

Who are you pleading for in your prayers?

Message for Sunday, November 21, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 18:16-33

1) It is good to pray for yourself

It was a week before Little Johnnie's birthday, and he was saying his bedtime prayers. In a loud voice he listed all the things he wanted. "Do not pray so loudly," his mother instructed. "The Lord is not hard of hearing!"

"Maybe he isn't," admitted Johnnie, "but Grandma is."

Sometimes our prayers are about ourselves, and there's nothing wrong with that, Johnnie's example being a bit of an exception. Jesus taught his disciples to ask for things, for his heavenly Father would be glad to give good gifts to his children [Matthew 7:7-11]. So don't feel guilty when you pray about yourself and for yourself.

2) It is good to pray for others

The Bible also teaches us to pray for others. There are specific instructions for that, such as:

James 5:16, New Revised Standard Version:
Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

1 Timothy 2:1-2, New Living Translation:
I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. As you make your requests, plead for God's mercy upon them, and give thanks. Pray this way for kings and all others who are in authority, so that we can live in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity.

There are examples of people praying for others. Paul often begins his letters by telling the readers that he is praying for them:

Romans 1:9, New Revised Standard Version:
For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers.

Even Jesus prayed for others, such as his disciples:

John 17:9, 11b, 15-18, New Living Translation:
"My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you... Holy Father, keep them and care for them—all those you have given me—so that they will be united just as we are... I'm not asking you to take them out of the

world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They are not part of this world any more than I am. Make them pure and holy by teaching them your words of truth. As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world."

Both the example of the Bible and the teaching of the Bible is that it is good to pray for others. With that as an introduction, let's look at today's passage about the life of Abraham and Sarah.

3) Abraham pleads for the people of Sodom

Last week we read about the three visitors who came to Abraham and Sarah, telling them that they would have a son in nine months. Now two of those visitors leave, heading to the city of Sodom. The one who is left tells Abraham that the plan is to destroy Sodom because of its wickedness.

In the Bible text, it says that it is the Lord personally speaking with Abraham. This causes all kinds of questions and confusion, because other places in the Bible it says that no one has ever seen God [John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16; 1 John 4:12]. (That in itself is confusing, because the Bible also says that Moses talked with God "face to face, as a man speaks with his friend." But I digress.) So some Bible scholars think it was an angel who speaks as the representative of God; some think it was Jesus who made an early appearance on earth. I'm going to take the weasel approach and just say, "I don't understand it, but I'm not going to worry about it."

The main point I'm getting from this passage is how Abraham pleads for the people of Sodom, trying to save them.

Genesis 18:24, Today's English Version:
If there are fifty innocent people in the city, will you destroy the whole city? Won't you spare it in order to save the fifty?

God agrees, and Abraham continues, all the way down to God sparing Sodom if there are just ten righteous people there.

In effect, Abraham is praying for those people. He is talking with God, asking for God's favour on these other people. It's not a normal prayer, though. Abraham keeps at it, over and over and over; he is *pleading* for these people. He's not just asking for God to bless them, to help them with some problem; he's praying for their very lives.

Lots of times you pray for other people. Several people from Fletcher and Merlin churches have told me they pray for me every day. That means so very, very much to

me! I welcome others to do the same. Pray for me to have wisdom, to be disciplined in my use of time, and for me stay close to God in my own prayer life.

Have you ever *pleaded* for someone? You've kept that person constantly in your prayers for days or weeks or even years.

It may be someone who isn't interested in your prayers, who doesn't care about the things of God. Here's what Charles Spurgeon said about this:

If they [lost sinners] will not hear you speak, they cannot prevent your praying. Do they jest at your exhortations? They cannot disturb you at your prayers. Are they far away so that you cannot reach them? Your prayers can reach them. Have they declared that they will never listen to you again, nor see your face? Never mind, God has a voice which they must hear. Speak to Him, and He will make them feel. Though they now treat you despitefully, rendering evil for your good, follow them with your prayers. Never let them perish for lack of your supplications. (*Metropolitan Pulpit*, vol. 18, pp. 263–264).

And now let's switch that around: Have you ever asked someone to pray for you? Have you ever come to the point of wanting – *needing* – others to join to help you in prayer? If not, why not? Embarrassed? Too private? Those answers are a sign that we still have room to grow as a church, if we cannot be open with one another.

4) Prayer and action go together

A homeless woman went to see the minister of a church in England, to ask for help. He was very busy and also didn't have any money on hand, so he promised to pray for her. This woman later wrote this poem and handed it to the director of welfare for that district.

I was hungry,
and you formed a humanities group to discuss
my hunger.
I was imprisoned,
and you crept off quietly to your chapel and
prayed for my release.
I was naked,
and in your mind you debated the morality of
my appearance.
I was sick,
and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
I was homeless,
and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter
of the love of God.

I was lonely,
and you left me alone to pray for me.
You seem so holy, so close to God...
But I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.

I like the way that William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army put it: “Work as if everything depended upon your work, and pray as if everything depended upon your prayer.”

Epilogue, an invitation to praying together:

Let me tell you about an early experience I had with prayer. We were sitting around a table in one of the classrooms of the church I was part of. It was coming towards nine o'clock in the evening, and the Bible study group I had joined was coming to a close. This was my first time with the group, and they had warmly welcomed me, putting aside any nervousness I may have felt.

We closed our books and I was about to push my chair back and stand up when the leader said, “And now, before we go, let's pray.” I thought to myself, “Oh yeah, prayer; I guess you're supposed to do that in church.”

But what happened next was unlike any prayer I had ever heard before. I was used to hearing the preacher pray from the pulpit, with the carefully chosen phrases and booming voice of an orator. The first person who prayed spoke in very plain language: simple, and straight to the point. Then the person sitting next to her also prayed. I don't remember a thing about that prayer; all I remember is a feeling of panic: they're going around the circle, and I'm next! My turn came, and I said something about being thankful to God for this group. One by one, the others in the group prayed.

Then one of them, obviously having listened carefully to the questions and doubts I had been raising during the discussion, prayed specifically for me. He thanked God for my openness with my struggles around my faith. He prayed that I would find answers to my questions, but even more, that I would trust God as the one who not only has the answers, who himself *is* the answer. He also prayed for wisdom for me in my schoolwork that week.

It was the first time I can recall someone praying for me by name, specifically bringing my concerns before God, and asking for God's touch in my life. It felt like being wrapped in a great big hug.

Would you like that?