

Lesson 1 | June 6, 2021

Interceding for God's Mercy

Study Text: Genesis 18:16–33; 19:24–29

Central Truth: God readily hears the intercessory prayers of believers.

Key Verse: Romans 8:26

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (KJV).

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 through wordless groans (NIV).

Learning Objectives

- Appreciate the impact of prayer on the outworking of God's purposes.
- Determine to pray and intercede regularly for God's intervention in the lives of people and circumstances in our culture and our world.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: This quarter of studies begins with a wonderfully appropriate focus—prayer. Prayer, together with the study of God's Word, is a critically important spiritual discipline for all of us to cultivate. During the course of these studies, it is hoped that you will carefully consider your own commitment to the practice of prayer, and commit to keep it a regular practice in your life. In this week's study we will focus on the vital role of intercessory prayer, standing before the Lord for needs in the lives of Christians and in our world.

Opening Activity—Answered Prayer

Ask: Can you share a time when either you have interceded for someone else's need or someone else has interceded for you, and God has answered that prayer? (Give several students opportunities to share.)

Say: Sometimes, we are tempted to limit our prayers to our needs and to the needs of the people closest to us. But the power of intercessory prayer can make a tremendous difference in the world around us because God answers prayer! Letting people know you are praying for them is also one of the greatest ways to encourage others. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Abraham is known throughout Scripture as a man of faith, and, when people of faith pray, God answers. **Abraham was praying, not just for his family and other righteous people, but for the entire city of Sodom to be spared because of those righteous people. As it turned out, the great sin of the city resulted in God’s judgment. However, God heard Abraham’s prayers and saved the righteous there from destruction.**

Part 1—Abraham Hears God’s Judgment God Took Abraham into His Confidence

Genesis 18:16–19

[Gen 18:16-19 KJV] 16 And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. 17 And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I 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 know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

Say: Most people can understand the value of friendship—what it means to be called a friend, as well as what it means to call someone else a friend. We can grasp, then, the significance of James 2:23, where James says Abraham “was called the Friend of God” (KJV). **Just as God had shared with Abraham His plans to make Abraham a great nation through his descendants, God shared with Abraham His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.** (Share your highlights from the following text.)

A brief backstory to the opening verses of this passage is in order. In chapters 17 and 18, Abraham had been approached by God, who outlined the terms of His covenant with Abraham that included the sign of circumcision, a seal of His covenant with His people. Additionally, He announced that Abraham would be the father of many nations, beginning with Sarah giving birth to a son, though she was greatly advanced in years.

This divine interaction continued with the appearance of three special visitors to Abraham, an anthropomorphic manifestation of God and of two angelic beings. Again, God confirmed that Sarah would bear a son, a message received by Sarah with amazement. Both Abraham and Sarah, however, would submit to God’s purposes, knowing that nothing is impossible with God.

In these, as in earlier encounters with God, Abraham had proved himself trustworthy. Although he might not have fully understood how all things would come to be, Abraham could be counted on to follow God's plans and purposes. Therefore, in the passage at hand, God revealed to Abraham what was about to come to pass regarding His judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. God's question to his two companions, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (verse 17, niv), is asked with the anticipated response that the plans should not be hidden. God's trust in Abraham's faith and obedience was paramount to fulfilling His covenant through him. Verses 18 and 19 indicate that Abraham's trustworthiness to lead would arise from the most fundamental level of guiding his household in the way they should go.

Resource Packet Item 1: Standing Before the Lord

Distribute the information sheet. You may want to highlight some of the points presented or send it home with the students for further study.

Discuss

? In what ways have you sensed God drawing you into prayer regarding His plans or purposes? How is a consistent prayer life important to such an experience?

? How does God's regard for Abraham's trustworthiness support the statement that greatness doesn't begin at the top? In what way is this counterintuitive to cultural understanding and expectations today?

God Stated His Disapproval of Sin

Genesis 18:20–21

[Gen 18:20-21 KJV] 20 And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; 21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

Say: While God provides grace for those who have sinned, He is deeply troubled when people persist in sinful behavior. Sin cannot exist in God's presence, so people who desire to spend eternity with Him must repent of their sins and turn to God for forgiveness. Those who refuse to submit to God will face His judgment. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Sodom and Gomorrah were in a kind of "moral free fall." Their wickedness had reached such epic proportions that the outcry against them had reached God's ears. One needs only to review the treatment of the two angelic beings upon their arrival at Lot's household, as recorded in chapter 19, to understand the depth of depravity to which the people of these cities had fallen.

