

Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous²¹ 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."

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

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, 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?" (Genesis 18:20-32)

God Has Mercy in Prayer

Some of you may remember that last week I said something that might have surprised you. I said that God does not talk to us in prayer; we talk to God in prayer. That statement is absolutely true. However, that does not mean that prayer is unimportant. Prayer is one of the most obvious signs that someone is a believer. St. Paul asks, "**How can they call on the name of the one they have not believed in?**" But prayer has an even greater value than being a sign of our faith. It's a gift of God. It is a way that he shows compassion on us who are stuck down here with all manner of fears and difficulties and problems. God looks down from heaven and he listens to our cries for help. So I'm glad that this week, the Word of God before us emphasizes prayer. **God has mercy in prayer.**

I.

The very first place that we see that truth in action today is with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. **God has mercy in prayer. God had mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah.** Does that statement surprise you? It might, if you know the history. In Genesis chapter 18, God came to speak with Abraham and he brought two angels with him. After eating a meal with him, God promised Abraham that within a year, when he was 100 years old and his wife was 90, he would have a son and through that son God would bless all nations because Jesus would descend from that son. Then God determined that he was going to let Abraham know about another matter: that of Sodom and Gomorrah. God sent those two angels to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because their sin was so great. Lest you miss a detail here, the sin was homosexuality. Sodom and Gomorrah had become hotbeds of that kind of sin. And if you know the story, you know that after the pleading that Abraham did here, God rained fire and brimstone down on those two cities and he wiped them off the face of the earth.

So how can I say that God had mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah? Because God gave them an advocate to pray for mercy for them. That's why God revealed to Abraham what he was about to do. God wanted him to plead for those two cities. God gave them a chance. These were large cities for their day – they probably had at the very least several thousand people between them. Abraham wondered how every one of those people could possibly be as evil as the majority were. He had good reason to wonder that – his own nephew, Lot, lived there, with his wife and two daughters. So he asked God to have mercy on all those thousands if only fifty people

could be found who still followed the Lord and showed it in their lives. If there were 5,000 people between the two cities, that would only be one percent of the total population. That's all that would've been needed to save them from destruction.

And of course, 50 is just where Abraham began. Immediately, he became concerned that they would come up a little short. So he wheedled his number down to 45 and then 30 and then 20 and finally 10. Ten righteous people, ten people who trusted in God and lived as he calls us to, would've spared Sodom and Gomorrah the fire that fell from heaven on them. God is merciful. But there weren't even ten. In fact, there were only three – only Lot and his daughters survived. Even Lot's future sons-in-law would not listen to the warning and flee God's wrath.

But God did show mercy in sparing Lot and his daughters. The truth is, most of the time when God brings his judgment down on nations, even those individuals who trust in him are caught up in the disaster. Like Lot, they may suffer loss of home and loved ones. Sadly, sometimes God even allows them to die and then to go home to heaven. But God did an extraordinary thing for Lot. He sent the angels to warn him and his family. He gave him time to try and convince his daughter's fiancés to flee. He held back his wrath until they were clear of the city. All this God did in answer to the prayers of Abraham.

To this day, God still shows mercy to our society because of the prayers of his people. In the New Testament, St. Paul told us, **“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”** In Paul's day, kings and rulers were almost never believers. Yet, he called on Christians to pray for them. He calls on us to pray for all those in authority that they would be a blessing to our society. He calls us to pray for everyone, not just for believers. And God answers those prayers. God sends rain and ends droughts. God ends wars and protects soldiers. God brings prosperity and relative harmony to our country. We have been blessed for generations in this country because God hears the prayers of his people and he answers them. And it is pure mercy on his part. He looks down from heaven and he sees all the difficulties this life has. And he listens when we pray for our country and for the people around us who are hurting and in need, whether they are believers or not.

II.

In his great love, **God shows mercy in prayer. God had mercy on Abraham.** Of course, Abraham fared much better than those two cities did. No fire and brimstone fell on his head. But there's more to it than that. God showed mercy to Abraham when he was troubled by what was coming and he prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah. Ever since I was little, I've been struck by the way that Abraham went about this. He wheedled. Even he recognized that he was pushing it. But God didn't lose his temper with Abraham. Rather, he dealt with him very gently. He knew that Abraham was troubled and he let him plead him down to ten.

That was mercy. And it was also grace. You remember the difference, right? Mercy is having compassion on someone who's in trouble. Abraham's heart was very troubled. Grace is undeserved love. Grace is a gift we don't have coming. That is clear here as well. Abraham did not deserve God's mercy. He was a sinner. Twice he passed his wife off as his sister and let foreign kings take her into their harem. If God hadn't protected her, she would've been violated. Abraham struggled to consistently live his faith just as we do. There were temptations that he couldn't overcome. And God's standard of conduct was no different then than it is today: total, perfect love and obedience.

