

“omg! change my world...” // Gen 18:16–33

UMPER: *Our creative team outdid themselves this week with that idea... Jonathan Edwards, Chris Baker, and some other guys at our church put that together... If you're old and out of it (like me, btw, had birthday this week, turned 27... 36... 36 feels old, I asked my wife, Do I look 36?)... if you're old, omg! is the text message shorthand for oh my God!" And it's making fun of the fact that we've created a world where there is a lot of communication that is very wide and very hallow. Most of our communication is now done by our thumbs. Magazine I read said, "We're more connected, but know people less than ever!" So we live in a world where communication is wide and hallow, but in this new series, we're going to take a look at some rays in the Bible that are deep and personal.*

know this applies to you, because, let's be honest, most of you STINK at praying. We text message and blog and twitter other people far more than we pray...

Before we get into it, I want to say that in one sense, this series couldn't come at a better time! In March, we went through our **Believe** project... I put the vision of where we were going out there for you and you committed nearly 5 million dollars to help us build some new facilities to reach people. Our purpose, like I explained, is not just to build buildings... buildings for us are just tools to reach people... that's why you look around and can see that we don't spend that much on buildings... ghetto is one of our core values. **Buildings are just tools to reach people.** If what you're looking for in a church is a nice building, that's not really us... I'm not going to spend my life trying to build a monument for a God who says He dwells not in temples made with hands. Like I said, "Not build a monument, but birth a movement." We want to reach people.

(And, btw, we saw that happen last week. Last week we baptized 114... atheists; one girl who is here in Durham at a sexual abuse facility... one 70 year old man... God has let us reach people, so, we know we've got to keep going forward. We've just leased another space right here in the BC campus and we're going to transform it, hopefully ready for the fall, to reach people. And we're pursuing getting to work right down the road on our more permanent facility...)

But I'm going to be honest with you guys... we just don't have the funds to do all that we need to do, and we need God to provide for us miraculously. And that's why I'm glad we're talking about prayer. We've done what we can do, and now we need what God can do.

Also, I want to mention this is the last week many of our college students will be with us... it's kind of a sad week around here...! (In fact, a lot of them are already not here this morning, because they skipped church to study for their exams, which I pray in Jesus' name that you would curse them and make them fail for skipping church, O Lord...) **No, we'll miss you because you guys are so much a part of who we are around here...**

In fact, one of the things I love about you guys is that you demonstrate what we are going to talk about today... Last year I preached on asking audacious prayer requests, which a group of our students decided to apply... Working with campus crusade on UNC's campus, they set up these things called "kvetching" boards around campus that said, **"What's wrong with Christianity?"** These boards filled up with dozens upon dozens of comments... Then they invited everyone to come to a forum where I would address all the questions... I was a little intimidated... The questions ranged from "How do I know there is a God?" to "I think Jesus is cool, but Paul's a jerk"... The attendance, for this kind of event, was huge. Never got an exact count, but it looked like a solid 250 or 300 packed into this room. (Y'all hear that and you think, "That's a pastor speaking, probably like 20 or 30 people...") No, there was that many... all that

appened because these students believed what I'm going to talk about this a.m.

Of course, this event also reminded me what I like least about college students. The event organizer and I were having a conversation, and I found out she grew up over near Russia... I told her I had just finished reading... I won't tell you her initials, but her name is Ashley Peterson... she had lived for a while in the Russia...

Gen 18... Here's the story... in Gen 18, 3 men have come down to talk with Abraham... They have two purposes for their visit, they want to announce to Sarah, Abraham's wife, that she's pregnant, and they have come to destroy two very wicked cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. Of these three, one of them turns out to be God Himself in human guise.

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."

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."

22 So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord. 23 Then Abraham approached 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 Or will you indeed sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Or will you indeed sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?"

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?" I love that verse...

26 And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." I love this, because Abraham starts haggling with God like they're at the market discussing the price of bananas... 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, (suck in gurgles) "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.

