

“Prayer” (Genesis 18:16-33) **Seven Rhythms • February 4, 2024 • www.isonrise.com**

Have you ever been disappointed by God? Have you ever thought you could do a better job at writing the story of your life than him? Has the character of God ever caused you to wonder how he could allow certain events to happen? The Bible describes God as being merciful and just. Justice is rewarding righteousness and punishing evil. Mercy is the act of withholding deserved punishment. Mercy and justice are not contrary to each other but run into conflict with each other. God’s mercy and justice collide with each other and are resolved in the idea of sacrifice. A sacrifice allows justice to be dealt out on a substitute and mercy to be experienced by the one who is represented by the substitute. This is the message of the cross of Christ. We can receive mercy because Christ received God’s just punishment for our sins. Knowing that God is merciful and just and seeing his mercy and justice in the cross of Christ, doesn’t reveal to us how God will act justly and mercifully in every event. When I experience injustice, I want God to deal out swift justice on my behalf. When I have acted unjustly, I want God to be merciful to me. I have been disappointed with how God has delayed his justice and how he has been quick to show mercy. When I suffer because of the sins of others, I want quick and extensive justice. When I suffer because of my sins, I want abundant mercy. I find it hard to trust God to act exactly as I would like him to, but I do trust him to act in a way that is consistent with his character.

Big Idea: God is faithful, but not predictable. God will be merciful and just. We just don’t know how his mercy and justice will play out in every scenario. We can trust God to act in accordance with his character. We just can’t predict how he will act. This principle is important to understand as we dive into the topic of prayer. When we pray, we can have confidence that God is not duplicitous or deceitful. He is faithful and reliable. Let me show you how God revealed his faithfulness and unpredictability to one of the patriarchs of his people, Abraham.

Our passage of scripture for today is a little unconventional. God is described in odd language and Abraham’s prayer sounds like a strange negotiation. When we properly handle these issues, we will be able to see how God is faithful and unpredictable. This story will encourage us to trust God with our journey even when we don’t know all the turns on the horizon. As we navigate this passage together, I want you to focus on the idea of trust. In this story, we are confronted with two questions of trust: 1. Can God trust Abraham? And, 2. Can Abraham trust God? The first section deals with the first question and the second section deals with the second question.

Genesis 18:16-19, ¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ 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.”

In verses 16 through 19, we are given the internal dialogue of God. God is portrayed as having a conversation with himself. This is an example of anthropomorphism, which is the act of describing God, an object, or an animal in human terms. This type of language should not lead us to believe that God, who created space and time and therefore is not restricted by such things, is like us. This type of language is a tool for our understanding more than it is a precise expression of God’s nature. The mystery of God can’t fit neatly into our minds, yet God still reveals himself to us in ways that help us get close.

God revealed his plan for Abraham in verse 19. God has promised to make Abraham a blessing to the nations. This plan has a three-step process: promise, obedience, and blessing. God made the promise, Abraham was expected to obey, and then the blessing was going to be experienced. Abraham’s obedience was specified as “doing righteousness and justice.” God spoke of this plan as being the reason for not “hiding” from Abraham that he was about to punish Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. God wanted to include Abraham to test and see if he was concerned about justice. If Abraham showed concern for justice in God’s dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah, then it would be reasonable to expect that he would act justly and therefore experience the blessing of God. This section of the story causes the reader to wonder if God could trust Abraham to act justly.

Genesis 18:20-21, “²⁰ Then the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹ 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.”

God shared with Abraham that there was a great “outcry” over the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Based on how the language of “outcry” is used in the Old Testament, this most likely described the protest of those who were oppressed by the sinfulness of these cities. The prophet Ezekiel mentioned how Sodom abused the poor and needy. God spoke of embarking on an investigative journey to these sinful cities. This is again an example of anthropomorphic language. God is omniscient and does not need to learn anything. This language was used to express the integrity of God’s justice. Similar language was used in the story of the Tower of Babel. God is not hasty or impulsive in executing justice. God was showing Abraham that he was a thorough judge who considered all the evidence in a case.

The next section introduces a new question of trust. Abraham’s conversation with God reveals that he was wondering if he could trust God to act mercifully and justly. At the close of this section, the reader is convinced that Abraham does indeed care about justice and that God will act justly.

Genesis 18:22-33, “²² So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord. ²³ Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ 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? ²⁵ 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?"²⁶ And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."²⁷ Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes."²⁸ 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."²⁹ Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it."³⁰ 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."³¹ 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."³² 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."³³ And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place."

At first glance, this seems like an irreverent way to speak to God. It is important that we see that Abraham was not accusing God of being unjust, but rather questioning how his justice would play out in this scenario. Abraham assumed that God was just. This is clear in what he said in verse 25. He repeated the phrase "far be it," to express how inconceivable it was to him to think that God would act unjustly. Abraham was confident that God would not punish the righteous in the city as if they were wicked. Abraham asked God to be merciful to these cities and spare them because of the righteous who lived in them. Abraham didn't argue with God's appraisal of the wickedness that happened in these cities, but he wanted to know that the righteous wouldn't be treated unfairly. If Abraham didn't believe that God was just, his questions made no sense. God's character created this dilemma in Abraham's mind and he was trying to understand how he could resolve this tension. How could God justly punish the wicked without unjustly punishing the righteous? Abraham believed the solution was to act mercifully to the wicked in the city for the sake of the righteous in the city.

