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Let Your Worry Fuel Your Prayer Life

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Series: Preach
Genesis 18:22-33

BIG IDEA - HOW TO TURN WORRY INTO PRAYER

Two Cities Church, whether you are in Lexington, whether you're at Davie, whether you're at Butner, or whether you are here in the room, here's what I want you to know, and I want you to take this seriously. You are an inspiration to the region. I pastor a church in Charlottesville, Virginia. We're inspired by what God is doing in you and through you in this church. I know a ton of guys in Virginia who are inspired by what God is doing in this church.

So, I have a request. Can I start with a request? Don't back down. Don't give up. Don't grow weary in doing good, for God is reaping a harvest of righteousness in your midst and across the region. Thank you for what you're doing. I'm profoundly grateful. Guys, like Kyle said, my name is Josh. I've been married to my wife Meredith for 15 years. We have four kids: James, Annie, Abigail, and Charlie, and we are preparing to welcome our fifth in October.

I have to be honest with you guys. I never thought I would be the 12-passenger van guy, but here we are. We're leaning into it. It's going to be fantastic. Let me start with a question. What are you worried about right now? What's weighing on you? What's lurking on the edge of your thoughts all the time?

I asked that question to my Community Group a couple of weeks ago, and my friend (we'll call her *Ashley* for the sake of privacy) said, "I'm really worried about my sister's marriage." Honestly, it has been rocky for years, but it's getting really serious, and they're not sure if they're going to make it. She's trying to think through, "Oh my gosh! What's that going to mean for their kids if they split up?" She's trying, she's praying, they're ministering, but nothing is happening.

Then my friend Rick said, "Man, I'm really worried about my adoptive son's health needs." You see, his family adopted internationally, and it was only after they adopted that they discovered their adoptive son has significant health needs they weren't ready for. I talked to my friend Clara. She's a grandma, and she said, "I'm just really burdened for my grandson's salvation."

You see, unfortunately, her daughter's family is not really walking with the Lord, so her grandson is not being raised in the fear and admonition of Christ, so she's worried. So I interrupted. We have probably 16 or 18 people in our Community Group. I said, "Hey, raise your hand if you are worried right now for either a family member or for someone you care about deeply." Every hand in the room went up.

Here's the deal, guys. I don't know you. Right? I'm some random guest pastor from some town you've probably never heard of, but I bet I know something about you. I bet you're worried about somebody today. There's somebody who is close to you who is perhaps far from God.

Maybe you're like the woman I spoke with after the 9:00 service, and you're worried about your dad. You've been praying for your dad for years. He seems to be hardened to the gospel. He's getting older. His health is deteriorating, and you're like, "God, would you break through? I don't know what to do. I long for my dad to come to know Christ."

Maybe you're a parent who has a teenager. You raised him in church, and he seemed to be interested in the things of God. Then he hit 15, and it was silence. He's bored, and he thinks your faith is naïve and outdated. He's here today because you made him come, but he's looking at his phone right now and not paying attention to a word I say, and you're like, "What do I do? I can't seem to reach him."

Maybe it's your cousin. You guys grew up, and you were so close and saw the world the same way, but it just seems like she has gone off the rails. A couple of years ago, she got divorced, and now she's sharing things on Instagram that are really troubling, and you're like, "What is going on?"

Who are you worried about right now? Guys, if you're here and you have no worries, this sermon is not going to be relevant to you. You can just leave. If your life is figured out, let the rest of us know. But if you're worried, I think this sermon is going to be relevant to you today.

Here's what we're going to do. We're going to look at a time in the Scriptures when Abraham, the father of our faith, was profoundly worried about his nephew, but instead of becoming a ball of anxiety, do you know what Abraham did? He turned his worry into

prayer, what the Bible calls *intercession*. Here's the truth: We have to do something with our worry. Why not let it fuel intercession for those we love and are troubled for?

To help us do that, we're going to learn three principles of intercession from Genesis, chapter 18. So, if you have a Bible, meet me in verse 22. While you're turning there, let me give you a little bit of context because we're just jumping into this story. Abraham had a prodigal nephew named Lot. Lot grew up in a believing family. Let me explain what that means. Everywhere Abraham went, he did two things. He pitched a tent, and he built an altar. So, he built his home, and he built the house of God.

Do you know what he led his family to do every single week? He would gather his immediate family and his extended household around the altar of God, and they would worship Yahweh. They would offer sacrifices. Guess who was there? Lot. Lot grew up in a believing family. Lot grew up with parents who were not perfect but parents who were authentic.

