

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 14: PRAYER MINISTRY

Genesis 18:16-33, 19:23-29 (NASB)

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What is the role and significance of prayer in the future of Christ's church? How much does it affect the outcome of our efforts? How much can we expect from God? The thesis of this study is that prayer is not mere icing on the cake of ministry. It is not a prefix, a suffix, a gloss, or a marginal note. It is a ministry of its own, and part of every ministry.

The early church experienced a most powerful lesson about prayer ministry under the oppressive reign of Herod Agrippa I (cf. Acts 12). The King was the sort of ruler who shaped his leadership by pleasing factions. The majority Jewish faction in Jerusalem was still hopping mad about the outbreak of messianic Judaism which believed in Jesus Christ. So when Herod was toying with his power one day by mistreating the believers, he discovered that this behavior tickled the Jewish establishment. He hacked James, the brother of John, to death with the sword. Then he arrested the apostle Peter.

Peter had been having the most marvelous ministry of preaching the gospel, leading people to Christ by the thousands, and performing signs of healing and deliverance from evil spirits. The fledgling church was concerned that their friend and brother was suffering in jail, and that his ministry was in danger of permanent shut down. So they went to battle in prayer with great zeal and persistence.

Herod was apparently very nervous about locking Peter up, because he chained both of his arms to prison guards rather than just one, and he assigned sixteen men to guard him in shifts around the clock. But Peter was not nervous. He may have thought: *Well, James got hacked to death, but I'm in God's hands, so I think I'll...go to sleep!* Perhaps this was the first outward evidence of the amazing effect of the ministry of prayer.

And then an angel from God showed up and poked Peter awake. Peter's chains fell off. The angel commanded him to gather himself and follow. Peter wasn't ready to accept the reality of God's intervention. He seems to have thought: *This is a really great dream! I think I'll follow the angel and see what happens!* The angel led Peter out past all of the guards. Peter watched the iron prison gate at the street open of its own accord. He was free.

And then he knew that he was not dreaming. Immediately he sought out the church which was praying for him by going to Mary's house, mother of John Mark. He started banging on the door of the gate. A faithful young servant named Rhoda jumped up to get the door and was shocked to hear the voice of Peter. In her excitement she ran inside and cried out to the assembled believers that Peter, for whom they had been praying, was at the door!

And here we have a great insight into the challenge of prayer. The idea that God had actually done the thing for which they had been praying seemed impossible. "There is something wrong with your mind!" they told Rhoda, who kept insisting Peter was there. Then the otherwise faithful early church grabbed onto a cockamamie superstition that each person's guardian angel looks like the person. In effect, they said: "It's a spirit!"

And Peter just kept banging. When they opened the door, they called out in amazement and Peter motioned for them to be quiet. His first concern was that the whole church needed to hear of this miraculous answer to prayer by telling James, the head of the church in Jerusalem and natural brother of Jesus. Let God be glorified! Then Peter left to carry on his apostolic work. And I hope they all apologized to Rhoda.

THE PRIVILEGE OF HEARING FROM GOD

How well do we appreciate the privilege of talking to God as a normal part of life? An episode from the life of Abraham reveals the Lord's commitment to communicate with the people whom he has made. Abraham had divided the land of promise with his nephew Lot who chose to live in the more fertile region along with some of the most morally depraved people on earth. The Lord went to Abraham to explain that his patience was ended with the city of Sodom and the whole region.

"Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. The LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.' And the LORD said, 'The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.' Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD" (Gen. 18:16-22).

For reasons only God knows, he has chosen to include human beings in the unfolding of his plan for the earth and its kingdoms. He showed up in the form of the angel of the Lord and began talking to Abraham. The reason is obvious in this particular case, since Abraham was to be the father of the people of faith on earth. The Lord spoke to Abraham as a friend. This was not true of every believer under the first covenant, but it is true of every believer in Christ, as he said to the first disciples: **"No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you"** (John 15:15).

What a friend we have in Jesus! He talks with us about the most stupendous things in God's plan for the whole world. I will admit that my sense of privilege leaks off from time to time and I must renew it. But renew it I must! A privilege like this must not be depreciated by the neglect of listening to the voice of God in prayer.

THE PRIVILEGE OF TALKING TO GOD

Abraham not only had the privilege of hearing from God, he also had the privilege of talking to God—and having God listen! The back story to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah continues: **"Abraham came near and said, 'Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the**

place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' So the LORD said, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account'" (Genesis 18:23-26).

What follows is a remarkable account of what looks like Abraham bargaining with God in prayer for the destiny of Sodom. There are several false conclusions we might draw from this passage. We must not succumb to the idea that God is mean and Abraham was kinder than God, so he had to bargain with him not to be mean. We also must not allow the idea that God did not know what he was doing until he talked to Abraham, or that God was uncertain and waffled in his plan for Sodom.

I admit up front that there is a mystery about how God, who knows everything, interacts with mankind in prayer. What we can say with certainty from this passage is that there is a process in the unfolding of the plan of God and believers have been made meaningful participants in it. Abraham's intercessory prayer was not a charade! And the Lord invites us to swallow our questions and choose to participate. Let none of us refuse to pray because we do not fully understand it! That would be like refusing to eat a wonderful meal because we do not understand how God makes fruits, vegetables, chickens, and cows.

