

The Journey of Faith - Abraham in the Autumn of Life

Prayer that God hears

Genesis 18:16-33

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Some of you will remember Moira Stuart, the BBC news reader. When she stopped presenting the news after 26 years in the job, it was rumoured that she had been pushed to the side-lines because 57 was, well, too old for a news reader! The BBC denied the rumour, but it was able to float, because in our visual, social media culture, beautiful young people in the spring and summer of their lives, are often valued more than those who are in the autumn and winter of their lives. I remember one elderly Christian lady saying to me that she felt invisible wherever she went, whether to the shops or about the local community: no-one seemed to care for the aged.

But God, who is no respecter of age, sees things very differently, and so should we. There's a place and a work for older folks in his glorious kingdom. Moses began his greatest work at the age 80. Noah too, was in the autumn of his life when he began his great work of building the ark. "Wisdom belongs to the aged, and understanding to the old," says Job 12:12. "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him." (Psalm 92)

A modern day example is my own father, Marlin Summers, who was a missionary for 20 years in India and Pakistan, but began his greatest work at the age of 60, planting the Asian Christian Fellowship in Wolverhampton.

Older saints, hear this: God loves and cherishes you just as much as he values the young! He has important work for you to do. His promise to you is, "They will still bear fruit in old age." It could be that the most important work God has for you to do in your family, your church, and neighbourhoods lie, not behind you but ahead of you! And as a church community let's reflect God's outlook by respecting, loving and cherishing our elderly saints, and older folks in general.

Why do I say all of this? Well today, we continue a series of sermons we began last year on the life of Abraham, when we studied his earlier years.

As we re-join the story, Genesis chapter 18, Abraham is 100 years old! God does not put ageing Abraham on the scrap heap, but in his old age Abraham accomplishes his most important life-works: he and Sarah have a son in keeping with God's promise; Abraham prays what must be his most significant prayer, here in chapter 18; and Abraham will pass through the greatest test of his life in his old age, chapter 22.

In God's kingdom there's no spiritual retirement!

Now, I do not want our young folks to switch off, to think that these sermons have no relevance for them. So let me say to them, first, there are many factors that remain constant throughout our whole earthly pilgrimage, whether we are young or old: faith is one example, we must trust God whether we are old or young. The faith and perseverance we observe in Abraham is needed in youth just as much as old age. And secondly, may I say to younger people: your spring and summer will pass much sooner than you think! If you want to be wise, pay attention to what lies ahead of you, listen and learn!

Introduction to this sermon

So we pick up the story of Abraham's life in Genesis chapter 18. Do you remember? Three visitors showed up at Abraham's tent in the middle of the day? Two of them were angels and one of them was the Lord himself: sometimes in the OT, God appears in human form, we call it a "Theophany". These visitors told Abraham that after waiting for 25 years, Sarah would bear a child within one year! This son would be the one through whom the great nation God had promised to Abraham would come; the nation who would bless the whole wide world with the Messiah, Jesus Christ!

The three visitors left Abraham and set out for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which could be seen in the distance from the heights of Hebron. *"When the men got up to leave, they looked towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way."* (16)

The three heavenly visitors have delivered their wonderful message and now they're headed towards the cities of the plain. What's going on in Abraham's mind, when he sees the direction they are taking, we're not told, but Abraham knows that his nephew Lot is living in that that godless place.

Lot, who is a true believer (2 Peter chapter 2) made some big mistakes in his young life. In fact ever since he left Abraham's side, he's made one foolish decision after another. That sometimes happens? A headstrong young believer leaves the protection and friendship and wisdom of older Christians and ends up drifting into peril! I have seen it with my own eyes!

Lot made his first bad decision, back in chapter 13 when he chose the good green pasture land and left the poor scrubland to his uncle. (Instead of trusting God to meet his needs, he trusted his own reason and senses). And once he was living on the plains of the river Jordan he made his second bad decision: he moved south towards the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, though he knew their reputation for wickedness. And since one bad decision tends to follow another, he makes a third and fatal decision to move right into the city with his family. It is possible for a true believer to make disastrous decisions which put both them and their loved ones in peril! Be warned!

Abraham knows that his nephew Lot is living in the city his three visitors are walking to. The three visitors decide to tell Abraham why they are going there. They are on their way to execute divine judgment on the city. First, they'll check out if the reports they've heard about Sodom and Gomorrah are in fact true; they are true, but God wants to show Abraham that he is a just God who gathers all the facts before he pronounces judgement.

The two angels continue on their journey, but the third visitor, who is the Lord, lingers behind, and Abraham takes the opportunity to plead with him, in a way that is unmatched by anywhere else in Scripture. There is no prayer, there is no intercession, one person pleading with God for another, in the Bible quite like this one!

