

Community Church of Issaquah

July 28, 2024

Bargaining with God

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You wouldn't think that something that happened more than 4000 years ago would have any relevance to our lives today, would you? Or even something someone said 2300 years ago. It doesn't seem logical, especially since neither of these people spoke English! But here we are in 2024 making a connection between Abraham and Jesus and trying to make sense of their views of prayer. There's a common thread there, and it's worth talking about. First, Abraham.

There he was way back in 2066 BC, the man chosen to be the founding father of God's nation, hanging out in the Jordan Valley not far from the Dead Sea. Not far from Abraham – or can I use his Hebrew name, Abram – were five cities in the southern end of the Dead Sea, in the area of Canaan. Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim and Zora (also known as Beta). These five cities were each ruled by their own king, but they weren't autonomous. The whole area was a part of the Kingdom of the Elamites, ruled by a very mean king.

When the five kings decided they had had enough after about 19 years of dealing with the Elamites, they began a rebellion. The king of Elam was having none of that, so he gathered warriors from all around and squashed the

rebellion, killing thousands, pillaging their cities and taking the remaining people captive. Among those captives taken from the city of Sodom was Abram's nephew, Lot. We don't know why he did it, perhaps to free his family member, but Abram gathered his own army and drove out the Elamites, freeing the five cities and their people.

Somehow, in the midst of all that war and destruction, the people of these cities took a turn for the worse and became totally evil – so much so that God decided it would be best to do away with them. Now you and I would probably say, “If they're so awful that God wants to destroy them, let God go for it.” Or if we were compassionate, we might even suggest that the bad people should be weeded out and the good people could stay. Abram had heard the rumor about the impending destruction of everyone in the five cities and it concerned him greatly. So, when three strangers came to his village and were welcomed by Abram into his home, the rumor became a reality. The Scriptures call these three strangers angels of God, but it doesn't tell who they actually were or why they were even travelling to Abram's village. But they revealed to Abram what God intended.

Having confirmed God's intention, the three set out to continue their journey on to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We won't dwell on the chaos that occurred while they were guests in Lot's home. Suffice it to say, things did not look good for them or any of Lot's family when the villagers came looking for the strangers. While this was unfolding, there was Abram, making his plea with God to spare the cities. Though it doesn't take the same

format as prayer that is familiar to us, nonetheless, Abram was engaged in a desperate prayer with God.

He began bargaining. What if there were 50 good, would God spare the cities? God said yes. Now, what if there were 45 good people? God said yes. Well, what about 40? And what about 30? Then what about 20? And finally, what if there were 10 decent people? God said yes, he would spare them. Sadly, as the story unfolded, there were not even 10 righteous in the whole area. As a result, not only Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, but so were Admah and Zeboim. Only Beta was spared. We know that the only folks who made it out alive were Lot and his family – except for his wife who didn't listen to the instructions about leaving, looked back though she was told not to, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Not a pretty picture.

The question arises then, what was the point of Abram's persistent prayer? And what about our prayers? Here are some other questions that come to my mind when I think about Abram and about prayer.

- Is prayer just a means to change God's mind?
- Is prayer how we can negotiate with God?
- Does prayer make things happen or does it just change our perception about what already is?

Abram asks God for more patience, more mercy, more grace. His persistence is something that is surely received by God. That's the connection to Luke's account of Jesus teaching his disciples about prayer – specifically, how to pray. Sure, the passage begins with the words that the

modern church calls the “Lord’s Prayer” and there are ten thousand sermons to be given about that. But it’s what follows in the passage that connects Jesus to Abram.

The core message seems to be “be persistent.” Do you need to bug your neighbor in the middle of the night for some bread for your unexpected guests? Keep knocking even when he says “no” several times. If you are just persistent, he’ll get up and give you what you asked for. He’ll change his mind. One common thread between the story of Abram and this neighbor is that God’s mind seems to be changeable.

Sometimes our persistent asking turns into bargaining, just like Abram. We want to change God’s mind. Or at least aim for a different outcome. And guess what!? You and I do that, too. You don’t think so? Maybe it’s something like this that someone might pray, “Lord, if you just make these drugs work and I get cured of cancer, I’ll really try to be a happier person.” That is an example of bargaining prayers, and trust me, they are often persistent. They were not or are not just a one-time ‘say it and forget it’ prayer. And I think if everyone is honest, each can say that we try to be persistent, and often even try to bargain with God.

We pray at church. We pray at home. We pray in many places and for many things. So how do we know when and how God is listening and responding? What does the church say that is honest and loving about a life of persistent prayer? First, we need to know that prayer is not in vain, even when we admit that it is not a magic

formula. Don't stop praying even if you feel discouraged or hopeless. Someone once told me, "Pastor, I've been praying that my husband would get better for years now, and he isn't better. I just get discouraged and think it's not worth it to keep on prayer for him." It's a difficult response to say, "Don't give up. God is listening and something will happen to answer your prayers."

Second, even the life of Christ is centered on the principle of "your will be done" and not mine. In truth, each of us wants things to happen the way WE want them to happen. It is difficult for us to say, "Whatever you want, God, is fine with me." Behind such a statement is the inner desire to have things happen to satisfy our desires. Honest prayers put the person praying into a submissive role, and for many, that is not where we wish to be. If you are like me, we want to be in charge. It's difficult to give the reins to God and allow the Lord to drive us to the place God wants.

And lastly, we need the assurance that persistent prayer comes with the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The gift of persistent prayer is that it brings us into a transforming relationship with God. There are certainly times when we pray that the presence of God seems to be very distant from where we are in life. I've had personal times in my own prayer life when I felt as if I were praying to an empty space. But I've learned that when I am persistent in my prayers, the more I pray and the more earnest I am about seeking God's answers, the nearer I feel the presence of the Holy Spirit.

As we pray, we should acknowledge God is **our** God, and we need to let God's will – not ours – be done. You can ask whatever you think sustains you, including the hard stuff, or even the things we think are impossible. But when you do persistently pray, get ready. Expect a result or a response. Be ready to be held close by the Holy Spirit; be ready to be challenged; be ready to be blessed; and be ready even to be changed by the Spirit.

But whatever you do, pray with persistence. It's a simple message that rings true from Abram to Jesus to you.