And look at the unthinkable span of influence granted to Abraham and to us! Abraham wrestled with God over sin and righteousness, the fate of individuals such as Lot and his family, the fate of cities, the fate of human enterprises such as farming and animal husbandry, the manufacture of cloth, clothing, and footwear, and the well-being of the created world. This example of believing prayer removes from us any thought that a prayer might involve something too big. We need to expand our consciousness of the things which prayer ministry may impact. Pray for your church, your city, state and country. Pray for governments in every land, for the outbreak of righteousness, for people everywhere to find forgiveness in Christ, for broken souls to be healed, and for God's people to propel the kingdom of Christ through bold acts of faith and evangelism.

We also see a primary angle for reasoning with God according to his own character. It is not true that God would ever treat the righteous and wicked alike, or violate his justice by any act of judgment, so Abraham used that fact in his prayer. Any attribute of God can be a good basis for appeal. For example, after you have fallen in sin for the umpteenth time, you could pray: "Lord, you are holy and you have called me to be holy as your child. I confess this sin to you. Please bring cleansing and transformation of my soul by your Holy Spirit so that I will never do this again. So I resolve in Jesus' mighty name."

OUR WEAKNESS WHICH BECOMES STRENGTH

You will observe as Abraham pursued his line of reasoning with God that he did not seem to know exactly what he was asking for or how to ask. The text continues: "**And Abraham replied, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' He spoke to Him yet again and said, 'Suppose forty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not do it on account of the forty.'** Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not

be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.' And he said, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.' Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it on account of the ten.' As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place" (Genesis 18:27-33).

Please know that Abraham did not back God into a corner! But he did display great faith to keep wrestling with God over something which was heavy upon his heart. Abraham revealed that he knew his limitations in wisdom and strength when he said **"I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes."** So go ahead and wrestle through your questions with God.

Abraham's own heart seems to have been motivated by mercy. This is a wonderful motive to seek God in prayer. You may not know exactly what you are asking for or how to approach God about your concern. And yet God will make you also an active, meaningful part of the fulfillment of his plan as he did Abraham. His intrinsic weakness as dust and ashes became his strength through God in prayer.

Why did Abraham stop praying? I believe he became convinced of God's righteousness in judgment in this matter. The specific answer had not yet been given. But Abraham set his heart at rest. We should pray ourselves into this same state of spiritual resolution that whatever the problem, God will be God and he will be enough.

LOOKING FOR THE ANSWER

I find that while I ask God for many things in prayer, I often fail to look for the answer. What actually did God do in response to my prayer? Abraham made his request and then he sought the answer, as the story continues in the next chapter: **"Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace"** (Genesis 19:24-28).

There were not, in fact, ten righteous men in Sodom. The flaming judgment of God fell. But we also discover a great truth about prayer in the fate of Lot's wife who looked back and became a pillar of salt. Our prayers can never remove from other people the responsibility they have for their own decisions before God. I feel sure that Abraham sought the safety and well-being of his entire family. Only three of them, Lot and his two daughters, were preserved in spite of many attempts by the Lord to get them to receive the blessing for which Abraham prayed.

Have you ever been perplexed by that problem of how to pray for others who need to make the right decisions? Have you ever wondered: *Why can't God just force my loved ones and friends make good choices?* The answer to that question is bound up in the mystery of faith. Trust in God is the only hope of every human being for their eternal destiny. By definition, we must each make that commitment of faith ourselves. We can pray for God's supernatural encouragements, but we cannot ask

God to compel faith in a deterministic, robotic way.

The chapter closes with the affirmation that God had indeed answered Abraham's prayer: **"Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived"** (Genesis 19:29). This was not the answer Abraham wanted. He had hoped and prayed for deliverance for his entire family and even for the whole region. In the end, God works his will in ways we cannot fully understand. After we are done being perplexed at this, the time comes to humble ourselves and worship, as the writer of Ecclesiastes asserted: **"He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end... ..I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him"** (Ecclesiastes 3:11,14).

I urge you to embrace prayer not as a moment, not as a meeting, but as a ministry. Somehow, beyond our strength and understanding, God has made us active participants in the fate of the world and his kingdom.

Do our families, churches, cities, states, and countries have problems which we cannot solve? Are people's lives being torn apart by heedless sins? Is the moral character of our nation in a steep decline? Yes, yes, and yes! Prayer ministry is the answer. Abraham prayed for his family, a group of cities, and an entire region. The significance of that act of God in which Abraham participated by prayer resounds thousands of years later.

The early church dropped everything and prayed when they saw their beloved leader thrown in the slammer by a king who had just hacked James, the brother of John, to death. I don't know what they asked God to do or what they were expecting. But the fervency and persistence of their gathered prayer reveals their faith. They ran to God and made their petitions.

And then what God did was so marvelous that they had trouble believing it! Peter got escorted out of a filthy prison by the very messenger of God. It was like a divine do-over, where the bad situation was completely undone!

Prayer is not just a way for us to feel better or more religious. Because prayer marshals the very resources of God it is a ministry of its own, and must be part of every ministry. I urge you to pray well in your small groups and study groups of every kind. Pray with your friends and family at gatherings—stop and give God glory and ask him for what you need, and to propel his kingdom. Gather with the people of God for prayer at a regular time, as we do at our Hour of Prayer on Thursdays. And bring your many concerns to the throne of God personally and privately as well.

And what will God do? James, the brother of the Lord, learned this well. When Peter was released from prison he gave the instruction: **"Report these things to James and the brethren."** And so later James came to write the magna carta of prayer ministry, which I offer you in my own translation: **"The prayer of a righteous person is energized with great power"** (James 5:16b, DBL). Hear it, believe it, and then pray. This is how things get done in Christ's kingdom.