If Abraham was to become the father of many nations, it was crucial that he understood that sin and wickedness would not be tolerated by a just and righteous God. God's condemnation and judgment **against sin are inevitable. Yet, it is significant to note that God did not rush to judgment. In His great omniscience, God was aware of the depravity that prevailed in Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, in His grace and mercy, Scripture notes that He looked to investigate the grievous reports that had reached His ears.**

Furthermore, God knew that Abraham had a critical stake in the matter. His nephew, Lot, lived there, as well as Lot's family. Though they had parted ways when their flocks had grown to where the land would not support both of them, Abraham loved his nephew. He had even once rescued Lot after Lot had been taken captive by enemy kings. (See Genesis 13–14.).

Discuss

? Why is it imperative that God condemn and judge sin?

? Many people can testify of God's grace and mercy despite years of living in sin. How have you experienced grace that is greater than your sin? Describe such grace.?

Part 2—Abraham Pleads for God's Mercy

Abraham Stands Before the Lord

Genesis 18:22–26

[Gen 18:22-26 KJV] 22 And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the LORD. 23 And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? 24 Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that [are] therein? 25 That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? 26 And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.

Say: When a family member is in danger, physically or spiritually, it's natural for parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles to pray for their healing, protection, or deliverance. Such was the case for Abraham's nephew Lot, and Abraham prayed earnestly for him.(Share your highlights from the following text.)

Having expressed His great concern over what was happening in Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord and His celestial companions turned away to leave for Sodom. The account goes on to say, “Abraham remained standing before the Lord” (verse 22, NIV). **Though far be it from him to interfere with God’s will, Abraham continued to talk to the Lord on behalf of those he loved, and any who might be found righteous. Clearly, a burden to seek the Lord in a time of pending crisis had gripped his soul. With great concern, Abraham came before the Lord, to register a plea for His grace and mercy.**

Abraham posed the critical question, “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (verse 23). Inherent within this plea is a need to understand the balance between God’s justice and His mercy. Abraham stood before the Lord to seek His answer. Interestingly, in this exchange with God, Abraham did not specifically mention his concern for Lot and his family, though they were no doubt at the forefront of his mind. Instead, the issue was Abraham’s belief that God could be trusted to do what is right in all circumstances.

God’s answer to Abraham’s intercession reveals both His justice and mercy. Earlier God had stated that He would evaluate the condition of Sodom and Gomorrah. In His wisdom, justice, and mercy, He would take action. And when He did, His actions would be in line with His character.

Perhaps in the hope that Lot had influenced the city for good and righteousness to at least some degree, Abraham asked if God would spare the city if only fifty righteous people could be found (verse 24). Abraham knew it would not be God’s purpose to destroy the righteous with the wicked—far be it from Him! (verse 25). **Yet God assured Abraham that if He would indeed spare the city if only fifty righteous people could be found (verse 26).**

Resource Packet Item 2: Strategic Intercession

Distribute the intercessory prayer sheet, and ask students to use it along with the information sheet distributed earlier to guide their prayer time this week.

Discuss

? Describe a time when you felt especially prompted to intercede on behalf of a person or circumstance.

? The Flood recorded in Genesis 6–9 and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are two prominent examples of God’s summary judgment upon sin and wickedness. Though the judgment was severe, how is God’s mercy evident in these accounts?

Abraham Presses His Plea

Genesis 18:27–33

[Gen 27:27-33 KJV] 27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which [am but] dust and ashes: 28 Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt thou destroy all the city for [lack of] five? And he said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy [it]. 29 And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do [it] for forty's sake. 30 And he said [unto him], Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do [it], if I find thirty there. 31 And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy [it] for twenty's sake. 32 And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy [it] for ten's sake. 33 And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place.

Say: Even in his intense intercession for Lot and his family and any other righteous people that might be in Sodom, Abraham never forgot the majesty and holiness of God. While we are invited to come boldly to God with our petitions, we must avoid being cavalier in our approach to Him. He is Almighty God and is worthy of our worship and reverence even as we bring our requests to Him. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Knowing now that God would spare Sodom if only fifty righteous people were found, Abraham approached God again. However, even though Abraham had a special connection with God, even being described as a friend of God by both Isaiah (41:8) and James (2:23), his closeness to God did not diminish his attitude of humility. He still knew his place before the Almighty God—he was no more than dust and ashes by comparison. He also acknowledged his boldness in asking God’s mercy upon the city if only fifty righteous people could be found. Then, as he interceded further, Abraham asked if God would also be merciful if only forty-five righteous people could be found. God promised again to have mercy.

