

## **Pleading with God**

### Genesis 18

Every spring for as long as Keegan could remember his family had always taken a special spring break trip. One year they had gone fishing in the ocean. Another year they went to Disney Land. Last year, they went to the Grand Canyon. Last night, however, Keegan's dad warned him they wouldn't be going anywhere this year.

He had struggled with his grades since starting Middle School. The first report card of second semester he'd received two D's, his first ever. "No more fun and games," dad said until the grades came up.

Keegan was devastated. He loved these spring trips. He looked forward to them all year long, and now, it was all gone. But deep down he knew he needed to improve his grades. He knew he'd been goofing off and letting things slide. Maybe, he thought, if he could bring his grades up enough by the next progress report they could still do something.

Keegan ratcheted up his courage and went to his father. "Dad, if my grades on my next progress report are real good. I mean really, really good, like if I got straight A's could we still do something this spring?"

Dad sat stone-faced for a moment staring at his tablet. "I suppose," he said slowly drawing out the suspense, "if it is really good. I mean A's in every class, we might be able to arrange something."

Keegan's eyes brightened, but as reality sat in his expression grew more grim. "Well, what if I get all A's, but one B. Could we still go then?"

Dad bit back a grin that tugged at the corner of his lips. "That would still be a tremendous improvement and would demonstrate great effort on your part. I would be happy with that."

The seventh-grader bit his lip before spitting out, "What if I got two B's?"

You can see where this is going, can't you? Just how far down will Keegan be able to bargain his father? If you're a mom or a dad, you've been there. This is the heart of a loving father who wants what is best for his child in a wrestling match with a child who has a different understanding of what is best. Every parent, no matter how stern our rules or firm our discipline

has responded to the earnest pleas of our children. Our hearts are swayed by their hearts, and even though we are still determined to direct the flow of their lives in a healthy, mature direction, we listen with the heart of a loving father or loving mother, and we respond accordingly.

We may not have a problem seeing earthly fathers in such a light, but what about our heavenly Father. We're going to look at a passage in Genesis 18 this morning, if you would go ahead and turn there in your Bibles, where Abraham has just such a conversation with God. Let me set the scene for you. Abraham is visited by three men, who are not mere men. They are angels who are there on God's business. Abraham prepares a feast for them. They reaffirm God's promise of a son, and assure him that by this time next year his wife Sarah would have a son. Sarah who was eavesdropping at the entrance to the tent knew she was far past childbearing age thought this was some sort of joke and laughed.

But it turns out that having dinner with Abraham wasn't the only thing on their itinerary. They are on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord tells Abraham, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 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." These are ominous words, and Abraham knows what they mean for Sodom and Gomorrah, he knows how bad things are there. There's good reason he's avoided having dealings with them. He knows God plans to destroy these places. And so Abraham begins to bargain with God, pleading on their behalf to save the cities.

We're not taught to use prayer to persuade God to change his mind. If anything, we are taught just the opposite. I've seen and heard it dozens of times, "Prayer does not change God, it changes us." Prayer certainly does change us, that's true, but I believe the Bible shows that it also appeals to the heart of our loving heavenly Father.

There is great mystery in this truth. In Malachi 3:6 God says, "I the Lord do not change." Yet in Hosea 11:8 He says, "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." You could line up passages under both sides. We must confess that an infinite God is beyond our finite understanding. Some aspects of God's nature are timeless and unchanging such as his holiness, his love, and his mercy. God is always holy, and He is always loving and He is always

merciful. But it's some of these very unchanging qualities of God that require him to be responsive to us. It is a merciful God who will hear the prayers of a repentant sinner and forgive them. Let's read our text in Gen 18:20-33

<sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and *their sin so grievous* <sup>21</sup> 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."

<sup>22</sup> The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> 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? <sup>25</sup> 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?"

<sup>26</sup> The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

<sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> 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."

<sup>29</sup> 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."

<sup>30</sup> 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."

<sup>31</sup> 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."

<sup>32</sup> 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."

<sup>33</sup> When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

Did you notice what happened here? Abraham argued with God, and he won. Now a lot of Christians have a hard time wrapping their theology around that, so they try to explain it away somehow. But it's only when we let our theological preconceptions get in the way that it's a problem. Jews have no problem with this. There is a very rich and very old tradition within Judaism of arguing with God.

And it's no surprise really when you look at the history of the Old Testament. Abraham argues with God here in Genesis 18. In the next chapter Lot argues with God about where he should go after fleeing Sodom. Jacob wrestles with a messenger of God to receive a blessing. Gideon argues with God about how many men to take into battle. Moses argues with God about his fitness to serve. Moses argues with God about the fate of Israel. Job has a rather long argument with God. David argues with God in many of the Psalms. The prophets sometimes argue with God.

But this isn't just part of the Old Testament tradition. In Luke 18 Jesus tells the story of a widow who was a victim of injustice. The judge in that town was corrupt, and he did nothing to help the widow. This poor widow kept after the judge day after day. Finally, because of her persistence, the judge granted her request. Jesus point was that if even an unjust judge can respond to such persistence, then how much more will a loving God respond to our prayers.

Now I must confess I have a lot of questions about these passages and how all of this fits with God's sovereignty and his foreknowledge. I won't pretend to have all the answers. I really felt for Jeff and Curtis in Sunday School last Sunday as they were in Romans 9, probably one of the most controversial and theologically complex passages in the Bible. God's word teaches that we have free will. It also teaches us that God is all-knowing and sovereign and that he predestines us. As soon as we come up with a pat answer to make sense of all of it, you can find a passage of Scripture that like a gremlin plays havoc with our tidy theology.