That standard applies to prayer. God told Israel through Isaiah, **“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”** Our sin hides God's face so that he will not hear our prayers. Since Abraham was a sinner, God should not have listened to him. So why did he? Because Abraham was also a believer. He trusted in God's promise that through his unborn and even unconceived son, a Savior would come and take his sins away. The trust he had in that Savior removed the barrier between him and God. So God listened to Abraham's prayer. More than that, God answered it. God allowed himself to be moved: he allowed Abraham to change his express plan and purpose. If there had been ten people in Sodom and Gomorrah who tried to live as God commands, those cities would've been spared. And when there weren't, God reached down and saved the three who were there.

That grace and that mercy are still present when we pray. There is no real difference between us and Abraham. Like him, we're sinners. We struggle all our lives to live as he commands us to. Day in and day out, we fail to trust him. We get anxious about our lives and our standard of living and we question God's love. We

resent the prosperity of others. We're greedy and lustful and our lips pour out all kinds of anger and bitterness and sin. It shows itself differently in each of our lives. But it's always there. That sin turns God's face away from us so that he should not hear our prayers.

But Jesus died and he paid for all that sin that we continue to display in our lives. Jesus died and he paid for all the lust and anger and resentment and fear. Jesus died and he washed away all the guilt that we've ever heaped up on our own heads. God has given us faith in Christ, just as he did for Abraham. Because he did, God now turns to us in grace: he hears our prayers, even though we don't deserve it. He answers every single one of them.

And he deals with us in mercy. He looks down from heaven and he sees how troubled our hearts are. He sees the hurt when people we love are in danger or are ill. He sees the fear when we watch the news and wonder where our country is headed. He sees the frustration and pain when our relationships with the people we love are damaged. He sees the wrestling and the anxiety we have when he allows us, his believers, to suffer the hardships that sin brings into this life. He sees the challenges to our faith and all our secrets hurts. And he invites us to bring it all to him in prayer. He promises that he will hear and answer every single one of those prayers. Now, he does not promise to do it like he did with Abraham. He does not promise that he will have a conversation with us. He does not speak to us, except in his word. But he does promise in that word that he will hear. He does promise that he will answer every prayer.

But it requires faith to trust that promise, because we don't always see how what happens in our lives can possibly be God's answer to our prayer. Sometimes things work like they did with Abraham: Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. But God did grant the essence of Abraham's prayer: he did save the believers, Lot and his two daughters. But on the day after the destruction of the city, all Abraham saw was smoke rising from the plain. And in fact, the Bible never says that he saw Lot again. His nephew took refuge in the mountains and his descendants grew up outside of Israel. Abraham may never have known all that God did for his family.

Sometimes it works like that for us, too. God answers our prayer. He gives us the essence of what we asked for, but we still have to see the destruction that sin works in our lives. Sometimes, we may not know for years what God did for us. In fact, there's no guarantee that we will ever see all that God does for us. But always he acts in mercy. He has compassion on us in our hurt and our fear. Always he acts in grace. He loves us, not because of what we have done, but because Christ has paid for us and the Holy Spirit has given us faith. So in love, he always does what is best for us. That will be true, even if we have to wrestle with what it means for all our lives here.

Always, God works to bring us home to heaven. That is what's best for us. When he chooses to tell us, "No, you can't have what you're asking for," he does that because it is what's best to bring us home to heaven. When he answers the essence of our prayer, but it's hard for us to see that, he does what is best to bring us home to heaven. And when he gives us exactly what we asked for and does it right away, he does that because that's what's best to bring us home to heaven. But always, he does what is best for us, who struggle with life here in a sinful world.

That makes prayer a precious gift. About fifteen years ago, I attended a conference of WELS missionaries who were involved in training pastors in the countries where we were working. One of the missionaries told a story about the men he was working with. They had had experience with missionaries from other churches. He asked them what they thought was unique about the WELS. In addition to other things, they said, "Lutherans don't put much emphasis on prayer." Now, no doubt that's because some churches do treat prayer as if that were the way God talks to us. Also, it probably had something to do with the emphasis we put on God working for us. But this missionary was troubled that perhaps we don't do as good a job as we should be teaching that prayer is a precious gift of God. God hears and answers every one of the prayers of his saints. Because of Christ, you can come into God's presence at any time and lay all your burdens on him. He will deal with you in mercy, in compassion, and do what is best for you. Amen.