Confident of God’s mercy, Abraham continued to press his plea that God would save Sodom if fewer and fewer righteous people could be found (Genesis 18:27–32). He approached God with descending numbers—forty, thirty, twenty. At various increments in his plea, Abraham needed reassurance that God would not be angry at him for his bold intercession. Though he was confident of God’s mercy, Abraham would not presume upon God’s grace. Yet, at each request, God

granted assurance of His mercy. Eventually, the number dropped to only ten righteous people. God's response was overwhelmingly gracious. Even if only ten righteous people could be found, He would spare the city! There was no question throughout this period of intercession that God was both just and fair. God has always desired that none perish, but that all have opportunity to come to repentance. (See 2 Peter 3:9.) It is also noteworthy that Abraham did not abandon his post as an intercessor. He stayed before the Lord, pressing forward in intense intercession.

Discuss

? What does Abraham's plea for mercy if fewer righteous could be found tell us about his heart and his understanding of God's grace and mercy? What does this suggest about the importance of persisting in prayer and intercession?

? As we pray, at times we can become overwhelmed by the pervasive sin and evil in our world today. How does our key verse, Romans 8:26, give us hope for making a difference as we pray?

Part 3—Abraham Witnesses Judgment and Mercy God Judges the Ungodly

Genesis 19:24–25

[Gen 19:24-25 KJV] 24 Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; 25 And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

Say: God keeps His promises. When He promises deliverance for His people, they receive deliverance. In the case of Genesis 18 and 19, He had promised destruction, and God does not make idle threats. His judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah was all-encompassing. God is holy, and those who refuse His grace will eventually experience judgment for their unholiness. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Despite Abraham's sincere and earnest intercession, not even ten righteous people could be found in Sodom and Gomorrah. Though mercy was available to any who were righteous, God's justice required condemnation of the pervasive wickedness that prevailed. His justice always will.

God's judgment was thorough. Verse 24 speaks of burning sulfur raining down from the heavens. Scholars and archaeologists have discussed how God might have brought the destruction—perhaps through earthquakes releasing hot gases from below the earth's surface, igniting a shower of burning sulfur. Yet the details of how the destruction came about are not revealed in the text. We can be assured, however, that the destruction

was supernaturally orchestrated. **Archaeological excavations have found a site that may be that of historical Sodom. That site has revealed significant evidence that a disaster took place. God's judgment against the wickedness was quick, severe, and all-encompassing in its scope. Not only were people and buildings utterly destroyed by the burning sulfur, but even the vegetation was destroyed.**

In his Second Epistle, Peter referenced the absolute destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as “an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” (2:6, NIV). A final day of God's wrath will come at the end of this age when His judgment upon evil and wickedness will be severe and final.

[2Pe 2:6 KJV] 6 And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned [them] with an overthrow, making [them] an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly;

Resource Packet Item 3: Intercession in the Bible

Distribute the work sheet, and divide your class into small groups. Assign one of the Scripture passages to each group and give them a few minutes to read the passage and answer the questions. Then have at least one group report to the rest of the class on each passage.

Discuss

? Though God is rich in mercy, He is also a just and holy God in whose presence sin cannot dwell. In view of God's judgment, what is our responsibility to the world around us today?

? How can you explain God's judgment in view of His mercy?

God Reveals His Mercy

Genesis 19:27–29

[Gen 19:26-29 KJV] 26 But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. 27 And Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the LORD: 28 And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. 29 And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt.

Say: God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we hope He will. Yet He always answers. Abraham had not prayed that Lot would be spared from Sodom; he prayed that the city would not be destroyed. And so, while God's judgment called for destruction, He spared Abraham's righteous nephew (see also 2 Peter 2:7). Abraham trusted God, believing that He had made the right decision. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

A poignant scene opens in Genesis 19:27, as Abraham rose early the morning after God's act of judgment on Sodom. Abraham returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord. There, on the day prior, he had interceded with great passion, humility, and sincerity for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now, as he looked toward the cities, all he saw was smoke rising from their ruins (verses 28–29).

