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[0 : 00] If I have a Bible with you, please turn to Genesis chapter 18 and can I just make the pastoral point that I think is incredibly helpful to bring a Bible to church or at least to pick one up on the way in if you don't bring one regularly. It's really important that you hear what the Bible says and that you test what you hear from the front to make sure that that is indeed what God has said. Genesis chapter 18 is incredible theatre. It begins with this extraordinary statement, the Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre. This is a visible manifestation of God. God appears in human form to Abraham and he comes with the most incredible message. Abraham is an old man. Sarah is an elderly woman and the message is Abraham in a year's time. Your wife, your own beloved wife will for the very first time in her life bear you a child, a son. And having made that incredible announcement, the Lord is about to depart and you have this incredible insight into the mind of the Lord. As he weighs up the wisdom of telling Abraham that it is not the only thing that he has come to do, bring this message of hope. He has come to inflict judgment on the wicked cities of the plain. And God tells Abraham what he is about to do. And then there is almost like a confrontation where Abraham

Abraham looks into the face of God. Abraham does what God wants him to do. Abraham intercedes. There is a conversation between a weak man and the living God. And from the words that are used, it would be impossible for you to realise in a sense which was man and which was God. So extraordinary is this conversation. And then at the end they go their separate ways. Incredible theatre. And what we see here is a man truly engaging with God. He moves God. Six times God says yes to what Abraham asks. Ever increasing demands. The fact of the matter is, had there been just ten people amongst the teeming multitude of that city, ten righteous people, the whole city would have been spared. The wicked place would have been spared by the living God. And indeed,

Lot and his daughters were spared. I want to draw your attention to these things because we desperately need help in prayer. To do business with God. Truly to engage with God. We know so little about praying in a way that brings the Lord's answer. So we pray that Christ may be honoured in our land.

And what do we see? He is more blasphemed. We pray for conversions. And what do we see? The occasional one here and there, but multitudes of people just rushing towards hell. And we pray for growth in Christian people. And what do we see? Increasing weakness and failure. And the whole church is so innocuous and ineffective in making Christ known. And we pray that those who've gone out from us may be restored from their backslidings. And what do we see? Well, we see them going further and further and further away. We need to learn how to pray. And we need to be convinced all over again that we have a prayer answering God. And this is a passage to help us in these vital things.

What can we learn here then about prayer that engages with God? Well, the first thing to notice here is how conscious Abraham is of the Almighty. He is very conscious of God. Now, somebody's going to say, well, of course he was. Because God appeared to him.

[5 : 20] He was there. God appeared to him physically. He was visibly present with Abraham. Abraham. We read in verse 22, Abraham remained standing before the Lord. And so Abraham approached him and said, and so on. So different from anything we could experience, let alone what we do experience.

How can we be conscious of God as Abraham was conscious of God? Well, please remember this. Abraham was expressing, exercising great faith in believing that the one who stood before him in human form was none other than Almighty God. Because he appeared to him as a man. You'll notice how the chapter begins. The Lord appeared to Abraham while he was sitting at the entrance

to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men. The three men were two angels and the pre-incarnate Son of God. God appearing in human form. And yet how Abraham speaks to him with what faith does he grasp hold of the living God. He spoke so forcibly to this one in the form of a man. He says, will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from you to do such a thing.

Will not the judge of all the earth do right? He has this profound sense that the one before him is very God. How can we have that sense of God? Well, by the same faith that Abraham shows.

That's what we need in coming to prayer.

The Bible says, he that comes to God must believe that he is. You've got to come as those who know there is a God to hear us.

And believing that he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek for him. Do we believe that? If we don't diligently seek for him.

[7 : 52] If we don't accept that maybe it won't be the first time or the second time or the tenth time or the twentieth time that we ask for something that God will hear us. Why is it we do not diligently seek for him?

For blessing from him is it because we doubt that he is a prayer answering God. We need that consciousness of God. The great God that Abraham shows here.

We may need to seek consciously just to be in his presence. To begin with, as you get so often in the book of Psalms.

Psalm 27, for example. The psalmist says, Hear my voice when I call. Be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, Seek his face.

Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger. For you have been my helper.

[8 : 57] When I say we need to be conscious of God, if we are to truly engage with him in prayer, I'm saying we need to be sure that we are actually speaking to God. That he is listening. We need to be convinced that only he can help.