Do you know someone who, at this very moment, is in grave spiritual peril?

Lot has a wife and two married daughters, that's 6 relatives, at least, whose lives are in danger!

Not just in the moral peril from their surroundings, but now the peril of imminent judgement by a holy God. Abraham knows that the two angels will find the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah true. Abraham knows that judgement will soon fall—perhaps that very day - on those cities where nephew Lot and his family live! Is there

someone you know in peril? Perhaps they are seriously ill, close to death, but have not yet repented of their sins? They're in peril! Well, today we learn how to intercede! Not just in emergency situations but more generally too.

#1 Intercessory prayer appeals to the character and promises of God

*“Will you sweep away the righteous with the unrighteous? 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? 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?**”*

Abraham appeals to the justice of God, his fairness, his character. There's no way a just God can send blanket judgement on a whole city when there are righteous people living there! I mean that would just be unfair! Abraham's argument flows from the character of God: so God *must* listen, for he cannot be other than himself: “The Lord said, “If I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

How can we appeal to the character of God? Well, let me give you an example. You can pray for the conversion of a loved one like this, “Lord you have said that it is not your will that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4 & 2 Peter 3:9). You have also said that if we ask anything in line with your will you will hear us (1 John 5:14), so when I ask you to convert my husband / wife / daughter / son / nephew, I am asking you for something in line with your will. Please hear my prayer.”

You are praying in line with the promises God has made! Or you could pray for a wayward child like his: “Lord you have said in your word that if parents train up a child in the way they should go, then when they are older they won't depart from it (Proverbs 22:6). Well, I did my best to train them up in your ways, I read the Scriptures to them, I prayed with them, I tried to live a Christlike life before them, so please keep the promise of your word and don't allow them to depart from your ways.” You are praying in line with God's Word, his promises, his character!

God had no option but to hear Abraham's prayers, for he has bound himself to be just! And God has no option but to hear our prayers, if we appeal to his unchanging

promises and character!

#2 Intercessory prayer is bold!

Abraham is bold! “Will you sweep away the righteous with the unrighteous... Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 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?” What forwardness! What daring-do! We might even say what audacity! Abraham is never irreverent or disrespectful: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes..,” “May the Lord not be angry but let me speak just once more..”

Do you know why Abraham can be so courageous? Because Abraham knew God as a friend! (Isaiah 41:8) Friends can talk frankly to friends, right? And we too have a friend in heaven: “I no longer call you servants” said Jesus to his disciples, “because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:15) “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4)

May the Lord teach us to be bold!

#3 Intercessory prayer does not give up!

Abraham comes back to God again and again and again and again, with the numbers 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 and 10. Is there someone you are praying for whose heart shows no signs of softening; a situation that show no signs of change, and you’re tempted to give up? Perhaps you have given up already? Jesus told a whole parable in Luke 18, about the poor widow and the unjust judge, to teach this very lesson: “to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” (verse 1). Monica the mother of the great Augustine didn’t give up praying for her degenerate son, and God heard her prayers. Don’t give up! Ever!

#4 Intercessory prayer is expectant

After the Lord finished speaking with Abraham, he went home. Fastforward the next day, chapter 19:27, “Early the next morning, Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord.” (20:29)

What’s Abraham doing? He’s expecting his prayer to be answered! He’s back to the place of intercession looking out for the answer! A young preacher lamented to Charles Spurgeon that few people were converted through his preaching. “Well” Spurgeon replied, “When you pray for conversions do you expect anyone to be converted?” “Well, not really!” came the reply! “Well, there’s the reason!” said Spurgeon.

Abraham expected God to hear and answer his prayers! And so should we!

#5 Intercessory prayer trusts God for the answer

I hear someone say, “But God did not answer Abraham’s prayers!” “Early the next morning, Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord. He looked down towards Sodom and Gomorrah, towards all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.”

This was not how Abraham hoped his prayer would be answered! Now he knew that there were less than 10 righteous people in the city! But what has happened to nephew Lot and his family? At this point in time Abraham had no idea that Lot, his wife and daughters had been rescued by the two angels! And Abraham may NEVER have known about their rescue! But this is where we say: Intercessory Prayer trusts God for the answer! “I prayed that God would spare Lot, I believe God has, I do not know how, but I trust God.”

Intercessory prayer trusts God for the answer. We may never see the answer to our prayers! But intercessory prayer trusts God for the answer. Abraham does not go back to his tent dejected and angry with God, he goes back trusting that God has heard and God will answer.

May the Lord teach us to pray like this! And may he hear and answer our prayers for our families, for our neighbourhoods, for our city, country and world.