Yet, not all had been lost; Abraham's petition had not been in vain. Though Lot's wife, in disobedience to an angel's command, had looked back on the destruction and was lost (see verses 23–26), Lot and his two daughters had escaped from the cities before judgment rained down. In His wrath, God had shown mercy, and as a result the lives of the righteous were spared. God had indeed remembered Abraham, who learned anew that God is trustworthy to do what is right and just in all that He has promised to do.

Discuss

? Why do you think Lot's wife looked back toward the city?

? How do you think Abraham felt as he looked at the destruction of Sodom? What thoughts may have gone through his mind?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: God invites us to approach His throne of grace with confidence. (See Hebrews 4:16.) Abraham was reverent, yet bold, in his approach to God, and his prayers were heard. Even though the answer was not exactly as Abraham expected, he trusted both the grace and judgment of God, and God kept His promises, doing so in line with His justice and holiness.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Commit to intercede to God for the needs of others.
- Let someone know you are praying for them.
- Watch for God's answers to your prayers in your daily life..

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Intercession for God's People.
Numbers 16:41–50

[Num 16:41-50 KJV] 41 But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the LORD. 42 And it came to pass, when the congregation was gathered against Moses and against Aaron, that they looked toward the tabernacle of the congregation: and, behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared. 43 And Moses and Aaron came before the tabernacle of the congregation. 44 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 45 Get you up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment. And they fell upon their faces. 46 And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun. 47 And Aaron took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people: and he put on incense, and made an atonement for the people. 48 And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed. 49 Now they that died in the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred, beside them that died about the matter of Korah. 50 And Aaron returned unto Moses unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the plague was stayed.

Tuesday:

Mercy for the Penitent.
Ezekiel 18:19–23

[Eze 18:19-23 KJV] 19 Yet say ye, Why? doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, [and] hath kept all my statutes, and hath done them, he shall surely live. 20 The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. 21 But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. 22 All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. 23 Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: [and] not that he should return from his ways, and live?

Wednesday:

Intercession for a Nation.
Daniel 9:11–19

[Dan 9:11-19 KJV] 11 Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that [is] written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him. 12 And he hath confirmed his words, which he spake against us, and against our judges that judged us, by bringing upon us a great evil: for under the whole heaven hath not been done as hath been done upon

Jerusalem. 13 As [it is] written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth. 14 Therefore hath the LORD watched upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the LORD our God [is] righteous in all his works which he doeth: for we obeyed not his voice. 15 And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly. 16 O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people [are become] a reproach to all [that are] about us. 17 Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake. 18 O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies. 19 O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.

Thursday:

Jesus Instructs in Intercession.
Matthew 9:35–38

[Mat 9:35-38 KJV] 35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. 36 But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. 37 Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly [is] plenteous, but the labourers [are] few; 38 Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.

Friday:

Paul Requests Prayer.
Romans 15:30–33

[Rom 15:30-33 KJV] 30 Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in [your] prayers to God for me; 31 That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which [I have] for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints; 32 That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed. 33 Now the God of peace [be] with you all. Amen.

Saturday:

Sympathetic High Priest.
Hebrews 4:14–16

[Heb 4:14-16 KJV] 14 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast [our] profession. 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as [we are, yet] without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Adrian Rogers on Prayer: "I think the reason we don't pray with frequency and fervency today is because we think we can do things on our own without prayer. You know, perhaps the worst thing about us is not our prayerlessness but our pride.

We have our plans, machinery, and methods. We have our pastors, choirs, Bible fellowships, and buildings. So we come to church thinking, "We'll get it done; we know how to do it."

And you know what the devil does? He stands in the corner and smirks. He says, "You can have your buildings, your choirs, your preacher—have everything you want. You can even have your Bible studies, as long as you leave out prayer." Satan knows the power of God that comes with the kind of fervent prayer that will not take no for an answer.

We must get it in our heads: the devil was even willing to go head-to-head in battle with the archangel Michael (Daniel 10:12-13). But he fears our prayers! He will do everything he can to keep you distracted and off your knees. Spend time in prayer. The devil mocks at our schemes, laughs at our organizations, ridicules our talents, but he fears our prayers. Pray—not only frequently but fervently."