Abraham and Sarah had seen God move. Lot had seen miracles in his family, but he didn't seem to care. He was around the things of God; he didn't seem to be impacted by the things of God. Then he went and moved to a city named *Sodom*. Sodom was notoriously wicked. It was like the Asheville of the Bible, guys.

So, Lot moves to Asheville and gets worse and worse. Abraham is so worried, because he's like, "I can't seem to get through to him. He just seems to be more and more worldly." What if there's somebody like Lot in your life who does not seem to be walking with the Lord? Maybe *you're* Lot this morning. Maybe you're like, "I've been Lot for the last decade, but I'm here."

Abraham was worried about Lot, but then things got really serious, because in chapter 18, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, "Abraham, the victims of Sodom's wickedness have cried out to me. I'm going to investigate, and if it's as bad as it seems, I'm going to destroy that city in judgment."

Well, Lot lived in Sodom. All of a sudden, things were very, very urgent, and that triggered this interaction between Abraham and God in verse 22. ***"So the men…"*** Those were angels who had arrived with the Lord. ***"…turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. Then Abraham drew near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?'"***

If you share this text with a modern person, there are two things they find shocking. First, they find it shocking that God would judge a city for wickedness. Secondly, they find it shocking that Abraham, a man, could have a conversation with God. But if you would have asked someone in Abraham's day the most shocking thing about this text,

they wouldn't have mentioned either of those things. They would have mentioned that phrase *Abraham drew near*.

They would have said, "That's remarkable," because in the ancient mind, you couldn't draw near to the gods. The gods were not to be known. They were not to have a relationship with. The gods were to be feared. The gods were to be obeyed. The gods were to be sacrificed to. So, when it says Abraham drew near to God, it's like, "What? What? You can't do that."

I wonder if there are some of you who feel that way this morning. You still have that same kind of idea about God. You're like, "Yeah, I believe in God generally, and I revere him, but I don't feel close to him. He's kind of an abstract concept more than a living, breathing reality." If you're honest with yourself, you're like, "I'm not like Abraham. I don't draw near to God. Instead, I feel kind of removed from him." Guys, if that's the case, I want to encourage you with something that is biblical truth and is remarkable.

Here's what it is: the God of all creation, the Alpha and the Omega, the one who has always been and who will always be, the one who is perfectly just, the one who dug out the Atlantic Ocean and filled it with water like you might fill up a bathtub, the God who will never die, the God who is immutable and unchanging, the God who is glorious and majestic, the God who is the fulfillment of every good thing you long for…*that* God wants to know you in a personal, intimate, relational way.

So, if you don't feel close to God right now, if you don't feel like you know him in an intimate way, if you're not that close to him, how can you grow in your intimacy? Well, here's the good news: God has revealed himself so that we can know him. He has done it in three big ways.

He has done it through *creation*. Romans 1 says we can know things about God by looking at creation around us. If you go to the beach this summer (I hope you do), and you look out over the Atlantic Ocean for long enough, here's what's going to happen. You're going to make this conclusion: "I am very, very small, and the God who created this is very, very big."

Last night, I watched the sunset over the Winston skyline, and it led me to pray. I just said, "Lord, thank you that you're a creative God who made colors." This summer, don't just enjoy this season; worship through it. Let it teach you about who God is. God has revealed himself through creation.

He has revealed himself through the *canon of Scripture*, the 66 books of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Let me tell you something I've found to be true in my pastoral ministry. Most of us have an ill-shaped view of God. We think things about God

from our upbringing and from social media and from shows we've watched. Do you know what we need to do? We need to correct our image of God with what God is actually like from the Scriptures.

Here's the truth, guys. You don't get your own personal version of God. God is who he is regardless of how I feel about it. God has revealed himself. So, you read the Scriptures, and it's like, "Oh, there are things God loves, and there are things God hates. There are things God affirms, and there are things God condemns." As you read the Scriptures, you realize, "Wow! God has made incredible promises to his people, and he has been faithful to them for generations."

Do you know why I want you to read the Bible every day? Do you know why Pastor Kyle or Pastor Dave or Pastor Caleb gets up here and is like, "Please, please read the Bible"? It's not so you can complete your little religious task list; it's so you can know God. He has revealed himself in the Scriptures. Are you listening to what he's saying?

