

Prevailing Prayer

Genesis 18

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Let us pray. Lord Jesus we thank you for your dear word and we thank you that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. We thank you Lord that you are able to make this word live in our hearts and our spirits so that it is a very word of God to us that will build up our faith in you. Thank you Lord, Amen.

We are studying the Old Testament chapter by chapter on Sunday evenings in order to live in the faith that God has for us. So loved ones, the question that I wanted to start with tonight is "What is the place of prayer"? That's a relevant question if you look at Matthew 6:8 which seems to wipe out the need for prayer. It's Jesus warning us against empty phrases, "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." So why ask him -- if your Father knows what you need before you ask him why bother? Why not just be quiet -- he knows anyway, aren't we just wasting our breath? So why do you pray? Why do you pray if God knows already what you're going to ask him?

The answer to that is in this last piece of Genesis 18 that we are studying. In Genesis 18:1, "And the Lord appeared to him" that is Abraham, "by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, 'My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.'" And what we said last week was that we know that it wasn't God that appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre and yet it says, "and the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre." We knew it wasn't God, because it says in John 1:18 that "No one has ever seen God." Because remember that if you see God you will be struck dead, so it wasn't God that appeared to Abraham. But the verse in John 1:18 goes on, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." One of those three men was Jesus -- that is the obvious interpretation; that it is Jesus that actually appeared to Abraham there.

There is that remarkable verse in John that reinforces that and we have looked it before in John 8:56; Jesus says, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad. The Jews then said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'" So Jesus, of course, existed from before the foundation of the world. It was him that appeared to Abraham with two angels, and repeated the promise that God had made to Abraham when Abraham was 75. Then he repeated it to him when he was 86 and then he repeated to him again when he was 99. He said, "You're going to be the father of a great multitude of people" but Abraham would continually say "No I have no children of my own" and he made some errors on the way. He could not believe that God would bring that about. Then Jesus appeared again with two angels and said, "No, this is what's going to happen; you are going to be the father of many nations and Sarah is going to have a son." This wasn't easy for Abraham to understand because Sarah was at that time 89 years of age -- she was 10 years younger than Abraham.

Then there's that very human, kindly, gentle interview between God and Sarah. It is so kindly and encouraging to our hearts. Genesis 18:9, "They said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'She is in the tent.' The Lord said, 'I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife

shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of woman. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son. But Sarah denied saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'No, but you did laugh.'"

It's so nice of God to say, "Yeah I heard you, don't bluff it, I heard you saying it, but still I'm going to give you a son." The possibility of Sarah at that age having a son, was because Sarah had already been included in Jesus' death from before the foundation of the world. Her old worn womb had been destroyed and he had made her womb new and created it new, so that in fact the son, in God's work, had already been born and all he needed was the faith of Sarah to manifest it that in time. So that's what we've shared up to this moment.

Now going back to the question that we started with loved ones, here's the beginning of the answer in Genesis 18:16, "Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?'" Now you can guess what he was about to do because you remember what Sodom was like if you look back to Genesis 13:13, "Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord." So the Lord had resolved to destroy Sodom, and in Genesis 18:17, "The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.'" So God said, "I am going to use Abraham to do a mighty work in this world, and I want him to understand why I am destroying Sodom." And loved ones that's what we need to see in our lives; God will do mighty things through you and me if we have faith in him and believe him.

But that's not really why he has put us here in this world. He has put us here in this world for one reason and Jesus explained it to his disciples in John 15:13, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." That's why God put us here in the world, so that we could come to understand him and understand his ways and know his mind and know why he does things and we could feel with him and think with him. That's why God has put us here -- he wants you and me to understand him. I mentioned last time that Einstein said in answer to someone's question, "Why do you spend so much time studying how the world was created" he said "I want to understand how God thinks." That's why the Father has put us here; he wants us to understand him. He wants you to be his friend. You may say, "I'm just a little nothing, I'm just a little creature, I can't understand him." God wants you to understand him. He wants you, personally, to understand him. If you, personally, don't understand him, he will miss a beautiful plan that he has in the universe that he has planned for your existence so that you can understand him.

