

## *Do My Prayers Really Make a Difference?*

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany – February 10/11, 2007

### Sermon Background Study

Genesis 18:22-26, 32-33 (NRSV)

[After Abraham hosts what he thinks are three men but are actually God and two angels, God decides to reveal to Abraham the coming destruction of the city of Sodom. After all, God has chosen Abraham to be the patriarch of the people of God. Abraham proves himself up to the task, as he negotiates with God over the future of the city.]

<sup>22</sup>So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup>Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup>Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? <sup>25</sup>Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” <sup>26</sup>And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”

<sup>32</sup>Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” <sup>33</sup>And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

James 5:13-18 (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. <sup>18</sup>Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

*A few weeks ago, we asked you to share with us some of your questions about prayer. This week and next, we'll consider the two most asked questions. Today's is no surprise: Does prayer really make a difference?*

Why do we pray? We pray because Jesus told us to. That is certainly a good reason. We pray because it makes us feel better; we find peace and comfort as we are reminded of our joys and unburden ourselves of our concerns. But do we pray because we believe that our prayers really make a difference in what God does or doesn't do?

*A surprising God*

A young woman, very active in our congregation, once came to talk to me about prayer. She told me that of all the things we profess as Christians, the most difficult for her to believe is that God really hears her prayers, one little person in the midst of the entire cosmos. Not the virgin birth. Not the resurrection. But that God actually listens to her . . . and to you . . . and to me.

But past the question of whether God listens, lies an even bigger question. Do our prayers really affect what God will or won't do? Doesn't God know everything? Doesn't God always know what is best anyway? I don't know how a philosopher would answer these questions, but there are several great OT stories that ought to reassure us.

#### John Wesley A Prayer of Submission

My prayer life has been strengthened by reading and absorbing the prayers of others. These prayers help to reshape the desires of my heart. I found this prayer in a volume of the *Upper Room Spiritual Classics*. The prayer is from a collection published by Wesley in 1733, before his mission in Georgia. I've abridged the prayer and updated its language a bit.

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, but you, all the days of my life.

*I give you my understanding.* May it be my only care to know you, your perfections, your works, and your will.

*I give you my will.* May I have no will of my own. Whatsoever you will, may I will, and that only. May I will your glory in all things, as you do, and make that my end in everything. May I ever say with the Psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.” May I delight to do your will, O God, and rejoice to accept it. Whatever threatens me, let me say, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.” And whatever befalls me, let me give thanks, since it is your will.

(continued in the text page on page 2)

Genesis 18 tells the story of a negotiation between Abraham and the LORD God. God is about to destroy the wicked city of Sodom, but Abraham asks God whether it is right to sweep away the righteous with the wicked. What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will God then spare the city? How about forty-five righteous people? Forty? Thirty? . . . the negotiations go on . . . Twenty? What if there are only ten? God finally replies, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." In the end, ten can't be found, though Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family are allowed to escape the city.

Consider the story of Moses and God at Mt. Sinai. God has rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and led them to the mountain. There, Moses ascends the mountain and is given God's covenant instruction for the people. Yet, while Moses is on the mountain, the people begin to whine and moan, fearing that Moses won't return. They even build a golden calf and worship it, praising it for delivering them from Egypt. God is so angered by the people's betrayal that he tells Abraham, "Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). God is going to start all over again! Yet, Moses intercedes with God. He reminds God of the promise that God had made to Abraham. "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on the people" (32:14).

Changed his mind. . . . This may not square with some of your conceptions about God, but the biblical revelation of God is of a loving parent who cares, who listens, who suffers, who desires a relationship with each of us, and respects us far more than we often do ourselves. This is what is unchangeable about God.

James, Jesus' half-brother, urges believers to pray in all things. When we are cheerful and when we are suffering. If we are sick, we are to pray for healing. Elijah prayed for drought and got drought. He prayed for rain and got rain. As James puts it, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

*Does prayer make any difference?*

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes

"God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either."

At the risk of piling on the biblical stories, here's another one (see 2 Kings 20:1-11). Hezekiah, king of Judah, was one of the few good kings of either Israel or Judah. Hezekiah fell ill and was near death when Isaiah, God's prophet, told him that the LORD had said Hezekiah would not recover. It was time for the king to get his house in order. In his sorrow, the king wept bitterly and prayed to the LORD, reminding God that he had always been faithful to God and done what is good in God's sight. Before Isaiah had even gotten out of the building, the LORD told him to go back to the king and tell him that he would be healed and would live another fifteen years. . . . Quite a story. Quite a God.

