

PEOPLE IN PRAYER -

1. *The Friend of God*

(Genesis 18: 16 - 33)

Introduction

I've got a bit of a love hate with biographies. Particularly ones written about famous Christians. On the one hand I find them informative and inspiring but on the other unrealistic and idealistic.

We face a similar problem in Genesis 18. The depiction of Abraham, one of the great heroes of the OT, pleading with God is so vivid and so dramatic that our own prayer lives seem pathetic in comparison. And that is the problem with our series on 'People in Prayer' in general. Instead of these Biblical characters inspiring us to pray they may only cause us to give up. But before we give up, let's look carefully at what is actually going on here.

Abraham was God's friend (James 2: 23)

First and foremost Abraham was God's friend. Throughout the Bible, for example in verse 23 of James 2, Abraham is described as God's friend. This is where we must start. Prayer is not primarily a spiritual discipline, it is a natural part of a friendship.

Abraham talked with God because he enjoyed a special friendship with him. Yet again, we automatically assume that this must be the case because there was something special about Abraham. Abraham was unique and so enjoyed an extra special relationship with God. It couldn't possibly be like him! But that is not what we discover from verse 19 of our passage – the LORD describes Abraham like this: "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord ... so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." Abraham was not God's friend because of his good

looks, scintillating conversation, or devastating sense of humour. Abraham was God's friend because God chose him in order to bring about his purpose through him. Abraham was special because he was God's friend; he was not God's friend because he was special.

Christians are friends of Jesus (John 15: 15)

Now the amazing thing is that Jesus said the same thing about his disciples in John 15: "I have called you friends, for everything I learned from my Father I have made known to you." Disciples of Jesus are people whom Jesus chooses to call 'friend'. Isn't that wonderful? It has got nothing to do with you deserving his friendship, with you earning his love in some way. Far from it, Jesus chooses all Christians to be his friends.

And therefore, before we move on to think about prayer this morning, I want to ask everyone a direct question. Are you a friend of Jesus? Have you become a Christian, by admitting your rebellion against God and believing in Jesus for forgiveness? You see the NT only has two categories of people: friends of God and enemies of God. There is no third group who aren't that bothered, none sitting on the fence. Either you are a friend of God or an enemy. And obviously I urge everyone here to believe in Jesus and become his friend.

For starters you will never understand prayer until you do. I am now going to go to explain how being God's friend should affect our prayer life; and therefore you will never get the hang of prayer until you know what it means to be God's friend like Abraham did. Anyway, three things essential to a friendship that are also essential to prayer: Friends talk, friends care and friends plead.

1. FRIENDS TALK

(Verses 16 - 21)

First of all friends talk to one another.

➤ An open & honest relationship (v 17)

These verses are incredible for the way they describe God. Look at verse 17, “Then the LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?’” We have God described just like us. He walks and thinks just like we walk and think.

Not that we are to picture God just like any other human being; but it does teach us about his friendship with Abraham. Their relationship is open and honest. They keep no secrets from each other. It is as if God is agonising over whether to tell Abraham or not. Tough though the news will be, God wants their friendship to be open and honest. God knows that they will actually grow closer if they face difficult issues like this together.

➤ Opening His heart (v 18 - 19)

And so God opens up his heart to Abraham in verses 18 and 19. This is why he must come clean and spill the beans to Abraham. Because Abraham is his friend. And remember what it was that Jesus said distinguished friends from servants in John 15 – friends are let in on the big picture. Servants are commanded to obey unquestioningly; but friends are let in on the reasoning behind it all. Friends discuss things; friends value each other’s opinions.

As God searches his own heart he knows that he does not want Abraham to be a puppet follower, a robot who obeys without understanding. No, he wants to let him in on all his plans. He wants Abraham to see for himself why God acts as he does.

➤ Sharing His plans (v 20 – 21)

And so we come to verses 20 and 21. This is the big news that he has been holding back until now: “Then the LORD said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 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.’”

This is all so amazing that we need to take a step back from it all in order to take it in. Friends talk and so prayer must involve open and honest communication between friends. This is a two way process. First of all we need the discipline of listening to God. Through Jesus God has come to us and made his plans known. And therefore any prayer time must also involve listening to God speak to us. Spending time reading the bible and asking the Holy Spirit to take God’s written word and speak into our lives. Any prayer life that is just us speaking to him, bringing an endless list of requests is bound to dry up. He loves us and is always ready to talk to us, but are we ready to listen?

