

# **The Life of Abraham**

## **The Prayer of Abraham**

*Genesis 18:16-33*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# The Prayer of Abraham

## Scripture

God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him incredible promises. At the time, Abram was seventy-five years old when he left family, clan and land to follow God's call to go to Canaan and claim the promises God made to him in Genesis 12:2–3, “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God reiterated his promises to Abram several times over the next twenty-four years. However, Abram, whose name was changed to Abraham, also failed God a number of times. Nevertheless, just after God promised Abraham a son by his wife, Sarah, the following year, God appeared again to Abraham in Mamre in the land of Canaan. During that time, Abraham pleaded with God for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Let's read about the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 18:16-33:

**<sup>16</sup> Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. <sup>17</sup> The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup> seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, 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 to Abraham what he has promised him.” <sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, <sup>21</sup> I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”**

<sup>22</sup> So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” <sup>26</sup> And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

<sup>27</sup> Abraham answered and said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. <sup>28</sup> Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” <sup>29</sup> Again he spoke to him and said, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” <sup>30</sup> Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” <sup>31</sup> He said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” <sup>32</sup> Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” <sup>33</sup> And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. (Genesis 18:1-8, 16-33)

## Introduction

Years ago, I heard Tim Keller preach this text at General Assembly. It was a very helpful sermon, and most of what I am going to say is from Tim Keller’s sermon.

If you read your Bible regularly—and I hope you do!—then you know that sometimes reading certain chapters of the Bible does not seem to have much relevance to you. But, then, as you

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continue your reading, you suddenly come across a portion of the Bible that seems as if it was written directly to you. That is what happens to many people when they first read Genesis 18.

In the first part of Genesis 18, three heavenly visitors, one of whom is a theophanic appearance of God, drop in to see Abraham in the land of Canaan. God reiterates his promise of a son to be born to Sarah the following year. This is important Biblical truth, but it seems somewhat distant from our daily experience.

However, in the second half of the chapter, the situation there is as relevant as today's news. It concerns wicked cities, a pending judgment, and the role of prayer in interceding for those who are about to be destroyed. James Montgomery Boice, quoting Henry M. Morris, applies the chapter like this:

The modern world, America in particular, has had the witness of the Christian gospel for a long time. But mankind has rejected it, and is descending into a morass of corruption and wickedness even greater than that of the pagan world before Christ. He has assured mankind, through his Word, that they will soon be coming to judgment. Until then, his people have the responsibility of intercessory prayer for lost men, and of a consistent spiritual witness to them, warning them of the wrath to come.<sup>1</sup>

### Lesson

The prayer of Abraham in Genesis 18:16-33 shows us a model for prayer.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Manner of Abraham's Prayer
2. The Reason for Abraham's Prayer
3. The Application of Abraham's Prayer

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 612.

## I. The Manner of Abraham's Prayer

First, let's examine the manner of Abraham's prayer.

After the meal and the discussion about the promised child, **the men**, one of whom was God, **set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way** (18:16). Now we begin to see the unfolding of Abraham's intercession for the people of Sodom.

There are four truths that we learn from Abraham's prayer.

### A. *He Prayed Dialogically*

First, he prayed dialogically.

Prayer is really a dialogue with God. There are two parties to the dialogue. Notice who started the dialogue in verse 17, **"The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...'"** We don't usually say to someone, "Shall I tell you what I am about to do?" unless we are going to tell that person. So, it is clear that God is going to reveal something to Abraham. But the important point is that God begins the dialogue. Abraham's prayer is a response to God's speech.

That is a very important point about prayer. Prayer is not us reaching out to God as we imagine him to be. If you say, "I like to think of God like this," then you are not praying to the God of the Bible but you are praying to the god of your own imagination. You see, true prayer is always a response to the person and work of God that is revealed in Scripture. That is why it is so important to immerse yourself deeply in the Bible to know God personally so that you can pray dialogically.

### B. *He Prayed Humbly*

Second, he prayed humbly.

Abraham knew that he was in no way equal with God. He

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knew that he was dealing with God who is “a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”<sup>2</sup> In verse 27, **Abraham answered and said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes....”** Abraham did not come to God with any of his own merits, accomplishments, achievements, or works. He recognized that before God Almighty, he was nothing **but dust and ashes**. He approached God with humility.

### C. *He Prayed Boldly*

Third, he prayed boldly.

Even though Abraham approached God with an incredible sense of his own unworthiness and the glorious majesty of God, he nevertheless approached God with boldness. Twice, in verses 30 and 32, while he was pleading for God to spare the wicked in Sodom, Abraham said, **“Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak.”** Abraham knew that God was holy, and that God was right in his judgment of wickedness.

Nevertheless, Abraham also knew that God was loving. His view of God was not one that he had imagined. God had met with him several times, so that he had a growing understanding of who God was. Abraham’s prayer was not weak and insipid, but bold because he knew that God loved him.

### D. *He Prayed Massively*

And fourth, he prayed massively.

I struggled to find the right word here. So many of our prayers are for ourselves, for our own spiritual growth, for our needs to be met, or for people who are ill. As someone cynically said, “Most of our prayers are organ recitals: we pray for our hearts,

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<sup>2</sup> Q&A 4 in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

livers, and lungs”! Abraham, however, was not praying for himself or his own needs. Instead, he was praying for the lost.

In verse 20, **the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave....”** The Hebrew word for **“outcry”** means “to cry for help in time of distress.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the **outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah** has to do with the people in the city involved in all kinds of sin.