Now if you're sitting there thinking, "I don't know about that." Loved ones, you think of it yourself; you know there is nothing as unsatisfying in a friendship as being with a person that doesn't understand you. You who are husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, there is nothing so frustrating as being with a human being and feeling that you don't understand

them. You think of the agonies we go to, to get each other to understand what we're feeling -- that's the heart of life.

Remember what God himself said, "And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." John 17:3. The whole purpose of our creation is that we would know our Father in heaven and that we would understand him and therefore that will build our confidence in him. Because isn't it true that when you have confidence in a person, when you know the way they think, when you can understand the way they reason things out, you feel good. "Good. I know where I am with that person." Now this is the Father of the whole universe and he has deigned to enable you to understand him and he has deigned to explain himself to you, so loved ones don't back into hiding behind being a little creature. God our Father wants you to understand, that's why he said, "I know I have resolved that I will have to destroy Sodom. Shall I hide it from this man that I'm asking to trust me for so many miracles in this world?" And he said, "No I won't" and the reason was he wanted us to understand.

In Genesis 18:20: "Then the Lord said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know.'" We talk in milliseconds, God talks in a billion, billionth second. He's just taking his great omniscient in this situation and he's expanding it into a few seconds so that we'll know the way he thinks. In other words he is omniscient; he knows all that's going on in Sodom. He knows all that is going on in every mind there and in every life. But he goes back and explains to us how he comes to that. And he explains to us that he himself does not that know that because he makes it so, he knows it because he has read their hearts and that's why he says this; "I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know." He is so gracious that he says it to us that way so we will know that it's not him that made them that way, and in his great omniscient he knows it -- in a billion, billionth second. He knows it because he has read them. He has read what their free wills have brought about in their lives.

That's the way he is with you; he knows it even a second before you do it, but he only knows it because of your will to do it. He only knows it because he, as quick as a flash, can go in one ear and out again. He is omniscient; he knows all that we are going to do, but he knows it just because he can read us, he doesn't know it because we are puppets or marionettes that he makes to do these things.

Verse 22: "So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Lord." Because Lot his nephew was in Sodom, "And Abraham still stood before the Lord." Why did he still stand before the Lord when he knew that these angels and Jesus himself were going off to destroy Sodom and to destroy his nephew? Why did he still stand before the Lord? Loved ones you'll find the beginnings of the answer in Ezekiel 22 and it's the beginnings of the answer to this question "Why pray when God already knows what you're going to ask?" Ezekiel 22:29: "The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without redress. And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none." It's amazing isn't it? "And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; their way have I requited upon their heads, says the Lord God."

There's common grace, and common grace is God's preserving grace that holds the whole earth in position and holds it together and refuses to destroy the earth again because of Jesus' death, he refuses to destroy the earth. He continues to reign his reign on the just and un-just to give them another 70 years to realize what he has done for them in Jesus. So common grace is given to all men and women freely and part of the common grace is the commitment to authority; to have authority over the world to subdue it so then even men that move millions of dollars do it by God's own strength that he continues to give even to people who rebel against him. Common grace is given to all men. Redeeming grace is given to those who have faith. Common grace is given to all men whether they ask for it or not, whether they believe for it or not. Redeeming grace is given to men and women who believe for it or to other men and women for whom somebody has believed. Now it can't be redeeming grace in the sense of regenerating – a person won't be regenerated unless they are willing, but the benefits of God's mercy are given in response to some people who will believe him for it. But if you don't believe him for it you cannot receive those benefits of redeeming grace. In other words God has put us all into Jesus, has destroyed us all and renewed us all in him, and then he says that can only be brought from eternity into time through faith. That's what it means when he says in Ephesians 2:8: "By grace, by my sheer grace I have foreseen all that you have become. I have foreseen all the problems in your life. I have put them and you into my son Jesus and I've destroyed them all. I have raised you all up and I have made you whole. By grace you have saved but only through faith. You can receive that only by believing that I have done it."