This is such a truly weird passage of Scripture... Abraham is like a reverse auctioneer... Hey God, 50, 50... do I have 40, 40... do I see 30, 30... No... Smoke the town.

- (By the way, when you look at it, Abraham turns out to be a pretty shrewd negotiator working his way down, kind of like the college-aged guy who asks his dad to borrow \$50 and his dad says, "\$40? What in the world are you going to do with \$20?")

This is probably one of the clearest places in Scripture that teaches you about prayer... (But first, let me deal with something I know some of you probably can't get over... You're going to get caught up on the whole idea of God destroying a city... and you're like, "This is the God

don't like... OT God... God when He was cranky. God in His Jr. Hi ears. I'm glad God grew up and reformed Himself in the NT... God not saved in the NT and became gentle Jesus.

Let me show you something: (V. 20) ²⁰ *"Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave..."*

- "Cry out" is a Hebrew term that means a cry that is the result of violent injustice or oppression.
- Who is crying out? The poor! **Ezekiel 16:49**, *Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.*
- God's anger is at the way Sodom has harmed His creation and how they have harmed each other. When you love something you hate the things that destroy it. If you love someone, you hate the cancer that ravages their body. You are willing to see violent chemotherapy to remove it. God loved the little girl there who had been sexually abused; he cared about the guy who had been cheated out of his job; and for the wife who'd been scorned for a younger woman.
- God's love, like all true love, includes wrath... wrath toward the things that destroy what He loves.

OK? "Well, I have a lot more questions about that..." There's a phrase you want to see... ²⁵ *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"* Some things may seem odd to us now, but that's because we don't see clearly. The Bible teaches that the Judge of all the earth will do right. And if we can't understand why God does what He does, then it's because we don't understand some things. **Geometry...**

As these guys are walking away, God says, to Himself, but loud enough for Abraham to hear, **V. 17**, "Shouldn't we tell Abraham what we're about to do?" That's kind of like when we say to a friend, "I don't know if I should tell you this..." At that point, you have to tell them! So God does. He takes Abraham and aside, and tells him what

he's about to do. Here's the point: God is treating Abraham like a friend!

When Abraham hears what God is going to do, he begs God not to... He prays for the city. Not for himself... but for the city. **Here's what is significant about that... these were not good people, and they had not been good to Abraham.** (Go back and read Genesis, you'll see that these people had treated Abraham very badly.) Yet, Abraham is praying for them. (I used to think that what Abraham was doing here was backhandedly trying to save his cousin Lot, because according to the story, Lot his cousin, lived in Sodom... So, I thought... Abraham was thinking if he could get God to spare the city, he could get Lot out... **But if so, why didn't Abraham just say that?** "God... don't destroy Lot... get him out, and then cover those disgusting Cretans with the Heavenly road tar." That would have been much less of a request... much easier than what Abraham was asking of God! No, Abraham is actually praying for the city, the city that had been so unkind to him!

He is being the city's "priest." Standing before God on Sodom's behalf, praying for their good, even when they deserved judgment! He even takes his life into his hands... He keeps saying, "God, don't be mad." He's risking his life to pray for them. He's doing what God had chosen him to do... See vs. 18? (¹⁸ *"Have I not chosen him?... Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him."*) **"I have chosen him that he would be a blessing to all nations."**

Now, what happens next, in the haggling that goes back and forth, is not just a bizarre encounter, but a deep theological lesson.

- *(Abraham stood still before the Lord. ²³ Then Abraham approached and said...)* Vs. 23 says Abraham "approached" God. In English saying that he approached seems redundant, because Abraham is already standing right in front of God; he doesn't need to come closer. (Like, He's 3 feet away and is now 1 foot...) But see, the word "approach" in Hebrew is a

technical word that means approach like “approach the bench in a court of law.” Abraham is appealing to the justice of God. (Now watch, you’re about to learn something really important about God.)