Equally, when was the last time you were open and honest with God? You know, just let rip – tell him how you really feel, bring to him what is really on your heart, what concerns you most. Just talk to him. If God is able to talk to Abraham like a man why do we feel that we have to use the language of the KJV when we speak to him?

Friends talk. They communicate. They share what matters to them. They don’t pussy foot around with formal protocol, they just get on with it. When was the last time that you and God had a good natter?

2. FRIENDS CARE

(Verses 22 - 25)

Secondly, Friends care.

➤ Abraham cares about:

Before we move on to verse 26 where Abraham famously pleads with God, let's take note of why he pleads. What is it exactly that causes him to pray to God like this? Well he prays because he cares. In verses 22-25 his mind and emotions are in turmoil. As he processes the information, conflicting emotions pull him in all sorts of directions. Abraham cares deeply and passionately, and it is because he cares that he prays. In particular he cares about two things – Sodom's fate and God's character.

- Sodom's fate (v 22)

Verse 22 describes his anxious state – “The men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord.” ‘Hold on’, Abraham says. ‘I haven't got my head round this yet.’ It's one thing to just drop this bombshell in my lap but I want to talk it through with you. I don't understand what's going on.

Clearly from what follows Abraham is concerned about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Please note that, at this stage, God has not said anything about destroying these two great cities. All God has told him is that he is going to Sodom to find out if the people really are as evil as it is claimed.

Yet Abraham knows enough from his dealings with the LORD that he is a holy God. The LORD cannot tolerate wickedness and evil and he judges it whenever he encounters it. In other words Abraham can see what is about to happen. He knows what the people of Sodom are like and he knows what God is like.

There can only be one outcome to this – God is going to judge Sodom.

And this bothers him. Verse 22 reads as if Abraham stands there waiting; waiting for God's response, almost waiting for God to justify himself. Abraham is filled with horror. The destruction of all these people appears before his eyes. These were people he knew. His nephew Lot lived there with his family. He had met their king. He had personally rescued many of its citizens back in chapter 14. These were people he knew and God wanted to destroy them.

How could God possibly do that? God had enabled him to save them earlier, what was the point if now they were going to be wiped away!

I am very disturbed by Abraham's request in verse 23 – “Then Abraham approached him and said, ‘Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’” What worries me most is how infrequently I ask God the same question. How little I care about the fate of those without God. You see Abraham was not motivated by care for his family. Otherwise he would have pleaded for them. No, Abraham prays for all the people in Sodom. Those he knows and those he doesn't.

So how do I compare? I am frequently ashamed by how callous my own heart is. I watch the scenes of flooding in Queensland on the news in a state of open fascination. This is a place I have visited several times and am slightly excited by pictures of rampaging torrents and cascading cars. People's homes are ruined, but do I care? Well, not really. It doesn't affect me, my own family are not involved. It remains merely academic interest.

And what about those in spiritual peril? I know better than Abraham what fate awaits the enemies of God when they meet their holy maker. I can chat to a relative or a neighbour and go

away unmoved. I have no problem in affirming my biblical orthodoxy. I believe that those who die without Christ are heading for God's judgement and yet most of the time it doesn't really bother me at all. I'm okay. I'm safe in Christ's kingdom. The floods are not my problem.

But not Abraham. He knew the terrible certainty of God's judgement. He knew the destruction that awaited Sodom and he cared. He cared enough to demand an explanation from the LORD. He cared enough to pray.

- God's character (v 25)

For hand in hand with his concern over the fate of Sodom was his concern over God's character. Most powerfully expressed in verse 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?”

Abraham is appalled with what is about to happen. So horrified that he has the audacity to question the moral integrity of God. He sees that destruction is on the horizon but it doesn't square with the character of his friend. How can a God of love destroy all these people indiscriminately? He questions. How can a God of justice act in such an apparently unjust manner?

Feel the pain in Abraham's voice. Listen to the anguish in his pleas. From what he knows of God's character he cannot come to terms with the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah.

- Do we care enough to pray?

If we are going to learn how to pray we must be motivated by the same things as Abraham. Notice that both of his cares stem from God's character. He prays because he knows God. He knows how

much God hates evil and therefore how certain his judgement is; and he also knows that God is a God of justice who is always fair in his dealings.

So, do we care enough about God and about others in order to pray? Are we prepared to plead for those who are lost? More than that are we prepared to be drawn into the pain of dialogue with God, trying to understand more of his plans? You see then it ceases to become the interest of a dispassionate observer. This passage transforms how we pray for the lost.

