

Gen 18:16-33¹

A Few Righteous Ones

Introduction

When you're bargaining with a merchant, you hold the money and he holds the merchandise. You each have something the other wants. So, you each have some bargaining power. But when it comes to God, He holds everything. So, who could imagine bargaining with God? Yet surprisingly, perhaps in the first instance of intercession found in the Bible, we read of Abraham "bargaining" with God!

Most of us are quite familiar with this account of Abraham bargaining with God for Sodom to be spared. God found its sin so great that He intended to destroy it. Abraham interceded with God, asking Him to spare the city on behalf of the righteous people who were living there.

At first we may think Abraham was a bit brash to do such a thing. But as we examine the account, we discover that God was actually encouraging Abraham to venture into intercession. God took the initiative by revealing to Abraham His purpose. Abraham was then moved to intercede, based on what he knew of God's character, for a city teetering on the brink of judgment.

What are the truths for us in this account of the Lord encouraging Abraham to venture into intercession?

I. The Lord included Abraham in conversation (18:16-22).

V. 16 When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.

V. 17 Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"

V. 18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.

V. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

V. 20 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous

V. 21 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."

V. 22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

In Gen 18, Abraham had been in conversation with three men who visited him. One of them we know to be the Lord Himself in a theophany (i.e. a divine

¹ 1984 NIV

manifestation that is understood by the human senses, like a visible appearance of deity in human form). And the other two “men” were angels in human appearance as told to us later in Gen 19:1.

It appears that in vv. 17-19, the Lord was speaking to the other two men, leaving Abraham out of the conversation. The Lord referred to Abraham in the 3rd person, i.e. as someone outside the conversation. However, another conversation between the Lord and Abraham seems to appear between vv. 20-22, when the other two men had moved on towards Sodom.

Verses 20-21 seem to suggest that the oppressed in Sodom and Gomorrah had suffered so much, they cried out to the great God in great despair, even though they might not have known Him personally.

In v. 21 when the Lord began to converse with Abraham, He said: “... 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 does not mean He didn’t have full knowledge of what’s happening, and thus, needed to go and find out Himself. Rather, it emphasises the Lord’s awareness and purpose in view of the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah. And God was encouraging Abraham to respond to Him in v. 22.

If I may paraphrase vv. 20-21, the Lord is saying to Abraham something like this: “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grievous. I have purposed to destroy them. But to be fair to them, I will go down and see if they are really that bad. Abraham, what do you say?”

No doubt we learn some lessons about the character of God here:

- One, God has full knowledge of a situation—He knew all about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. Indeed, He sees every injustice in this fallen world.
- Two, God is just and will always act against sin and do what is right. In fact, Abraham himself affirmed this later in v. 25 when he said this of God—“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?”
- Three, God is also merciful. He prompted and encouraged Abraham to intercede for Sodom when He could have destroyed the city from the very beginning.

All these human descriptions of God help us understand in some measure the great extent of His mercy for a fallen world.

How then was God encouraging Abraham to venture into intercession? He encouraged Abraham by revealing His purpose to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their sin ... so that Abraham would be prompted to intercede for God’s mercy on these cities and their people.

God wants us to intercede sincerely and earnestly for His mercy because we know of His sure judgment upon a fallen world.

So, here's this truth for us to take home: *The privilege of knowing God's heart desire for lost humanity carries the responsibility to seek divine grace and mercy on their behalf.*

Moving on ...

II. The Lord reassured Abraham that He would spare great wickedness for the sake of a righteous few (18:23-33).

V. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

V. 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?

V. 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?"

V. 26 The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

V. 27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes,

V. 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

V. 29 Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

V. 30 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

V. 31 Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

V. 32 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

V. 33 When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

We see Abraham in vv. 24-32 sincerely and earnestly “negotiating” with the Lord as he interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah—from 50 righteous people to 45 to 40 to 30 to 20 to 10. And Abraham stopped at 10, probably because he somehow knew that 10 was the lowest that the Lord would go, and so he didn't press his plea further. The fact that judgment eventually fell on Sodom and Gomorrah suggests that not even 10 righteous people could be found.

Now note that Abraham did not ask God to save only the righteous people. He pleaded God to spare all in the city. And God clearly accepted Abraham's terms because He said in v. 32, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." But God said this knowing that not even 10 righteous people could be found.

Eventually in Gen 19, God destroyed the whole cities of Sodom and Gomorrah together with their wicked people. BUT those who heeded the Lord's warning of destruction and turned to Him were spared. These were Lot and his family, and obviously they numbered less than 10. Had there been 10 righteous ones, Sodom and Gomorrah would have been spared.

By the way, we read in Gen 19:16 that Lot was actually hesitant about leaving Sodom when it was about to be destroyed. The God-sent angels in human form had to grasp the hands of Lot and his family, and rush them out. You see, Lot was not so right with God that he was so willing to leave the sinful world of Sodom immediately. But even then, God showed His mercy on him and his family, and spared them.

So, the Lord did destroy the cities with their wicked ones, but He did not destroy the righteous together with them. In other words, the Lord answered Abraham's question in v. 23—"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" His answer is a resounding "No!" In His justice, He would punish and destroy evil. In His grace and mercy, He would save and spare the righteous remnant.