*Of course our prayers make a difference.  
We can influence those who love us, even God.*

Wesley's prayer continued

*I give you my affections.* Dispose of them all. Be my love, my fear, my joy; and may nothing have any share in them . . . What you love, may I love; what you hate, may I hate . . .

*I give you my body.* May I glorify you in it, and preserve it holy, fit for you, O God, to dwell in. May I neither indulge it, nor use too much rigor toward it; but keep it, so far as I am able, healthy, vigorous, and active, and fit to do you all manner of service.

*I give you all my worldly goods.* May I prize them and use them only for you. May I faithfully restore to you, in the poor, all that you have entrusted to me, above the necessities of life. May I be content to part with them too, whenever you may require.

*I give you my reputation.* May I never value it, but only in respect of you; nor endeavor to maintain it, but only as it may serve and advance your honor in the world.

*I give you myself and my all.* Let me look upon myself to be nothing, and to have nothing, apart from you. Be my sole governor; be my portion and my all.

O my God and my all, whenever I am tempted to break this solemn promise, when I am pressed to conform to the world and to the people and customs that surround me, may my answer be: "I am not my own. I am not for myself, not for the world, but for my God. I will give God the things that are God's. God be merciful to me a sinner."

# Reading With Heart & Mind

February 11 ~ 17

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Sunday Exodus 7:8-25</b> Aaron and Moses arrive in Egypt and confront Pharaoh. The first plague befalls Egypt. What do you think we are supposed to make of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? What could be gained?</p>	<p><b>Monday Exodus 12</b> It is time for the tenth and final plague – death of the first-born. God institutes the Passover. The blood of a lamb spread on the doorway protects the homes of the Hebrews. How does this relate to Jesus' Last Supper and our own practice of Holy Communion?</p>
<p><b>Tuesday Exodus 14</b> The crossing of the Red Sea. What makes this the great salvation event for the Jews? Why does God save them? Note that the people have not yet been given the Ten Commandments. The sequence here is grace, then law.</p>	<p><b>Wednesday Exodus 16</b> The people whine about being in the wilderness. "We'll starve!!" How does God provide food for them? What is most surprising about this? What lesson are they to learn? You might also read John 6:22-59. Jesus is the bread of life.</p>
<p><b>Thursday Exodus 19:9b-20:21</b> The people are consecrated and made ready to receive God's Law. Look carefully at the Ten Commandments. Does anything surprise you? How would you summarize them?</p>	<p><b>Friday Exodus 23:1-12</b> What does God expect of the Israelites? How well do we do at living up to this instruction?</p>
<p><b>Saturday Exodus 32</b> While Moses is on the mountaintop with God, the people rebel and fashion a calf made of gold, which they worship and credit for their salvation. The ancient rabbis saw here the story of Israel's greatest sin. Why would they see it this way? Do we make "golden calves?" What does Moses' intercession say about God and prayer?</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### **www.howeabout.com**

Prof. Leroy Howe and his wife Nancy have been coming to St. Andrew for a few months. Leroy is retired from a 30-year teaching career at Perkins Seminary. I recently learned of Prof. Howe's cleverly named website and blog. You'll find there many insightful postings on matters of faith, theology, and everyday life. There is a large archive of past postings, as well as an on-line version of his newest book, *Explorations in Faith and Belief*. I hope that you'll visit Professor Howe's blog and make it part of your discipleship training plan.

### **Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten Fellowship Groups meeting now. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewacademy.org](mailto:sengle@standrewacademy.org).

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg observes that too many people resort to prayer only when they are desperate. In normal circumstances they are happy to make do with their own resources and abilities. Have you ever been a desperation-only prayerer? What do such desperation-only prayers reveal about our view of God, prayer, and ourselves?

Is there a time that a prayer of yours showed clear and immediate results? What was it like to experience such an answer? Was your request answered as you hoped it would be or were you surprised? How did things work out?

The basic theme of this week's study is plain. Your prayers can change the future. You can influence God to do something that God would not have done without your prayer. Do you really think this is so? Is it just too hard for you to believe that God would pay that much attention to what you say? If it is hard for you believe, what do you do with these stories of Abraham, Moses, and Hezekiah? What really makes them so different from you? Dallas Willard says if we don't believe that our prayers make a real difference, then it is psychologically impossible to pray as we should. What do you think he means? Do you agree? How can we strengthen our confidence that God not only listens to us but is willing to respond with both compassion and action?