So it is with these people; God is saying, "I wanted to give these people a chance and give them mercy. I sought for a man who would stand in the gap before me for the land that I should not destroy it -- I sought for just one little man who would ask me not to destroy it so that I would not be a mighty dictator and I would destroy this land and I wouldn't destroy that land. I can't do that; I committed myself to your free will; I cannot come down and save you whether you want to be saved or not. I cannot come down and hold back the justice of my wrath just because I chose to. I can only do it if somebody will ask me to do it. I will only pour out the benefits of redeeming grace in response to the action of even one little free will in this world. But if I don't hold myself to that, then I become a puppeteer and I become a dictator and I cannot do that, otherwise I will produce little robots who will not be able to enjoy my love or to love me. So I have committed myself to making the full provision; here is the feast laid out. Here are all your financial problems, all your sicknesses, all your sorrows; they are all laid out and they are destroyed my son and I have made you this feast. But I cannot tip the table over the top of you -- you have to come and get it. You have to believe that I have provided it and you have to receive it by faith knowing that it's yours. And if there isn't one man who will come to me and plead that before me, the lamb will not be destroyed and I will have to let my wrath go forward.

It's amazing but that's the situation. That's the situation for India, California, Africa, it's the situation for Australia, and it's the situation for your family; God is always looking for some man or woman who will stand in the gap, because if one person will stand up and say, "Lord will you have mercy upon this land. Will you have mercy upon this family? Lord will you hold back your hand so that your grace can continue to appeal to their hearts. I know you can't make them accept you, but Lord I ask for more time for them." God is able to respond to that. But loved ones he has made it a simple basic fact of dealing with we men and women that he cannot give us anything unless we exercise faith for it. He cannot do it against our will or apart from our will. He cannot do anything against his own will, but he cannot do anything apart from our will. This is why it was so important that Abraham continued to stand before the Lord.

This whole truth is reinforced by God's statement of his own dependence on our asking in a few

chapters later in Ezekiel 36:37, "Thus says the Lord God: 'This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their men like a flock. Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of men. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'" So God knew, "If I can increase these people like the flock at Jerusalem so that the waste cities will be filled with flocks of men, then the other people will know that I am the Lord." Yet it's amazing in verse 37, "Thus says the Lord God; 'This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them.'" God says, "I will let you ask me to do this for you and if you don't ask me, I can't do it." It's overwhelming isn't it? You don't want to believe it because it puts such a responsibility upon us that we say, "It cannot be." But loved one's there it is in black and white. "This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them; to increase their men like a flock." God certainly knew what was needed, he even knew what we were going to ask but unless we asked it, he could not do it. So that you're very clear on this; it's because if God did not operate on that principal with us men and women, then he would end up being a dictator, a puppeteer, who would come down whenever he chose or whenever he wanted, and save this person and not save that person and then you're into pre-destination. But God is not like that. God is the one who, in his own son Jesus, weeps over Jerusalem and says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks but you would not." Implying there is only one thing more powerful than God -- and that is the little human will. Loved one's God refuses to act apart from your will and mine. So you can sense that there is a deep yearning in God's heart for men and women who will stand in the gap and too often in the world's history he has found none. There is that little story that Jesus went up to heaven and the angel Gabriel asked him what arrangements he had made now that he had left the earth. And he said, "I have appointed twelve men who will translate to all the other people in the world what I have done for them." And Gabriel said, "What if they fail?" Jesus answered, "I've made no other arrangements."