Our problems are so great, only almighty power can answer us. And we need to be convinced that he is worth speaking to because he does hear and answer the cries of his children.

That's where we need to begin, with a consciousness that we are in the presence of God. And that is not an easy thing. And we need to work hard at it. And the thing about Abraham was, this was not the first time that he prayed.

He prayed to a God that over many years he had learned to know. A God he had worshipped. A God whose word he had taken seriously. A God whom he obeyed.

A God who he constantly sought to know. And at the end of that experience, as it were, as he grew in his knowledge of God, he came to a point when he could confront the almighty, as he does here in this passage.

[10 : 06] We must walk with God and trust him and serve him like Abraham if we are ever going to engage with him. I'm not saying it takes a lifetime.

Some of us it may take a lifetime, but it's only because of our unbelief and our many failings. God wants to be known by us.

He wants to hear us. We must begin and seek out a consciousness that we are in the presence of God and that we have his ear.

Abraham was very aware of God. Then secondly you notice that Abraham expresses big concerns. He expresses great concerns.

He speaks to God about the fate of a great city. To be sure he asks about the righteous people there. But please notice he wasn't saying to God take the righteous people out of the city then destroy it, I don't mind.

[11 : 10] He was saying for the sake of the righteous spare the whole city. A city marked by depravity and blatant sin.

I'm sure you didn't enjoy me reading Genesis 19 to you. It's pretty unsavoury stuff. But we need to read it because we need to understand what is the nature of the city for which Abraham dares to do business with God and even to say to God will not the judge of all the earth do right.

There was something very brash and very vile about this city. But Abraham wants it all spared and he speaks to God about God's justice and yet his goal is to see God's mercy, his compassion shown to multitude of held deserving people.

He expresses big concerns. So often we are preoccupied, are we not, by small concerns in prayer. Our prayer meetings are marked by a right care for one another. But we rarely lift our eyes beyond that to the great issues with which we need to do business with God.

[12:31] Abraham expresses big concerns. It's all so much bigger than personal self-interest. He's passionate in prayer but he is not praying for himself.

I'd go so far as to say he has absolutely no self-interest as he prays here. Now somebody will disagree with that. Say, ah, what about his nephew Lot and his family?

Friends, it's 20 years probably since Abraham last saw Lot. And when he did, Lot was being unbelievably selfish and greedy and showing his folly.

And Lot has chosen to live in this awful place. All those years. And please notice that Abraham is not simply asking for Lot to be spared or even the righteous to be spared but the wicked also.

It's all so much bigger than personal self-interest. So many times, if we ever get passionate with God, it's about ourselves.

[13:46] It's about our immediate family. It's about our circumstances. It's about our circumstances. It's about some great burden that oppresses us. But he has, Abraham, so much bigger concerns.

Now friends, don't get me wrong. There are great big personal concerns over which you and I must do business with God. There will be some people here tonight. And you must do business with God over the fact that you stand condemned before him and without hope.

And you're rushing through life. You've never made your peace with God. You've never humbled yourself before him. You're all, if you've prayed, it is, how can you possibly pray without confessing your sin and the seriousness of that sin to God?

Jesus told the story, didn't he, about two men who went to the temple to pray and this religious man, do you know, he's a marvel because he can come to a holy God without confessing his own sin, without asking for mercy.

That is incredible. It's also absurd. But that is the self-righteousness which so readily characterises and captures the human heart.

[15:15] You need to do business with God about your sin while you still can find mercy. Or maybe you have doubts and fears and you need to pray that God would show himself to you or give you assurance that you really are his.

And then you have children and parents and siblings and dear friends and neighbours. People you've known many years. People who've been so kind to you who are without Christ and without hope.

You need to do business with God over personal things. But friends, but friends, we are called upon to intercede for cities, for nations, for multitudes of heathen people in our own land.

People who live in darkness and unbelief. Why does God show us? Why does God show us about situation in other lands? Why does he reveal to us the mess in our own nation?

It's for the same reason as he did to Abraham. Derek Kidner says that the words of verse 22 should be translated the other way round.

[16:31] That there is indication that in the original text of the Hebrew that was changed because people could not believe that the text should read that God remains standing before Abraham.

Kidner's a great Hebrew scholar and I'm sure he's right. That's what the text should read. And people just, no that can't be right. God can't be doing that. So that mustn't be what the text says.

