

Genesis 18:20-32
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 24, 2022

When you were quite small, your parents likely taught you to fold your hands and bow your head. In that posture you learned simple meal prayers and bedtime prayers. How do you regard prayer today—merely as something for kids? I hope not, for then you would be missing a blessed privilege. Prayer is our focus in today's service. See from Abraham in this text

PRAYER IS NOT FOR COWARDS

- I. Come boldly
- II. Come persistently
- III. Come confidently

Prayer is not for cowards, but come boldly because God invites prayer. He presented the opportunity to Abraham to pray in behalf of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord and a pair of angels had visited with the patriarch to announce the upcoming birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. After the announcement, the visitors walked on and Abraham saw them off. Before they parted company God decided to reveal what was soon to happen. "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." We know about their sins from the next chapter. They were filled with lust, especially with unabashed homosexual depravity. The vileness of their behavior called for action. God indicated that destruction was on the way. Abraham caught the message.

The Lord said he was going to verify the circumstances. Because nothing is hidden from him, he knew the conditions. He was using human descriptions to communicate his actions. He was not going to act without accurate facts. He is a just God. He is also a merciful God. By tarrying and announcing his intent he was giving Abraham opportunity to react and to do something with this knowledge.

What would you have done? Knowing the depravity of the cities we might have cheered. "Right on, God! They've had it coming. It's about time. I can't wait to watch." Or perhaps indifference would have been your response. "It's not my problem. Whatever—you can deal with it. I don't want to get involved." But then remember that Abraham's nephew Lot lived in the city. Maybe you would have thought it was up to you to handle, so you would run ahead and sound the warning,

which may or may not have had an effect. Abraham's response was to plead with the Lord, based on his relationship with him. The Bible calls Abraham a friend of God. That connection came about through faith. He trusted and loved the Lord as his Savior, just as we do. We are his children through faith in Jesus.

Children in a loving family are not afraid to speak with their fathers. They come readily and boldly into their presence, knowing Dad welcomes their concerns. So Abraham addressed God, who remained as the two angels continued on their way to Sodom. "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Abraham asked. He appealed to God's sense of justice, that it would not be fair to destroy everyone together. He brought more than personal concern for his relative Lot and his family, who lived in the area, evident in the higher number (50) that he suggested. Abraham was concerned about believers who might be present. He called them righteous, for that's how believers appear before God. We are righteous in his sight because the perfection of Jesus has been credited to us and we have the forgiveness for all our sins that he purchased with his blood, shed on the cross. Notice that Abraham didn't deny or dismiss the guilt of the people in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Living nearby, he surely knew their wickedness. He appealed to the justice and mercy of God and asked him to hold off the action.

His prayer was bold because he knew that God welcomes prayer. He wants us to bring our concerns to him and to ask for big things. Yet Abraham's approach was also humble. He didn't dictate to God. He recognized who was the boss. As he continued praying and pleading with God, we can see some hesitation. He expressed awkwardness, but knew appealing to God was the only way to preserve the cities. He called himself "dust and ashes." Abraham was a mortal being, made from the dust of the earth and returning one day to that dust. So he did not tell God how he must act, but asked him to refrain from the destruction.

God invites your prayers as well, and not just when trouble is threatened. When all is going well, it's easy to become complacent and forget about our need for his actions. He wants to talk to his children always. Go to him; speak without hesitation. Don't view prayer as a last resort, but as the first step in every situation. Come boldly, but not audaciously. Recognize you are coming to a superior, but also to a loving Father. Know that he can handle anything.

II.

Praying is not a quick and thoughtless activity, but we come persistently. Abraham repeated his requests to the Lord, who granted that initial petition. He promised not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if fifty believers populated the towns. Abraham knew conditions were not good there. Perhaps his original number was

pushing it. So he moved down to 45. How could a difference of only five believers cause such a drastic action? Then he kept working down: 40, next 30, then 20, and finally down to ten. Each time the Lord agreed that he would not destroy the cities if that many believers were present.

Abraham didn't give up. He was persistent, like the man in the Gospel reading who needed provisions for his late night company. Only Abraham was dealing with a perfect and holy God, not with a tired neighbor who didn't want to be bothered. God does not merely put us off so he can go back to sleep. He loves to answer prayer and is always there for us to talk to.

Another item we note is the concern of Abraham for others. He wasn't praying for anything personal but was concerned for others and their welfare. We call that intercession. There's no need for selfishness when it comes to praying. God has enough goodness and plenty of blessings for all.

Whether the prayers are for others or for ourselves, our heart needs to be in them. Persistent prayer is more than mechanical repetition of the same words. Focus on the content of your prayers. Pray not as a routine activity, something you rush through so you can quickly move on to something else. Christian prayer accepts God's will, but it's not merely an attitude of "whatever you say." Storm the throne of God's grace with your prayers. The Reformation was described by one historian as having been born and sustained in Martin Luther's prayer closet. Luther knew firsthand the importance of prayer. He stated that some days he was so busy with his work that he needed to spend three hours in prayer. As you pray for yourself and others, pray sincerely and persistently. That's not for cowards.

III.

As you bring your needs to God also come confidently, for God answers prayers. He agreed with the pleading of Abraham, each step lower in number. We might think that God declined his prayer since the cities ended up being destroyed, as the next chapter reports. Remember that Abraham stopped with the number of ten believers. Perhaps he felt that a yet smaller number would have looked like he had only personal interest for his relatives. Or maybe he knew that justice must be done.

Actually Abraham received a bonus. The Lord took special actions to rescue Lot and his family from the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. He granted more than Abraham asked. God is generous in his answers to our prayers, giving what we seek or something even better, whether we recognize it as such or not. So come confidently before him.

The basis of our confidence as we pray is the goodness of God, not ourselves or our act of praying. We recognize our sins and the fact that we deserve nothing from God. There are our sins of doubt and neglect when it comes to prayer, as well as our daily shortcomings in our behavior toward God and toward one another, as we do what is wrong and fail to do right. We deserve punishment now and eternally, not answered prayers. But we are coming to the God who saved us. He loves us so much that he sent his one and only Son to redeem us by living a perfect life and by dying on the cross as our substitute. Because of Jesus, God grants full and free forgiveness. He has reconciled us to himself, promises to direct all things for our good and to bring us to heaven for eternity.

As he solved our biggest and most impossible problem of sin, surely he can handle our other needs. He has the power to do so, for he is almighty. Nothing is impossible for God. He definitely has the love to motivate acting in our behalf, since he sacrificed even his own Son for us. As the all-knowing Lord of all he has the wisdom to know the best answer. That gives us confidence regarding any topic about which we pray. True, the answer may not always be in the form we asked. It may be even better. Therefore we pray with confidence.

I have been saying prayer is not for cowards. We come boldly and persistently—that's not the manner of a wimp. Actually, however, even cowards can pray, because knowing Jesus as Savior and God as our loving Father will overcome our cowardice and lead us to pray confidently, positive that his time and way of answering will be good. Don't neglect your prayer life because you view it as an activity for a child. Use your privilege regularly, in good times and in bad. God has blessings that he is just waiting to grant you.