:21-23}. Here were two cities which were not given over to homosexual practices, which nevertheless, in the judgment of Jesus, were more worthy of condemnation than the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. So it is not the nature of their sin that is bringing down this judgment, rather, it is their persistence in evil and their refusal to recognize what God was telling them about what their sin was doing to them.

Abraham, at any rate, has been informed that the hour has come. The reaction we get is that he is appalled by this, but it is very important for us to see what is really troubling him. If you ask the question, "Is Abraham really trying to save these cities?" the answer has to be, "No, that is not really his concern." Abraham knows that God's hour of judgment has struck, that there has been long record of his patience up to this point. He knows that it is only unrighteousness that will ultimately be judged, so he is not trying to save the cities. He expresses his concern in these words: "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Are you going to treat righteous people the same way you treat wicked people?" That is what is troubling him.

Some of the commentators who have dealt with this passage are right in suggesting that there is a cold fist of fear gripping the heart of Abraham at this point, that he fears he is going to find that God is not quite who he thought he was. It may be that he is concerned about what we, with our New Testament background, call, "the salt effect" of believers. Righteous people, we know, have a way of salting the whole area around, preserving it from corruption and from judgment. Abraham, perhaps, is troubled that if God destroys a whole city full of wicked people, with some righteous among them, the word will go out that righteousness is of no effect and a wrong impression will be left. It may be too that he is really asking himself, "Does the gift of righteousness, which God has given me, mean anything? If God treats the righteous as he does the wicked, do I have any hope when my hour comes to stand before the God of all the earth?" So Abraham has a troubled heart, questioning whether God really is the kind of God he has thought him to be.

Have you ever felt that way? In your prayers, or in your confrontation with life, have you suddenly seen God moving in ways you did not anticipate, allowing things to happen that you did not think he ought to allow? Have you thought, "Lord, can you really do this? 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' This is not right."

There are instances in Scripture when men felt this way. Remember how David felt when he was bringing the ark back to Jerusalem after it had been in a Philistine city for many years. As he was bringing it back on a cart, the oxen stumbled and it looked like the ark was going to fall off. A man named Uzzah reached out to steady it and the moment he touched it he dropped dead instantly by the hand of God. David was so shaken that he took the ark and put it in a neighboring house and left it there for six months. He did not know what to do with a God who would take the life of a man who was trying to forestall an accident.

There is the account of Habakkuk, who, in his prayer for Israel, learned that God intended to bring the Babylonians against the nation and destroy it and take the people captive and lead them off to Babylon. He is appalled that the God of righteousness would let this happen to his own people. Many people have felt this way when they have read the stories in the Old Testament about God ordering the Israelite army to wipe out the inhabitants of entire cities. They ask, "Is that the God I worship? Can the God of love and mercy and patience give a command like that?" They are horrified.

We are getting very close to how Abraham felt at this point, when we sense that sudden horror that God is not going to act as we expected him to. Abraham is really raising the question here, "Does righteousness make any difference? If God wipes out these cities filled with both wicked and righteous people, if they are all treated alike, isn't it telling us that righteousness really does not make any difference, that God himself pays no attention to the gift of righteousness that he has bestowed?" That is what he is concerned about.

We have to remember, however, that Abraham understood what righteousness really is. Many people who read this account do not. They think being righteous means being nice, decent people who live a good outward moral life, who do not break the law, and do not get into trouble with their neighbors -- they are just "good" people. I am sure there were people like that in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. If you visit a gay community today you will find a lot of very likable people, who, though they may be participating in the same sin as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, are upstanding and decent people in many ways. So many people read this account as though Abraham was saying, "Are you going to wipe out those kinds of people as well as the obviously ungodly, blaspheming, violent types?" But Abraham was not thinking that. He understood that being righteous does not mean to be nice moral people who do not deserve judgment, because nobody is like that in God's sight. Abraham understood that righteousness is referring to self-centered, ambitious, proud and judgment-deserving people like you and me, who, nevertheless, by the blood sacrifice provided by God himself, have been given a gift we do not deserve, who have been introduced into a relationship with God that is pure grace and nothing else. What Abraham is concerned about is, "Does that really make any difference? Will God honor that in the hour of judgment? Does that really govern him or change him when the hour of crisis strikes?" He is wondering, uncertain, unsure. So, aware of his own ignorance and weakness, he lays his problem before God.

You can see how timidly he ventures, "Lord, just a moment. Supposing there are fifty righteous in that city, will you then destroy it?" Immediately the response comes, "No, I'll not destroy it for fifty." Again, timidly he ventures. "How about forty-five?" "No," says God immediately, "if I find forty-five I won't destroy it." Then Abraham girds up his courage and says. "Lord, now don't get upset, but I'm going to press this a little further. How about forty, or thirty, or twenty?" Finally, he goes as far as he dares, feeling the end of his sense of concern when he says, "Lord, how about ten? If there are ten righteous will you save them and the city?" God's immediate response, as all along is, "As far as you go, Abraham, I will go. If there are ten righteous I will not destroy the city."

Each prompt answer of God eases the fist of fear that is gripping Abraham's heart. Each answer is a reassurance to this great man of God that God will honor his promise, that he will preserve the righteous in the hour of crisis and danger -- and not always physically. Abraham understood that Sodom and Gomorrah were to be examples for all time of divine retribution and justice, a symbol of eternal condemnation. And that is what they have been.

