

Genesis 18:16-33 Persistent and powerful praying

Introduction

Can we afford not to pray for the needs of other people, for the needs of the world around us? The book of Ezekiel is probably not high on the list of favourite passages of Scripture today, but it contains some powerful messages that seriously challenge us as God's people. In chapter 22 the prophet quoted God as saying that the wickedness of the people of Judah and Jerusalem in particular, prior to the exile, had been so bad that He had sought representatives of His people who would pray for their nation to turn back to God and repent of their sins. The short passage below indicates what happened at the conclusion of God's 'search'. *This is what the Sovereign Lord says...²⁹ The people of the land practise extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and ill-treat the alien, denying them justice. ³⁰ I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so that I would not have to destroy it, **but I found none.**³¹ So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord (Ezekiel 22:28b-31).* It did not say that God searched for a large congregation of His people who all were busting a gut to prioritise the prayer meeting in their weekly schedules, it was at least one individual or small group that He would have heard. In the book of James chapter five verse sixteen we read these words: *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is **powerful and effective.*** Do we truly believe that or do we think this is not the case? If we do genuinely believe it then can I encourage each of us to put in into practice? We have several prayer meetings for men and women, together with times of prayer in house groups on top of our personal times alone with God – do you have a good reason for not attending a prayer meeting? Most people genuinely might struggle to make every week, but once a month as other commitments allow? It is far better to put it this way round because we make the time out of our 144 hours for the things that matter most – can I ask you to raise prayer up the priority list, in practice, this coming church year? In James 5:17-18 the author selects an individual's intercessory prayers to illustrate his point: *Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.* For over three years the lead news story in the land was directly associated with this man's personal prayer life! Could you imagine substituting your name, your prayers and the lead subject on the 10'O Clock News each evening? Although Elijah's name was not mentioned in public in association with the drought and then the later restoration of the rainfall, he was personally blamed for praying to this end! There are passages in the Bible where we wonder how they can be applicable to life in the twenty-first century. This is not the case here in Genesis 18:16-33 as this is so clearly and directly applicable to each follower of Jesus Christ who comes to the heavenly father through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, in the all powerful and all-prevailing name of Jesus (Ephesians 2:18).

1. The Solemn Responsibilities of Intercessors (Genesis 18:16)

¹⁶ *When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. (a)**Our Special Position before God*** We often forget that the blessing of God upon individual unbelievers or on countries is due not to their intrinsic goodness or merit, but as a result of the prayers of God's people. God can use the affairs of human beings to carry out His will, and that includes matters of international diplomacy that seem far removed from topics for prayer compared with specific concerns for individual prayer needs. Jacob, with all his problems and messed up life, was a believer. His uncle

Laban who worshipped foreign gods, nevertheless, recognised that Jacob's presence in his family had made a specific positive difference. In Genesis 30: 25-28 we eavesdrop on a discussion of this subject: *After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, Send me on my way so that I can go back to my own homeland.²⁶ Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way. You know how much work I've done for you.²⁷ But Laban said to him, If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that **the Lord has blessed me because of you.**²⁸ He added, Name your wages, and I will pay them.* Sadly both Laban and Jacob were deeply influenced by a materialist understanding of what is valuable in life and thought that there was a financial price for everything. This is a real problem today in the Western world, but interestingly less so in the poorer two-thirds world where the Christian Church is growing. Yet the principle remains here of Laban's blessing through the presence of Jacob. The same was true for Potiphar when Joseph was in his employment. Genesis 39:1-6 tells this story. *Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.² The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.³ When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did,⁴ Joseph found favour in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.⁵ **From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph.** The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.⁶ So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.* This was not just an Old Testament principle, but also appears to be true in the New Testament. In Acts 27:21-26 the lives of the crew and passengers of the ship on which Paul was sailing to Rome, would all be spared, as God in His sovereign purposes had determined that Paul would reach Rome to stand trial for His faith. *After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.²² But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.²³ Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me²⁴ and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and **God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.**'²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.²⁶ Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.* The fact that he was ultimately executed by being beheaded on the orders of the Emperor at a later date, reminds us that the point being made here is not in any way implying that life will be easier for Christians than for other people. Yet, it does affirm that other people may be blessed by God as a result of association with God's people in some contexts. And that the opposite may also be true that the judgement of God may fall more swiftly or to a greater degree if there are not believers praying for specific needs in their country or cultural context. Listen to these words of challenge from God to the prophet in his home city, recorded in Jeremiah 5:1: *Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. **If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.*** There were believers in that city, not very many, but none were persistently praying for God to have mercy on their city or their land. Our society has been as privileged as Judah in hearing the Word of God, yet the moral boundaries are continually being removed by those in authority. The question is whether we will take the responsibility as God's people to act, sometimes by petitions, letters or phone calls or visits to see MSPs or MPs, but **always** to pray for God to work in our land.