Abraham was undoubtedly aware of how wicked the cities were because his nephew Lot lived in Sodom. Perhaps Abraham had visited Lot and seen for himself that the sin of the cities was very grave. Well, how did Abraham pray? In verse 24, Abraham asks God to **“spare”** the cities. Do you know what the word **“spare”** means in this context? It means “to forgive.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, someone may say, “Of course, Abraham asked God to spare Sodom. His nephew Lot, Lot’s wife, and their two daughters, lived there.”

But that is not what is going on in this text. The reason is because Abraham could simply have asked God to spare Lot and his family. But he did not. In fact, Lot is not even mentioned in this entire chapter. No. Abraham actually cared about the whole city. Abraham’s compassion and prayer is not just for his family, but is instead for the whole city. Abraham has a heart for all the lost and wicked sinners in the city.

## II. The Reason for Abraham’s Prayer

Second, notice the reason for Abraham’s prayer.

Why was Abraham able to pray dialogically, humbly, boldly, and massively? Why was his prayer so outwardly-focused?

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<sup>3</sup> Leon J. Wood, “570 קול,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 248.

<sup>4</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

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The reason for Abraham's prayer was its theological depth. He was not just asking for his own needs to be met. He was praying on the basis of God's nature, on the basis of God's person and work. That is what made his prayer so deeply profound.

Abraham was able to pray to God because he grounded his prayer on two aspects of God's nature.

### *A. He Knew That God is a God of Justice*

First, he knew that God is a God of justice.

In verse 25b, Abraham said, **“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”** That is a rhetorical question, which means that it is a statement. Abraham knew that God is a just God. He was a righteous and holy God.

Now, Abraham wanted God to spare Sodom. But he knew that God was a God of justice. He knew that God would not just turn a blind eye, and forego his justice. God could not do that and remain just.

### *B. He Knew That God is a God of Grace*

But second, Abraham knew that God is a God of grace.

In verses 18-19, God said to Abraham, **“...Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have chosen him, 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 to Abraham what he has promised him.”** Abraham may have thought at one time that God chose him because he was a good person. But by now he knew that just wasn't true. He had failed God so many times. He had even tried to help God by having a son by his wife's Egyptian servant, Hagar. And yet, God was still so gracious to him. Despite



Abraham's many failures, God was still having dinner with him and restating his promises to him. That is a God of grace!

Abraham, then, was reasoning like this, "Oh God, on the one hand, you are a God of justice. You cannot lay aside your justice and ignore the sins of the wicked. On the other hand, oh God, you are a God of grace." Then Abraham goes even further, "God, isn't there a way that the righteousness of a few might transfer and save many?" And astonishingly, God is agreeable to that. Abraham prayed in verses 23-24, **"Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?"** In verse 26, the Lord said, **"If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."**

Abraham was astounded! But, then, realizing that there might not be fifty righteous within the city, Abraham asked, "What if there are only forty-five righteous in the city?" And God said, "Yes!" He would spare the city if there were forty-five righteous people in it.

"How about forty?" asked Abraham.

"Yes," said God.

"How about thirty?" asked Abraham again.

Yes," said God again.

"How about twenty?" asked Abraham.

"Yes," said God.

"How about ten?" asked Abraham.

"Yes," said God.

And suddenly, the prayer ends. Verse 33 says, **"And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place."**

Just when God seems so agreeable to save the city, Abraham stops praying. We expected Abraham to ask, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose only one

righteous person is found there. Will you save the city for the sake of one righteous person?”

And we expect that the Lord would say, “Yes, Abraham, I will save the city for the sake of one righteous person.”

But Abraham never asks the question. God goes down and brings judgment on the city, and the city is lost.

Why? What happened? Here is what happened. Abraham knows that there is not one single personally righteous person in the city. Lot is definitely not a righteous person. But, worse yet, Abraham knows that he himself is not personally righteous. He knows that “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). And so he knows that there is no hope in himself.

More than two millennia later, God did send one who was truly and personally righteous to this earth. That was his own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus never ever committed a sin during his entire life. He was completely and utterly righteous. When he went to the cross, he said, in effect, “Father, the wages of sin is death. I am paying that wage. I am paying the penalty for sinners. Now, Father, spare the lost. Forgive the lost. I have satisfied the demands of your justice. Now, Father, extend your grace to unrighteous sinners so that they may know your love, mercy, and forgiveness.”

### **III. The Application of Abraham’s Prayer**

And finally, consider the application of Abraham’s prayer.

Abraham’s prayer points us to Jesus Christ, who is the true Abraham. He is truly righteous and is able to transfer his righteousness to sinners and so save many.

Here are two applications.

First, understand that gospel. The gospel is that you are so wicked and sinful that Christ died to pay the penalty for your sin on the cross. And yet, you are so loved that Christ was glad to die for you. The gospel is both the justice of God and also the grace

of God.

And second, the gospel enables you to pray for the lost. You and I have far more information than Abraham had. We know the rest of the story. Jesus has come. He has paid the penalty for sin. He has demonstrated his love for sinners. And so we look to the justice of God and the grace of God, and we ask God to save the lost.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 18:16-33, we should pray “big” prayers.

Abraham kept going to God for more and more. He did not settle for small prayers. “But,” someone might say, “Abraham did not get what he asked for.” It is true that the city was not spared. However, Lot and his family did get out of the city. Lot got out because of Abraham’s prayer, as Genesis 19:29 says, “So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived.”

Friends, let us be bold in our prayers. Let us go to God for the lost people in our city. Let us go to God for the lost people in our families. Let us go to God on the basis of his own attributes. Let us go to God with big prayers, as John Newton wrote:

Thou art coming to a King,  
Large petitions with thee bring;  
For His grace and power are such,  
None can ever ask too much.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Eckert, *Steve Green’s MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1998).

## **Mission Statement**

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## **Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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## **Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)**

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)