So you get back to "he has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet." And obviously there's a truth in the fact that you have certain things that you can do that none of the rest of us can do. You have certain relationships with loved ones, with colleagues at work that nobody else has; you're the only one to stand in the gap for those people. That's reinforced again by the whole teaching that you get in Roman's 8, and it's very touching when you read it. It's the dependence of the third person of the Trinity on us. Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." It's so overwhelming that you hesitate even to say it, but you see verse 27: "He who searches the hearts of men." God actually searches your heart to see what is in it, and where he sees in it the Spirit interceding according to his will, he is able to answer. So you cannot believe it, can you; that God would search our hearts, our miserable hearts. But God himself is tied to what is in our hearts and that's why sometimes God doesn't answer prayers -- he answers hearts. That's why there's nothing as powerful as a father's yearning heart for his daughter or his son, nothing more powerful. Or a son or daughter's yearning heart for a mother or father. Or a friend's yearning heart for his colleague or his roommate -- there is nothing as powerful as a heart that yearns for these things because Satan is going around the earth walking up and down seeking whom he may devour. So here is the blessed Spirit of God going up and down the earth searching men and women's hearts, looking to see what is in our hearts. And God actually acts in accordance with the things that are in our hearts, he cannot act apart from that. And the Holy Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God only if he can find a body to live in because he's a Spirit. Only if he can find a heart and will that is willing to yearn with his yearning can he intercede for the saints according to the will of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit comes from the son down into our hearts and then yearns up to the

Father's heart; Jesus can only speak to the Father through hearts that are governed by the Holy Spirit, and that's how Jesus is interceding all the time for the world. That's how he brings about the salvation of the world; he can only intercede through the Holy Spirit and our hearts to his Father. Then the Father gives to Jesus what is needed, and Jesus manifests it in the earth.

But it's overwhelming to think that God actually searches your heart to see what you're yearning for someone else, and then he is able to act upon that. So what your heart wants, that's what God answers and he cannot answer apart from that. It takes you away completely from the idea that God is some kind of theistic God. You remember that theism is the belief that there's a God up there somewhere who is winding the world up and setting it running and doesn't intervene at all in its activity. It removes you completely from a passive Buddha God who is not changed by anything. Suddenly you realize there are a thousand, million things that God is only going to be able to do if your heart yearns in the right way for the right things. God has tied himself to your need, loved ones, so don't be casual about your prayers. Don't be casual about your parents or your friends and think God will do it anyway. No, be assured he will not do it anyway. Be assured if you do not continue to yearn before God for those loved one's, God is not free to act without taking the position of a dictator who will just govern things himself, and he will not do it. So know that your prayers are vital. God is always looking for a man or woman to stand in the gap.

That's reinforced by the whole principal of faith that Jesus taught us in Matthew 9:27: "And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, 'Have mercy on us Son of David.' When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to him, 'Yes Lord.' Then he touched their eyes saying, 'According to your faith be it done to you.' And their eyes were opened." That's the principal; it is unto you according to your faith. If you go into this coming week full of fears and anxieties and full of the things that may go wrong, then it will be unto you according to your faith. Not because of the power but because of the thinking. Because when you have faith in those things, you're having faith that Satan is king of this world and that he has not been destroyed and that he still rules. You're having faith that he's able to destroy your life and mess it up with all kinds of things going wrong with your finances all kinds of things going wrong with your friends or your colleagues, all kinds of things going wrong with your business and you're simply believing Satan's work. You believe his lie that he is the undisputed king of the universe, so it is unto you according to your faith.

Or you can believe what Paul said "I Glory in nothing but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me." The world, all that intractable world that I face this week, that boss that is so hard to understand or work for, that situation with that person that has got messed up completely, that difficulty with my car even. I don't want to be silly but do you see that the engine block of a car is just as fluid as the Holy Spirit; it is made up of protons and neutrons that are whirling around at tremendous speed and the Father is able to even affect those things. See, the whole world has been put into Jesus, has been destroyed, and remade. It's all made right and new and clean, and you can bring it from eternity into time through your faith. It will be unto you according to your faith.