Before we unpack God's response, we need to comment on the posture of Abraham's parade of questions. Abraham is speaking to God from a humble posture. Every time Abraham asked God a question, except for in verse 29, he directly expressed humility. We see this in verses 27, 30, 31, and 32. The clearest expression of this is in verse 27 when he spoke of being just "dust and ashes" before God. Abraham was not putting God on trial, but trying to understand how God was going to act in this situation in a way that was faithful to his character.

God's responses to the questions of Abraham showed that he can be trusted to act justly. Every time Abraham brought a new number for God to consider, God assured him that he would spare the city for the sake of that number of righteous persons. The progression of shrinking numbers shouldn't lead us to believe that there was a heavenly threshold of collateral damage that God was comfortable with. If we follow the pattern of numbers given (50, 45, 40, 30, 20, and 10) Abraham's last question would have moved from 10 to 0. It is not surprising that

Abraham didn't ask God if he would spare the cities if there were found 0 righteous people. God was not trying to play a game with Abraham in which he attempted to guess the exact number of righteous people that would require him to be merciful to the whole city. The dialogue ends with God leaving the discussion. I believe God ended the conversation this way because he had done enough to assure Abraham that he would not act unjustly. The rest of the story proves that the number of righteous persons wasn't the main concern.

Genesis 19 shows that God was mindful of the one righteous person who lived in the city, Lot. Lot was Abraham's nephew. The angels of God rescued Lot from the city before it was destroyed. God is said to have "remembered" Abraham when he had mercy on Lot before he destroyed the city he lived in. *Genesis 19:29*, ²⁹ *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.* Peter referred to Lot as "righteous" when he reflected on this story. *2 Peter 2:7*, ⁷ *and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.* God showed himself to be just by sparing the one and only righteous man in the city.

Abraham didn't predict this scenario. He thought God would spare the wicked cities for the sake of the righteous. Instead, God removed the one righteous person and destroyed the wicked cities. God's justice was not compromised in this scenario. He protected the righteous and punished the wicked. **God was faithful and unpredictable in his execution of justice.**

Genesis 19 also records how **God is faithful and unpredictable in his mercy.** Lot, the one righteous person who was rescued, asked for a small city to be spared from God's judgment. His prayer was similar to his Uncle Abraham's request but got a different response. *Genesis 19:17-22*, ¹⁷ *And as they brought them out, one said, "Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away."*¹⁸ *And Lot said to them, "Oh, no, my lords. ¹⁹ Behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. ²⁰ Behold, this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!"*²¹ *He said to him, "Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²² Escape there quickly, for I can do nothing till you arrive there." Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar.* The city of Zoar was spared because of Lot's prayer. God was merciful to this small city that was scheduled for destruction like the rest of the cities in the valley. Abraham and Lot made a similar request but got very different answers.

God is faithful, but not predictable. I would love to say that God is predictable. I would love to lay out the exact events of your life that you could expect to experience if you obeyed God. I can't do that. The Bible does not do that for us. We are told how the story will end, but we are not told how it will exactly get there. But, we are not only left with the options of worry and fear when we face the unpredictable future. We can expect that God will be faithful. He will act

with justice and mercy. Faith is not the absence of uncertainty but confidence in God's character. We rest in who he is and not in knowing what will happen to us in every situation.

When you are facing worry, anxiety, doubt, fear, sadness, and depression remember who God is. We find comfort in his character and not in our circumstances. Feel free to wrestle with God as Abraham did. Ask your questions. Express your doubt. Let out your frustrations. My wife uses a wonderful illustration to make this point. She says, "Faith wrestles with God, whereas unbelief leaves the ring." When you are disappointed with the events of your life, wrestle with God. He can take it. He didn't strike down Abraham. He won't strike you down. Wrestle, but don't leave the ring. There is no hope outside of the ring. When you pray don't expect God to be predictable. Don't expect to get what you want the way you want it. Expect God to be faithful to his character. Find peace in his faithfulness and not his predictability.

If you are not yet following Jesus, but you are here exploring Christianity, I encourage you to evaluate your sense of peace. Do you find comfort in the control you have over your life? Does the future fill you with fear? We were created to find safety and security in God. When we rebelled against God, we lost that. Thankfully, through the forgiveness that is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can find peace amid the chaos of this life. Following Jesus won't free you from all the pains of this life, that won't happen till the end, but God can give you a peace that will persevere even in the greatest pain.

Life Level Application

- 1) **Head:** Read Luke 9:51-56. Why do you think James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven? How is this different from the heart of Abraham in Genesis 18 when he prays for Sodom and Gomorrah? How have you expressed both of these attitudes toward others?

- 2) **Heart:** Read Exodus 34:6-7. How is God's mercy described in this passage? How is his justice described? How does this declaration of God's character give you comfort? In what way does it cause you discomfort?

- 3) **Hands:** Read Jonah 3:10-4:4. Why was Jonah angry with God? Was God acting against his character? Does God's mercy toward others ever offend you, especially when he is merciful to those who have hurt you?

- 4) **Habits:** Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Think about some of your unanswered prayers. How did you handle the disappointment of those prayers being unanswered? How was God still faithful even in your disappointment?