(b) **Our openness to see the need** God did not tell Abraham to pray in this situation. He would simply share the problem that existed which needed prayer and divine action. We too need to have our eyes open to the world to see the need that lies around us, the injustice and the pain and ask the Lord to place on our hearts particular matters for prayer. Don't worry about running out of things to pray for! If you ask the Lord He will provide more than enough

issues for prayer. Radio 5 Live on Thursday 1st September had a debate on the question: ‘Is there spiritual poverty in the land?’ It was apparently based on the claim by the chief political commentator of the *Daily Telegraph*, Peter Osborne. This journalist had apparently suggested that a significant contributory cause of the recent riots in our land was as a result of spiritual poverty. It was no surprise with an unsympathetic Nicky Campbell chairing the debate, that Christian contributors were treated significantly less sympathetically than other people who phoned in. However, the truth remains that a land without its moral compass intact will require increasingly the prayers of God’s people to plead for undeserved mercy for it.

2. **The Wonderful Possibilities of Intercession** (Genesis 18:17-22, 26)

(a) **Divine Encouragement** (Genesis 18:17-18)¹⁷ *Then the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?* ¹⁸ *Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.* 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.* ²⁰ *Then the Lord said, The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous* 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.* There was a two-fold explanation behind God’s decision to reveal this information to Abraham. First of all God had promised that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Here was a practical opportunity to illustrate the significance of that prophetic statement. But by contrast the opposite of that, the prospects for a people with no thoughts of God and no people of God praying for them was potentially bleak. God sought to instruct Abraham to see people as He sees them and to have a heart for their good. Yet at the same time it was not a sentimental ‘love’, but one consistent with righteousness and justice. In II Peter 2:4-10 the apostle reminded his readers of God’s consistency in judgement against wickedness and made reference to the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. He concludes: *the Lord knows how to rescue godly men (and women) from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgement* (II Peter 2:10mg). Abraham, the Lord was saying, keep your eyes on what is going on in the world, don’t be wilfully ignorant. Do so in order to pray for it and where appropriate to take other forms of action that will make it a better place. The same principle is applicable today: evangelism and social action are two sides of the same coin. We have a holistic gospel. In Amos 3:7 we read these incredible words: *Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants the prophets.* How can we pray in an informed way for the world? There are numerous Christian organisations that provide prayer diaries about their work at home and overseas. Whether via paper copies or websites vast quantities of up-to-date material can be obtained to assist you in your prayers. Excellent Christian newspapers like *Evangelicals Now* give a digest of information from around the world as well as news from different Christian Churches at home. Prayer changes things and is the most powerful weapon Christians possess. The question is are we motivated to fight the good fight with this spiritual weapon?

(b) **Abraham’s willingness to pray** (Genesis 18:22) *The men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord...* The work of intercessory prayer will often be a private work alone before God as it was here with Abraham. There are times when God’s people do so together in pairs, triplets or small or larger groups. It doesn’t matter how we do it –it is whether we will do it that matters most! William Carey was motivated to pray for world mission and ultimately spend the rest of his life overseas, in the first instance, by reading exploration reports from Captain James Cook’s lengthy sea voyages between 1768 and 1779. [James Cook (1728–1779) was a British explorer, navigator and cartographer, ultimately rising to the rank of Captain in the Royal Navy. Cook made detailed maps of Newfoundland prior to making three voyages to the Pacific Ocean during which he achieved the first European contact with the eastern coastline of

Australia and the Hawaiian Islands as well as the first recorded circumnavigation of New Zealand.] A growing awareness of the spiritual darkness in which millions of people lived without Christ led to prayer and then a commitment to Christian service overseas. In his case it was overseas missionary service; in your case and mine this might not be the case, but be warned if you become passionate about praying for things you might be changed as well as the situation for which you are praying! Will you spend time ‘standing’ before the Lord?

(c) **Divine Openness** (Genesis 18:26) ²⁶ *The Lord said, If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.* God knew exactly what He was doing but invited Abraham through intercessory prayer to participate in the work of God. It is very difficult to put into words, but this passage appears to indicate that somehow Almighty God in planning His world takes into account the intercessory prayers of His people in the shaping of His will in particular situations. Do we catch a glimpse of what that means? Your prayers and mine may have an influence on situations beyond our physical control or input at the human level. This is absolutely amazing. Listen to these words of Jesus from Matthew 18:18-19: *I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will already have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will already have been loosed in heaven.* ¹⁹ *Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven* [v18 my translation of the pluperfect tense to bring out the meaning more clearly] Now we must give a little clarification on this point from I John 5:14-15: *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.* ¹⁵ *And if we know that He hears us— whatever we ask— we know that we have what we asked of Him.* Within the sovereign purposes of God is an invitation to you and me to participate in the determination of God’s actions in His world –do you plan to take up His invitation?