So when you have loved ones that are miserable, defeated people don't look at the miserable defeat; don't look at Satan's work. Look at them in Jesus; "Henceforth we know no man after the flesh but we know every man after the Spirit because every man is in Christ Jesus. Christ has died for all, therefore all have died" and see them in Jesus new and whole. It's not just good psychology that's silly stuff -- there's no power in that except psychic power and that works no permanent changes.

It's not that. It is truth; Christ has died for all therefore we all have died, therefore we have all been raised, therefore it is right to see us all that way and it will be unto you according to your faith. That is the time machine that brings the gifts of eternity into time.

So that's why Abraham did what he did and you remember how it goes on -- he really believed his God! I thought after the first prayer he would be struck dead! Genesis 18:22: "So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said, 'Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous, fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'" And God was pleased. Why? Because back in verse 19: "No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice." God wanted Abraham to be righteous and to be just and Abraham believed that that was God's nature. So he appealed to God on behalf of his own nature and he said "Now Lord you said the sinful souls shall die, but the righteous will live. So Lord you are going to destroy the righteous and the wicked together here. Should they not be dealt with separately?" Let's look at Ezekiel 18:20 and I would encourage you to take God and his nature seriously in your prayer life: "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." So Abraham went to God and said, "Lord is this not your nature? Is this not the way you operate? Lord I ask you then, because this is your nature, will you act this way in this situation?"

God expects you to take his nature seriously and to deal with him according to his nature and not to play games with him and not to say nice little prayers thinking that you're turning some little prayer wheel -- if you turn it enough times God will answer. God expects you to come to him and plead with him and pray through with him. That's why the Korean Pastor Cho said "Envision your definite objective. Have a burning desire for it and pray through to an assurance that God wants you to have it." That's what this is; it's praying through to an assurance that God wants you to have it. Going round the situation again and again with God, finding out the promises in his word that reinforce the promise that you should have this, and then plead that before God until you get to know God's nature and he says to you "No my child you're missing it; this is what's true." Then you say "Lord alright." Or God says "You're right. You're pleading rightly with me and I will act." Loved ones that's what prayer is and that's why this dear man had such bravery, at least it seems to me its bravery.

Verse 25: "Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fair as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" And the Lord said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.'" I would have called it a day there at that point. "Abraham answered, 'Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I am who but dust and ashes.'" Yeah you are, and you should remember it. "Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And I expected thunder and lightening and that the guy would shrivel up. But God is not like us, he runs to a different tune, doesn't he? "And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him and said, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of 40 I will not do it.'" I would have pulled Abraham's coat and said sit down. "Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there?' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, "Behold, I have

taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there?' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there?' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place."

That power you and I have with God, and we are lucky people, aren't we? So loved one's, will you begin to pray to God that way? Begin to talk things over with your Father and find out from him why he won't do whatever you're asking -- he'll explain it to you, or keep on asking until he does. But that's our dear Father, so gracious.

Let's pray.

Dear Father we would ask forgiveness for the way we have treated you like an impersonal machine. Father we would ask forgiveness for the way we have often said our prayers, that's the way we so often put it: "We said our prayers." Father forgive us for that and that we have not really prayed. Forgive us Lord that we've thought it was how often we said a thing that counted or it was the way we said it or even the time we spent praying. Instead of seeing Lord, that you are a dear warm hearted Fatherly person who loves us and knows us and is dependent on us wanting things for the rest of our brothers and sisters here on earth. You have done everything you can without actually lifting us into heaven against our wills and therefore you have committed yourself to us exercising our wills on behalf of our friends. Father thank you for showing us so plainly through Abraham that you will listen to us and that you will be willing to discuss things with us and talk things over with us and that as soon as we begin to treat you like a real, warm, living person we'll begin to hear you speak to us. We'll begin to see your will being done in our lives and the lives of our friends. So Father we thank you. Thank you for your kindness and your great humility and for committing yourself to depending on us so that we are as important as this. Lord thank you. Thank you.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.