God knew all along that there would not even be 10 righteous people to warrant the sparing of Sodom and Gomorrah. What then is God's purpose for allowing Abraham to intercede before Him? Put in another way, if God already knows the facts and what He is going to do, why intercede (pray)? Some answers to this question may be seen in our text:

- First, it is not to change God's predetermined outcome, but to encourage Abraham, in his inability to see/know all things, to intercede for lost people. Also, it is to demonstrate his compassion for people (both within and beyond his family circle) by seeking God to spare great wickedness even for the sake of a righteous few.
- Second, it is to reveal God's mercy—that He takes no pleasure in destroying even the wicked. This conversation between Abraham and the Lord really reveals to us the heart of God Himself—i.e. God delights more in deliverance than in destruction.
- Third, it demonstrates the power that righteous people can have as they intercede and influence in this fallen world. The flourishing of wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah points to this—i.e. wickedness had risen to power because the righteous had gone into hiding. The British politician, Edmund Burke, a Christian who lived in the 1700s, once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

If we are the righteous ones in Jesus Christ, how then do we intercede and influence as we live in this world today?

Well, the righteous must first be in this world, and make their presence felt in the affairs of life. Would Sodom be a better place if Lot had spoken out instead of apparently being reticent about the immorality of his day? If he had done so, there might be at least 10 righteous ones to save Sodom and Gomorrah from God's judgment. I do believe there are times when Christians as individuals and as a church may need to speak out for the sake of God's righteousness. We ask God to help us speak His righteous truths in honest, redemptive, loving, gracious, responsible, and humble ways. As salt of the earth, our words and even actions are not meant to bring hurt, but to bring healing.

On the basis of this passage, there are good news and bad news:

- The good news is this—we the righteous ones in Jesus Christ can make a difference with Gospel-directed words and actions. A few righteous ones in Jesus Christ who are united can impact the wider community for the sake of the Gospel.
- The bad news is this—this passage makes it clear that what brings God's judgment is not so much the presence of too much evil, but the absence of even a little righteousness. Ten people could have saved Sodom and Gomorrah. No matter what we may think of the sin of these cities, this much is beyond doubt—God really wanted to spare them, even for the sake of a righteous few.

Look at our families, our schools, our workplaces, our neighbourhoods, our friends, and our society. How are we doing as the righteous ones in Jesus Christ? What Gospel impact are we making in these environments?

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we are living in a time of much uncertainties and anxieties. This can so easily lead us to be inward looking. Yes, stay home and stay safe. But even more importantly, stay close to God and stay committed to the cause of the Gospel.

So, here's another truth for us to take home: *God can use even His righteous few (e.g. a small church like us) who are faithfully interceding for and involving in the wider community to make a big impact for the Gospel's sake.*

Conclusion

In 1956, American missionary Jim Elliot was killed in his attempt to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador with the Gospel. His wife Elisabeth was at home in the US with their 10-month-old daughter at that time.

If it were any one of us, we might feel great hatred towards the people who killed our spouse. But Elisabeth Elliot decided to go into the jungle of Ecuador two years later in 1958 to pick up from where her late

husband had left off. She dedicated herself to reach out to the Auca Indians, just like her late husband.

By divine appointment, Elisabeth met Dayuma, a native woman who knew her late husband well when he was alive. Through this friendship with Elisabeth, Dayuma became a Christian, and helped share the message of Christ among her people. Eventually, the Auca Indians were transformed by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and changed their savage ways.

In spite of the pain of losing her husband, Elisabeth knew that God still had a calling—not only for her, but also for the lost Auca Indians. She was convinced that God's love was for them too.

Elisabeth Elliot often said these words: “You are loved with an everlasting love and underneath are the everlasting arms!” She believed in God's everlasting love for the Auca Indians, and all those we label as lost and wicked. And that's the reminder she gave to herself (and to us) as she interceded for the Auca Indians with God's everlasting love, and persevered among them undergirded by God's everlasting arms.

(<https://bethanygu.edu/blog/stories/jim-and-elisabeth-elliott>)

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, this everlasting love from God to all is also for you. Yes, you can be counted among the righteous when you accept God's everlasting love for you in Jesus Christ. The Bible says in Rom 3:22—“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe ...” I encourage you to talk with a Christian you know whose life has impacted you, and learn more about what it means to have faith and to believe in Jesus Christ, so that you too can experience God's everlasting love for you.

For those of us who are believers made righteous in Jesus Christ, the Lord calls us to faithfully intercede, involve, influence, and impact for the Gospel's sake as we live in our wider community.

In order for us to do that, we first need to learn to live as God's righteous people:

- *First, be confident that God reigns.* Even in the midst of trying circumstances and calamities, we are confident that our God reigns. Put in another way, we believe that God is still active and in control amidst difficult and adverse situations. Today, we see the world's political giants, economic gurus, healthcare experts, medical research wizards, and even spiritual leaders all trying to restore a severely battered world order, in which many of the normal ways of life are not normal anymore. The COVID-19 pandemic seems like God's bitter and humbling reminder for humanity—that the final shaping of world history

is ultimately in His hands, not in that of human rulers. May we learn to live with humility as we realise how fragile our human achievements can be, yet with confidence in Almighty God who in His grace and mercy, can and will make all things right in His time.

- *Second, be mindful that those who oppose God and the Gospel are also whom God loves and holds out His hand to reach.* He takes no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked. The Lord will spare the whole city even for the sake of a righteous few—as we have read in our text today. He desires them to lay aside their enmity, to repent and come to Him. We are to intercede for and reach out to such people, so that they too may find hope and help beyond this world and in Jesus Christ.
- *Third, be reassured that our Saviour Jesus Christ will not lose anyone who belongs to Him.* Let this glorious truth be a reason for us to praise God no matter what the circumstances that trouble our world may be. Put in another way, we the righteous ones of the Lord will be victorious on the other side of eternity, even if we are outnumbered by the unrighteous ones here in this fallen world. So, let's not get weary of remaining faithful in what God has called us to be and to do.

Let's then commit to impacting our community as we intercede and involve ourselves in the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel. Amen!