- Abraham says, “vs. 23... Won’t you, God, do what is right? For the sake of 50 righteous, would you not spare the city? I know you hate injustice, but do you love righteousness so much, and aren’t you so merciful, that for the sake of 50 righteous, wouldn’t you spare the city? He knows that God is just, and hates injustice, but He also knows that God loves righteousness, and He loves people, and so He says, “*for the sake of the righteous, God, won’t you spare the wicked?*” And the answer is... *yes!* God does hate injustice, but He loves righteousness more, and He loves people; and He loves to forgive, and for the sake of 50 righteous He would certainly spare thousands of wicked people in the city.
- So, Abraham works his way down... 45, 40, 30, 20, 10... each time, God saying, “Yes, I’ll spare the city for 40...”
- But then, all of the sudden, Abraham just stops. It never resolves... Abraham is on a roll, he has bargained God down from 50 to 10... why doesn’t he keep going, down to one? It’s like you’re waiting on a climactic moment that never comes! It’s like playing 7 notes of a piano scale and then not hitting that one... End it! Why doesn’t Abraham keep going? Why doesn’t he go all the way down to say, “Would you do it for *one?*”
- Here’s why: Evidently, he recognizes that there is not even *one* in the city who is righteous, or righteous enough for God to spare the city.
- And so it ends, and God destroys the city. He saves Abraham’s cousin Lot, but destroys the city.

Do you see? This story leaves a question that the New Testament will answer. Abraham couldn’t find that one. Jesus is that *one*.

- Jesus was the one righteous for whom God will forgive the wickedness of the wicked. This whole story is really about Him:
 - Abraham *risks* his life to plead for the unrighteous...; Jesus actually gave His life for the unrighteous.
 - Abraham pled for the people of Sodom, who had threatened to take his life! Jesus pled for people who actually *did* take his life.
 - Because God loves righteousness so much, and because Jesus was so righteous... for the sake of Jesus, God will gladly forgive the sins of the many!
- Isaiah 53 is the great chapter in the Old Testament where, 751 years before Jesus’ birth, the prophet Isaiah foretells, in detail the horrors of the cross. After describing the bloody cross, he says in vs. 11 **Isaiah 53:11**, “God will see the suffering of His soul and be satisfied.”
 - Jesus’ righteousness was so great, and His sacrifice was so pleasing and so acceptable to God, and God is so willing to forgive, that on His behalf God forgives all of Sodom... which are not the homosexuals, but all of us, if we simply believe on Him.
- **Islamic Ka’aba story.** Do you understand that if you just believe on Him... look to Him... ? God hates your sin, and He must punish your injustice but He loves you... and because of Jesus Christ’s righteousness on your behalf, He would love to forgive and restore you!

But I would suggest to you that this story is here not just to teach us about Jesus, it is here to teach us how to pray for Sodom. Let me give you 4 obvious things this story teaches you about how you should pray for your city:

(1) Ask “in Jesus’ name.”

- What Jesus has done is so pleasing to God... on his basis God will save. **Isaiah 53:11**, “God will see the suffering of His soul and be satisfied.”

- **Psalm 2:8**, “Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession.”
- When we pray, we are asking for Jesus has earned. Remember years ago the shootings at Columbine? Story came out about Cassie Bernall... “Someone much more pleasing than even her paid the price.”
- When you pray, think, “What does Jesus want for that person?” Jesus died in pursuit of some end in that person’s life... God, I’m going to ask you for it.
- When I pray for our city, or my girls, I say, “Lord, Jesus died so that He could have this city. I’m asking you to give it to Him.”
- In some of the missionary biographies I read, there was a phrase they would use about what they were praying for... they would say, “May the Lamb that was slain receiving the reward of His suffering.”