In fact verse 25 tells us what to say when non-Christians die. One of the hardest things I have had to do is to take the funeral of those who don't believe in Jesus. What can you say? I can't offer false hope. I can't promise them heavenly rest when I have no grounds for believing that. But equally I can't condemn them to hell because that is not my job. Only God knows our eternal destiny. All I can do is offer them to God, *knowing that the judge of all the earth will do right*. Knowing that our only hope is in Christ Jesus and knowing that no one will be able to accuse God of being unfair!

3. FRIENDS PLEAD

(Verses 26 - 33)

Friends talk, friends care and friends plead. Now I hope you find that a bit strange. Friends do sometimes plead but 'pleading' probably wouldn't be in your top 10 things that describe friendship. Well that is deliberate. For in verses 26-33 we see that this is no ordinary friendship.

While I have been stressing the amazing truth that Abraham was God's friend let us not get carried away into thinking that it was an equal friendship. His requests are bold but he never forgets who he is and who he is talking with. He may be God's friend but he never sees God as just his 'mate', somehow on his level.

➤ An unequal friendship (v 27)

In verse 27 Abraham says this, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes ...” Then in verse 30, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak ...” and again in verse 32. That is why we say that he pleads to the Lord. He is God’s friend but he acknowledges that in the universal scheme of things he is very small fry. It was what God thinks that really matters. His friendship with the Lord counts for something but he does not presume upon it. He never over steps the mark from honest questioning to become too chummy with the almighty creator. And so while we marvel that God would count us as his friends we must never forget who is creator and who is created in this relationship. Our friendship with the Lord will always be a very unequal partnership.

Still that is not meant to be a negative thing. It is only because Abraham has such a high view of God that he is able to make such great requests. It is only because the Lord is the creator of all that the fate of these major cities rests in his hands. The more powerful the person we are talking to the more we plead and the less we chat. And the greater they are the greater impact our pleas may have.

And so Abraham pleads. What if there are 50? 45? 40? 30? 20? And then 10?

➤ haggling or tug-of-war?

Now all this raises a whole host of questions. Is Abraham haggling with God? Does God change his mind? Then as we read on to chapter 19 and find out that God does indeed destroy Sodom even more questions fill our minds – if God was going to do it anyway,

why bother with Abraham’s prayer? Why doesn’t Abraham’s prayer make any difference?

The simple answer to such profound questions is that we don’t know. In fact what we learn from Abraham here is that prayer involves living in the tension that these questions bring. The whole point about prayer is that it is not cut and dried. We do not pray dispassionately. Prayer is all about wrestling with all that God has already revealed to us through his word.

For rather than haggling, a better description of what was going on is that of a tug-of-war. Abraham couldn’t possibly be haggling, what does he have to barter with? No, there is only one outcome when you have a tug-of-war with God, that is you end up where God is. On the face of it little changed due to Abraham’s prayer but actually a lot did. Abraham changed, he now had a far more profound insight into God’s ways. Presumably Abraham stopped at ten because he was sure that there must be at least 10 good people in Sodom. But there wasn’t. Abraham could not stomach a God who would destroy the good with the bad. But he didn’t realise just how bad the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were.

We want clean-cut answers to these questions but the Bible does not provide them. In fact we will never learn how to pray while we search for exhaustive answers to these questions.

It is best summed up by our ‘if it be your will’ prayers. As we read verse 33 and Abraham returns home, we could hear him mutter ‘if it be your will.’ To do so would be a trust in God’s character. Faith that God is Lord of all and Abraham trusts in his sovereign plans.

But in my own prayers 'if it be your will' shows nothing but laziness. Too quickly I rush to this resignation. Again it shows that I don't really care. Too quickly do I assume that so and so will never become a Christian, or that my friend will never be healed. Now my assumptions may eventually prove correct, but have I first pleaded like Abraham?

No, so often this little phrase needs to be given its real name – a cop out. This is picking up \$200 without passing 'Go' on the monopoly board. I do not have to come to grips with the living God. I need not wrestle with discovering what God's will is in this particular situation. There is no need to exercise faith in the character of the One who can do the impossible. 'If it be your will' so often requires nothing of me.

Abraham on the other hand prayed. He talked, he pleaded, he wrestled, he prayed. Who can tell what eternal rescues might be achieved in the lives of our friends if we learn to persist in intercessory prayer?

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 - God's character (v 25)
- Do we care enough to pray?

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- An unequal friendship (v 27)
- Lots of questions ...
- '*If it be your will*'