I think that is what the text says. The Almighty waits for Abraham to besiege him in prayer. That's why he's told him what he intends to do for Sodom. Every time you hear information providentially about needs in countries or desperate situation in your own town it is in order that you might besiege God for his mercy in that situation.

Abraham had great, great things to say to God. He expresses big concerns. Thirdly, so he has this sense of God.

That's the first thing. Secondly, he expresses big concerns. Thirdly, he is very bold and yet humble. Breathtakingly bold towards the Almighty.

[18:00] He launches in. Listen, this is extraordinary. Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Where are the preliminaries? As far as I can say, see, he didn't even use the name of God.

It was as if he grabbed the Almighty by the jugular. Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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? Sounds like a lecture to me. Sounds like the things that I remember standing before the headmaster when I was at school and in trouble. But this is the living God being confronted by this puny man, Abraham. He gives God a hard time. He virtually accuses him of being unconcerned about what is right. [19 : 11] It's absolutely incredible. Is God offended? It's interesting. God causes it to be written down and to be remembered.

you and I can read it. Is God offended? God is not offended. He responds almost meekly to everything that Abraham says to him.

Captured by John Newton, you are coming to a king. Large petitions with you bring. For his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too too much. Breathtakingly bold and yet also truly humble. Notice verse 27, Abraham spoke up again, now that I've been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. It's a sense of the greatness of God and his own weakness. weakness. He is the very dust and ashes to which Sodom will soon be reduced.

[20 : 25] He feels his weakness and then as he prays some more he has this sense perhaps God will be angry with him because he knows himself sinful. Is he pushing himself, is he pushing the almighty too far?

Is he being irreverent? He has this fear because he is a humble man, a truly humble man. He's very bold and yet humble.

It's an amazing combination but surely it is infinitely appropriate and we know so much more of this God than Abraham did.

Perhaps sadly not always personally know him as well as Abraham did but God has shown us so much more of himself and all that revelation surely is to give us hope in prayer.

The extraordinary grace of God. It's a scripture full of evidence that God answers prayer. There's a scripture full even more of the extravagant love and mercy of God.

[21 : 35] This is the God of Golgotha. The God who gave his son that you and I can be reconciled to him.

He is very bold with God and yet humble. It's what we need to be to engage with God. It cannot be like this unless we learn more of God.

Unless we grasp the fact that he cares, that he is for us, that really for so much we ask only he can help. One of the great lessons to learn about the Christian life is that you are utterly powerless at every point.

Dealing with your own sin. Controlling your own tongue. Speaking effectively to others.

Being a consistent, godly, kind, gracious witness before others. Can you do any of those things? please tell me afterwards because I have failed miserably.

[22 : 41] But by God's grace, with his help we can be all those things and more by his power and mercy. Abraham is very bold and yet humble.

And then finally, he is pressing and persistent. If you and I would learn to move the heart of the almighty, if we would have power with God, if we would pray in the way that really engages with him, we need to be very aware of him.

We need to pray big prayers, have big concerns. We need to be very bold and yet humble. And we need to be pressing and persistent.

This is staggeringly true of Abraham. He argues with God, does he not? Five times he returns to God asking for more.

If this was a child vis-a-vis Christmas, how quickly they would be sent away. But he is asking all the time for the bar to be lowered in order that this city be spared.

[24 : 02] what if there are fifty righteous? What if there are five less than fifty? What if there are forty? Only forty?

What about if there are thirty? What if there are twenty? What if there are as few as ten? He is pressing, pressing, pushing, persistent.

The Lord is not offended. The promises get bigger and better. The only flaw that one would say in Abraham's logic is that he stops.

He could have kept going. And somebody said no he couldn't have kept going because the Lord turned away and left him. Verse thirty-three, yes but that is true but God is simply taking Abraham at his word.

Do you notice how Abraham says that he's asking for the last time? When he gets down to ten God takes him at his word.

[25 : 05] Abraham was frightened that God would be angry with him but did that fear come from his own heart or from something that God had spoken or done? Seems only to arise from his own heart.

But anyway the significant thing for Christians now is to understand that Jesus Christ tells us to be persistent and not to take no for an answer.

Remember how the disciples in Luke 11 they asked Jesus or one of them asked Jesus Lord they've seen him pray they've seen his extraordinary engagement with God in prayer.