At some point we must simply bow our heads in awe at the mystery. We can't help but join with Paul, who later in Romans says, *"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"* I think he was confusing even himself. But let us not throw up our hands in frustration and run away from this learning nothing. I think there are some things we can take away from this and apply to our prayer lives and our own relationship with our loving heavenly Father.

### **I. Prayer Can Really be a Struggle**

The first is this: prayer can really be a struggle. We tend to see prayer as a rather passive activity. But true prayer is work. Sometimes it is hard work. In our passage Abraham intercedes six times, asking for more and going further each time.

In Luke 11 Jesus tells a story about a man who receives an unexpected guest at a very late hour. Unprepared for a visitor, the man has no food to offer his friend. So he wakes his neighbor in the middle of the night, to see if he would loan him three loaves of bread. At first the neighbor says, "No." However, the man doesn't turn away. He keeps asking for bread, he keeps seeking help, he keeps knocking on the door. Finally, because the man keeps insisting, the neighbor gives him what he was asking for. The lesson, Jesus says, is that when it comes to God we need to keep on asking, and keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. Not because God's asleep, but so that we can learn to do the hard work of prayer.

In Exodus 32, after the nation of Israel builds the golden calf, God says he is going to wipe all of them out, and start over with Moses. Moses then proceeds to argue with God to spare the nation of Israel. He gives God three arguments or reasons why he should not destroy the people of Israel, and Moses wins the argument. Exodus 32 covers all this in only 4 verses, but Moses recounts this experience in Deuteronomy 9, as the people of Israel are about to enter the Promised Land. Listen to what Moses says in Deut 9:18-20

*<sup>18</sup> Then once again I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the LORD'S sight and so provoking him to anger. <sup>19</sup> I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the LORD listened to me. <sup>20</sup> And the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too.*

Did you get that? Moses fasted for 40 days as he wrestled with God in prayer in an effort to persuade Him not to wipe out the nation of Israel. When was the last time you wrestled with God for 40 days in Prayer? Do we even really know the hard work of prayer?

Too often we treat prayer like a spiritual vending machine. We pop in our 3 minute prayer, and we expect answers and blessings to come out. Have we ever even left the shallow end of the pool. We're just playing in the waves that lap up on the beach from the ocean that is prayer. I like what Philip Yancey writes, "We should pray like a salesman with his foot wedged in the door opening, like a wrestler who has his opponent in a headlock and won't let go."

Prayer is hard work. It is a struggle, and if isn't. You're probably not praying right.

## **II. God Really Listens to Our Prayers**

This passage, however, isn't just a challenge to quit wading around in the shallow end of the pool. It's also an encouragement. It is a reminder that God really listens to our prayers.

The reason Abraham could have such confidence, such boldness in approaching God is because of the nature of God. God welcomes our concerns, our doubts, our questions, our misgivings. God doesn't scowl in anger if we dare raise a peep. His relationship with us is as a loving father to a child. God listens to our questions with a loving heart.

Have you ever complained to customer service, talked to a manager, wrote a letter of complaint, only to be ignored? Your concerns go in one ear and right out the other. You wonder if anyone other than a computer program actually read your email. Some people feel prayer is like that. They feel God is like that. Sure, we can voice our concerns to God to God, but He doesn't really listen. God welcomes our concerns and He responds. This doesn't mean we will always get what we want, or that we will usually get what we want. But it does mean God will hear us out, and respond as a loving heavenly Father.

Many believers fear raising their questions to God. They think it is wrong or shows a lack of faith. Just as when a child is having problems, there should be no better place to take it than to a loving, responsive parent. When we, as God's children are having struggles, there is no better place to take it than our loving heavenly Father. God really hears our prayers.

### **III. Prayer Really Does Make a Difference**

Not only does God welcome our concerns, but thirdly, our prayers really do make a difference. If God only listened to our prayers, but didn't respond, what use would prayer really be? If there were no answers, if we received no strength, if we received no guidance, what good would prayer be? God would be like a heavenly therapist who listened to you talk about all your problems, but never did anything in response.

We know prayer is a good thing, but do we really expect it to accomplish anything great? The story is told of a young boy who wanted \$100 very badly. He prayed for a long time, but nothing happened. Undaunted by the lack of response, he wrote a letter to God presenting his request once again. When the postal authorities received the letter addressed to "God, USA," not knowing what else to do, they decided to deliver it to the President. Mr. President was interested in the letter enough to instruct his secretary to send the little boy \$5. He thought this

amount might be enough to encourage such a young boy. And indeed, the little boy was delighted with the \$5 bill. He sat down immediately to write a thank-you note to God. This too was forwarded to the President. It read, "*Dear God, Thank you very much for sending the money. However, I noticed that for some reason you sent it through Washington DC and those guys deducted \$95 in taxes!*"

One of the reasons we don't pray like we should, is we don't really expect anything to happen. One of my favorite quotes on prayer comes from Donald Whitney in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. He writes, "If we felt certain of visible results within sixty seconds of every prayer, there would be holes in the knees of every pair of Christian-owned pants in the world." God didn't promise results in sixty seconds, but He does promise to answer our prayers.

What we see here is that God responds to our prayers with tender compassion. When we talk about a relationship with God, we mean a real, living, breathing relationship. He hears us and responds accordingly. Jesus tells us in John 15:7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." We must be careful here. This is not a blank check, or a credit card without limits or conditions. What we ask for must be in accordance to our abiding in him, and His Word abiding in us. Scripture is clear in other passages that we must ask according to His will, and in His name. Our prayers must be true to Him. This is not a child's Christmas list to Santa.

The truth remains, though, we are invited to ask, and He has promised to respond. Luke 11:9, He says, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened." God is your loving heavenly Father and He listens to you, and He listens with a responsive heart.