3. **The Essential Conditions of Intercession**

(a) **An Urgent Plea** (Genesis 18:23-25)²³ *Then Abraham approached him and said: Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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? 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?* ²⁶ *The Lord said, If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.* The basis of the request was God’s justice. God cannot act in a manner inconsistent with His character. He will not break His covenants or go back on His Word. It is stating the obvious that a perfect holy God cannot do evil or engage in conduct that is inappropriate or inconsistent with who He is. Therefore, this was a strong ground, for example, in World War Two to plead for the overthrow of Hitler and his allies, not because the British Government and its allies were saints, far from it, they would willingly have allowed all the Jews to be gassed, along with any other group Hitler wanted to dispose of. It was self-interest that made our Government go to war in 1939. Yet God would use that as part of His judgement on the evils of Nazism. Like Abraham in his fight in Genesis 14 the British Armed Forces really had little chance of winning the war. Hitler should have won, but catastrophic errors of judgement together with incredible bravery and dedication of his opponents combined to turn the tide against him. Even when the nation has been guilty of grievously dishonouring the Lord He can still be sought to assist His people. In Exodus 32, after the idolatry of the golden calf incident and the other sinful actions, Moses went to plead for mercy for his guilty nation. He admitted the sinfulness of Israel and made no attempt to cover it up. However, he did plead the promises of God, requesting that the Lord honour His own name and do what everyone in Egypt knew He was planning to do. In essence Moses was enquiring which course of action would bring most glory to God’s name. He was undoubtedly clear that continuing to take them to the Promised Land would be the best course of action. Here are Moses’ words and

the Lord's response: *But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. O Lord, he said, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?*¹² *Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.*¹³ *Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever.'*¹⁴ *Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened (Exodus 32:11-14).* This is the strong ground for our own petitions in prayer. God this is what You have promised, please honour Your name in this situation, despite the shortcomings of the human beings involved! God does not miss anything, but notices when His people cry out to Him for mercy and deliverance.

(b) **Deep Humility** (Genesis 18:27)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, we are children of God, but we remember it is not another human being to whom we come in prayer, but our heavenly Father. The arrogant demanding prayers of some tele-evangelists are cringe worthy. We must come with humility. Why because we are not worthy in ourselves to ask a perfect holy god for anything in ourselves. We come in the name of Jesus, clothed in His perfect righteousness, so that His Father sees the merits of Jesus when He hears our prayers. Now be encouraged Jesus is praying for you today and every day before the Father's throne. He is praying that you and me will be gradually transformed to be one day like Him –perfect. He takes our inadequate petitions and presents them to His Father on behalf of His people. Hebrews 7:25 reminds us of this fact: *Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.* Remember also that we also have the aid of the Holy Spirit in our prayers, especially in those times when we are so broken or weak or distressed that we are simply unable to formulate words in prayer. Be encouraged by these words of the apostle Paul in Romans 8:26-27: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*²⁷ *And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.* Our prayers when they appear to be answered in accordance with our wishes, are answered because our requests are in tune with the perfect will of God and therefore, it is not that we are better prayers than other Christians, rather sometimes some Christians are closer to their Father and are more aware of what is on His heart and more naturally sense how He would have them pray. He alone must get all the credit and glory –none of it is for us. May we never forget that or the devil will lead us astray with the sin of pride, with which he also fell from the presence of God.*

(c) **Earnest Persistence** (Genesis 18:28-33)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.*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.*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.*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.*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.*³³ *When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, He left, and Abraham returned home.* We need to grasp that this is not a five second plea and the whole matter is wrapped up in minutes. It is earnest persistent wrestling in prayer. One of the most famous prayer warriors in Scottish Church history was John Welch (1568-1622). He averaged seven hours a day in passionate intercessory prayer. In John Howie's old classic on great Scottish Christians of the past, *Scots Worthies*, the following was said of this minister of the Gospel: As the duty wherein John Welch abounded and excelled most was prayer, so his greatest attainments fell that way. He used to say, he

wondered how a Christian could lie in bed all night, and not rise to pray; and many times he rose, and many times he watched. One night he rose and went into the next room, where he stayed so long at secret prayer, that his wife, fearing he might catch cold, was constrained to rise and follow him, and, as she hearkened, she heard him speak as by interrupted sentences, "Lord, wilt Thou not grant me Scotland?" Abraham pleaded with God for Sodom and over a period of time saw progress in his prayers. It is idle speculation to ask if he had reduced the total of righteous people in the city to one (Lot) as a precondition of Sodom being spared –would the whole overthrow of these cities have been halted? The issue for us is this: how persistent will I be in my prayers for the things God lays on my heart? Am I willing to persist to my dying day for people to be saved and for other specific needs He lays on our hearts? Jesus, in a story in Luke 18:1-8, urged the fruitfulness of persistent praying. *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*² *He said: In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men.*³ *And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'*⁴ *For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men,*⁵ *yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'*⁶ *And the Lord said, Listen to what the unjust judge says.*⁷ ***And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?***⁸ *I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? May God help us to see the incredible power of earnest and persistent intercessory prayer, for the glory and honour of His name, Amen.*