And so they say to him teach us to pray as John taught his disciples. And what does Jesus do? The first thing he does is this very brief summary illustration that is the way to pray.

But three quarters of the instruction is not how to but it is just motivation to get on and do it. And the first piece of motivation is an extraordinary story.

[26 : 10] Those of us who live in a culture with many Muslim people understand the story better probably. I mean I expect most of you if somebody came to your house at midnight and they've come from afar you might give them a bed but the breakfast, the food would have to wait till the next morning and if you hadn't got any you'd go down the supermarket the next morning.

There's no question of you doing something at midnight. But this is a different culture. This is a culture in which it is an appalling failure and a sense of great shame if you can't provide for the person who's come to your house.

So the guy goes in Jesus story to a friend of his, bangs him up, knocks him up, he's in bed, family are in bed and he says this is my situation, you must help me, give me bread so that I can feed the friend who's come on a journey to me.

And the guy says what we always say, amazing, human nature never changes that. He says I can't do it. how often we say I can't, sorry I can't do it.

What we mean is I won't do it, I don't want to do it, I can't be bothered to do it. But he says I can't do it. But Jesus says in the end you'll get out of bed just to get rid of the guy.

[27 : 36] He's too persistent, he's too brass-necked, he won't take no for an answer. And what's the purpose of the story? Jesus is saying you need to pray like that.

When you come to the Almighty do not take no for an answer, do not give up. Those are the words of the Son of God, that is how to pray.

And he says so I say to you ask and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you. And of course that's a promise for a better Christian than you, no it isn't. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds, to him who knocks the door will be opened.

This is the prayer that engages with God, the prayer that just cannot afford to take no even from the Almighty himself.

We need to be like Abraham, to press God, to be persistent because there's no alternative. we must have from the Almighty what we need.

[28 : 49] We must have life or the church dies. We must have conversions. We must have unity. We must have a heart to know him better.

We must have a passion for the world out there and the world beyond our little environment. So we will pray believing the promises of God.

What do you know of praying like Abraham? Pressing and persistent, unashamedly, as it were, taking God by the throat and refusing to let go.

prayer. This prayer of Abraham, my friends, is an extraordinary prayer, at least compared to my experience and probably yours as well. Here is a man who is deeply conscious of God.

He prays with boldness and yet humility. He's pressing and persistent to an extraordinary degree, even though he's not praying for himself, but for an evil pagan city.

[29 : 59] and God responds. God responds. Had there been only ten righteous people there, the city would have been spared.

And God reaches down and he spares righteous lot. I love that New Testament description of lot. I would never have come up with that.

But this man is justified by faith in the mercy of God. God spares lot and his daughters.

I didn't dare read the rest of chapter 19. If you thought the bit I read was pretty sordid, the rest is worse. You need to appreciate God is a God of grace.

He hears the most astonishing prayer. prayer. And what do we learn here? We learn that such prayer brings results.

[31 : 04] Skeptics say praying is a waste of time. It's not. It's just about the most effective thing you could do with your time. And the results are not just psychological.

prayer has changed me. I feel better. God hears and answers prayer. God reaches down and he plucks lots and his daughters from the city of Sodom.

God is ready to hear his people when they pray like this. That's why it's here. He wants you to know the kind of prayer he hears.

And if we engage with him we will see his compassion, his staggering grace touching other lives.

And the challenge is surely this. Ah but will we pray like this?

Our experience proves that it is not easy. But it is possible. Abraham was a man. A man of weakness.

[32 : 12] A man with many blemishes on his record as he sought to walk with God. Abraham with the help of the Spirit of God intercedes powerfully with God.

He has this heart concern for the honour of God. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? and for the desperate city of Sodom.

And God hears his cry. Will we pray in the same time? We know more of God. We've seen more of the grace of God than Abraham could have ever imagined.

Can we not pray like Abraham? And if we do, what a great difference, what an incredible difference that could make.

It's hard to pray. We need to learn to pray together because it's easier to pray together than it is to pray alone. We need to pray alone. Abraham prayed alone. But can we not spur one another in our prayer meetings?

[33 : 26] Not only to pray about the nitty gritty of everyday life and the problems and burdens of one another, but to pray that God would have compassion and mercy on the places in which we live and the people who are around us and indeed on the nations of the world.

We'll sing to close 402. Thank you.