Somebody said not long ago, "If God doesn't destroy San Francisco, he will have to apologize to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah!"

Those cities are symbols of the justice of God carried out in the fullness of wrath. Abraham is reassured that God means what he says, that righteousness does make a difference, that God's promises are valid in the hour of crisis, and that he does not treat the righteous as he does the wicked. When he reaches that place, Abraham is satisfied.

He was not trying to save the city, and he did not save it, for the account goes on to point out that Sodom and Gomorrah were judged. But there is an interesting word at the end of the 18th chapter. Verse 33:

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

As you read the account it is Abraham who has been speaking to God, but this verse strongly hints that there is something deeper, that God has been speaking to Abraham and that the purpose of this whole interchange is to reassure him that the promises of the gift of righteousness are valid, that righteousness is given to us when we do not deserve it and yet God honors it. We stand as a different people, treated on a different basis than those around us because of the mercy and the grace of God alone.

Then in Chapter 19 we have the story of the destruction of Sodom. It is a terrible story of unbridled passion and perverted lusts, where a whole city is given over so totally that they even assault strangers who come into their midst. This raises the question, how many righteous were in Sodom? The answer is: One. Four people were delivered from the city at first, Lot and his wife and his two daughters, that is all. The angels had to force

them out of the city to save their lives, and yet one of them perished on the way. Lot's wife turned back and looked at the city, disobeying the warning of the angels, and she became a pillar of salt. (You can visit the area today and see pillars of stone covered with salt encrustations which are pointed out as Lot's wife.) In a very sordid story, also in Chapter 19, Lot's two daughters, twisted by the evil of Sodom, resort to incest with their own father so that they might bear sons. Those sons grew up and formed two nations that throughout biblical history, down to this very day, have been enemies of Israel. There is no indication in Scripture that these two daughters were righteous.

But there is an account, found in Second Peter, that suggests that only righteous person in the city was Lot himself. In Second Peter we read:

... if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he [God] condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.
{2 Pet 2:6-10a RSV}

That is a divinely-inspired commentary on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It has great relevance to our own situation today.

But what I am concerned about is that we learn something about prayer from this. The great lesson that comes home to my heart, and I hope to yours, from this story is that true prayer is always grounded on the character of God, not the needs, the wants, and the desires of men. It begins with who God is, and what he wants. That is why the model prayer that is given to us by our Lord himself begins with that threefold petition:

- First, "Our Father" (which indicates our relationship to God);
- Second "who art in heaven" (which indicates his invisibility to us and yet his present availability to our needs), and
- Third, "Hallowed be thy name" (the greatness and the character of God that forms the ground of prayer).

Like Abraham, we may need reassurance from time to time that God really is the kind of God he claims to be, that even in the midst of judgment he honors his promises and redeems his offers to those who lay hold of them.

Abraham comes from this account with his heart at rest, assured that God still honors the righteous, and that the gift of righteousness which he gives is a valid claim in his sight for a relationship with him. That is the ground of prayer.

We have no right to come to God merely to use him as a kind of a "heavenly supply depot" that we draw on whenever we have great need. What we ought to see is that prayer is based upon the character and the promises of God.

Let me share with you a quotation from a fine book on prayer by an English writer, Reginald E. O. White. He says,

Sometimes it is God's character as revealed in His consistent ways that is the basis of the reasoning of faith: "If God so clothe the grass of the field ... shall He not much more clothe you?" Sometimes it is God's character as shown by what He has already done that provides the standing ground of confidence: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall he not with Him also freely give us all things?" And often it is the character of God expressed in His promises that forms our prayer and encourages our asking: "And now, O Lord God, thou art that God, and thy words be true, and thou hast promised this goodness unto thy servant: therefore now let it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee: for thou O Lord hast spoken it." (2 Samuel 7:28, 29.) In each case attention is

directed away from ourselves and our desires -- or deserts -- to God and His constancy of love, His steadfastness of character. Faith ever reasons from the God we know to be the goodness which we seek. To put the point in the different way: we believe, not as we sometimes rather loosely say, in the efficacy of prayer, but in the graciousness of God. On that all prayer experience rests.

That is what Abraham is teaching us here, that God is who he says he is.

As we reckon on that and remind ourselves of that, we have a basis upon which we may pray with confidence, with understanding, and with knowledge. May God help us to understand and learn how to lay hold of this great ministry of prayer.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that this incident in the life of Abraham reminds us afresh that our very destiny and our relationship with you at the present moment hangs upon your faithfulness to your promises. We have no right to come. We have no righteousness of our own. We have only that which is given to us by the gift of your Son on our behalf. Thank you for that, but thank you also for the assurance that *that* is a valid promise, that as we come on *that*, we have a whole new realm of relationship to count upon. Thank you that you are our Father, that you have forgiven us, that you have delivered us from the guilt of our past, even our immediate past, yesterday and ten minutes ago. Thank you that you have given to us great promises for the present and for the future, a provision of love and acceptance, guidance, of protection and all these things. We pray that your name, therefore will be glorified; that, as the world watches the righteousness in its midst, they will see that your hand and your heart are committed to those who respond to your offer of grace, and your judgment awaits those who resist the patient pleading of their God. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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