2) Ask for “the city”

- We are put here as priests, just like Abraham.
 - This is what I tell our mission teams... they are there to ask God for the city. **Me in Indonesia on the shore...**
 - I, and every man in this room, you are the priest for your family... I get down on my knees and I pray... God, for Jesus’ sake... I look around and think... where are you guys? Who is praying, daily, for your kids? It’s why you are there.
- You are the priest for your neighborhood, your dorm, and your workplace... Not saying get a card that says, “J.D. Greear, resident priest”... One of our members... *“Welcome to my office, where I’ve made it hard to go to hell”*

3) Ask big

- This story shows you God’s compassion... He wants to save! He invites us in, and shows us what He is doing so we will ask... even lets us bargain with him...
- So, ask for big things.

- *What do you believe God wants to do in the life of one of your children?*
- *What do you believe God wants to do in your marriage?*
- *What one thing would, if you had unlimited power and resources, would you want to see happen for God’s glory? Ask for it!*
- The Bible consistently teaches us that we underestimate what God will do, not overestimate.
 - Matt 13:58... Faith unlocks the power for the mission of God
- So ask, and ask big. John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, wrote another hymn we never sing... *“Thou art coming to a King, so with thee large petitions bring; for His grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much!”*
- Two things that cause big prayers... feeling with God’s heart; seeing with God’s eyes.
 - Some of you may feel overwhelmed with something... like there’s no way out of a situation; you can’t do anything... but you can. You can pray and God can open up venues of life and power that were unknown before.

(4) Ask persistently

- Hagglng... God wants Abraham to bargain with Him...
- **Reminds me of one of my favorite parables... “parable of the unjust judge”**: Jesus talks about a woman who comes and pesters this judge... “God is like that.” The parable is quite a ridiculous tale; if anyone but Jesus told it, it might have seemed blasphemous! ... God is compared to an unjust, uncaring judge who answers a widow's request simply because she is annoying him. But the point Jesus is making is... God is not an unjust judge! He is a merciful Father. And if even an unjust, uncaring judge will respond to persistence, won't the loving, just God of the universe?
- For whatever reason, God has ordained that some miracles only come through persistent asking.
- Some of you have been asking for something, and you are about ready to give up... I think sometimes we give up right before God

gives the miracle we are asking. Keep going... After a while, maybe you'll just annoy God to death... but no... He is a Father who loves. Jesus said, "How many of you, if your child came to you and asked you for a piece of bread, you'd give him a stone." Kind of funny, too. Fish/Tarantula... Talk to God like He's your Father. Talk to Him like He tenderly cares about you, because He does. Sometimes my kids ask me for some things, and I have to tell them no (STORY)... **but I love to tell them yes!**

conclusion: One of my pet peeves is when you talk a lot about prayer, and don't do it... so this morning, we are going to spend some time praying. I'm going to ask our campus pastors, at all of our campuses, if they would come up right now and lead us in a time of prayer.

While they are coming... I want to do one more thing. I would like to challenge you, for the next 21 days that we are in this series, to pray for 10 minutes every day. I know a lot of you pray a lot longer than that, but we've got to start somewhere, right? 10 minutes every day. For some of you, it's going to be a discipline... you're going to have to make yourself do it, and when you do, your mind will wander, and it's going to feel useless. 10 minutes. (What do I pray about? What you're learning here). And, if you will do it, I will PROMISE you, that at the end of the 21 days, you'll be praying longer than those 10 minutes, not by discipline, but by desire.

culp:

research:

- Principle of substitution in this story
- “righteous” Lot?

God saved Lot, even though Abraham didn't ask it. It was his intent, and God heard that!

When we depend upon organization, we get what organizations can do; when we depend on education, we get what education can do; when we depend upon man, we get what man can do; when we depend upon prayer, we get what God can do.” A.C. Dixon

For you old, out of date people that just email, there's a whole new world of text messaging and twittering... How many of you twitter? My life is just not that exciting to be broadcasting it play by play to the world. What are you doing now? Drinking a Diet Dr. Pepper. I played a game with my girls. Drunk another Diet Dr. Pepper... So, we've created a world where there is a lot of communication that is very wide and very shallow...

There are certain emotions, experiences we have that can't simply be reduced to text messages. (if you don't get it, btw, omg is the text shorthand for “oh my god.”)