The third way he has revealed himself, finally and most fully, is through the *person of Jesus Christ*. Hebrews 1:3 says, ***"He*** [Jesus] ***is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature…"*** That means if you want to know what God is like, all you need to do is look at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Let me ask you something. Have you ever wondered this? How does God feel about you when you sin sexually? How does God feel about you when you're so consumed with greed that you love money and use people? How does God feel about you when after 45 years you realize that actually you've never been a real Christian; you've just been full of religious pride and judgmentalism, and you realize, "Oh my gosh! I don't even know the Father"?

How does God feel about you in those moments? All you have to do is look at how Jesus related to people like that. How did Jesus relate to Matthew the tax collector who was full of greed? How did Jesus relate to the woman at the well who had been married five times and was cohabitating with a man at the moment he talked to her? How did Jesus relate to a guy like Nicodemus who knew the Scriptures inside and out but didn't know what it meant to be born again?

How did Jesus relate to *those* people? That's how God relates to *you*, because Jesus is the exact imprint of the nature of God. I have good news and bad news. Here's the good news. The most important, powerful, beautiful, wonderful being in the universe wants to know you better. I say that in an American church context, and we're all like, "Of course he wants to know me better." That should blow our minds.

Imagine if you got a text from Elon Musk this morning that was like, "Hey, would love to grab coffee and get to know you better." You'd be like, "Oh my gosh! Clear the calendar. Cancel the vacation, honey. The first trillionaire in world history wants to know me." Imagine that cute girl you've been kind of talking to a little bit, you know, holds the door… You've noticed her. All of a sudden, you hear from a friend who's friends with her, "Hey, she wants to get to know you better." You'd be like *Gasp!* Your heart would be beating.

Guys, I hope that girl is so cute and thinks you're cute and it's amazing. I hope it goes well. God is so much better than she is. God is so much better than Elon Musk, and he wants to know us. That's the good news. Here's the bad news. If God feels distant and cold and abstract to you, it's not God's fault. Isn't that good news? This is how every religion in the world works. Are you ready for this? Only the best get to know God. Only the top 10 percent, the cream of the crop.

What if that was true? What if only one person in every row got to have a relationship with God, and it was like, "Oh my gosh! I hope I'm doing better than she is today"? No. Praise the Lord that because of the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, God wants to know every single one of us with all of our flaws, all of our brokenness, all of our darkness, and all of our sin. He wants to know us through Christ.

So, if he feels distant and abstract, it's not because his door is closed. It's not because he's in the back somewhere trying to avoid you. He's leaning forward, inviting you to draw near to him. Guys, Abraham didn't have a cold, abstract, distant relationship with God; he had an intimate one. In other places in Scripture he is called God's friend. Because of Christ, you can have that same kind of relationship.

That is so absolutely essential when we're talking about intercessory prayer. It leads to our first principle: *intercession springs from intimacy*. The better you know God, the more boldly you will go to him on behalf of other people. I mean, that makes sense. We all understand this. Like, the better you know the person who runs your floor at Baptist hospital, the more likely you are to go to them on behalf of the new nurse. Right?

The better you know the vice-principal of your middle school, the more likely you are to go to her on behalf of the new teacher in your grade. We go to people we know well with requests. The Bible teaches that if you are in Christ, you do not approach God merely as a subject; you approach God as a son or daughter.

Because of the doctrine of adoption, God is now your heavenly Father. As Romans 8:15 says, ***"…you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'"*** Guys, the Greek word *Abba* there is probably best translated *Dad*. It's the word

a child would use of their father. Here's what I'm trying to drill home to you in this point. If you are in Christ, God is your dad, and he's not a bad dad. He's not an absent dad. He's not an abusive dad. He is a wonderful, perfect, loving dad.

He wants you to come to him at any time with your requests, no matter how selfish or petty they seem to be. He's not waiting for you to clean up your act. Can you imagine if when my 8-year-old daughter came into my bedroom in the middle of the night and woke me up and said, "Dad, I had a bad dream…" Can you imagine if I looked at her and said, "Well, Abigail, when you start doing your homework better, I'll come put you back to bed"? Yet how often do we treat God that way?

"You know what? When I have more quiet times, when I really get over this pornography addiction, when I start being a better dad and a better husband, then God is going to hear me, but he's not going to hear me until then." What kind of terrible dad do you think God is?

You see, we often live with what the New Testament calls an *orphan spirit.* Here's what an orphan spirit says: "I've got to watch out for me. God doesn't really love me. He's just waiting to abandon me when I screw up. So, I can't come to God freely. I've got to manipulate him, and I've got to do everything right, and if I do it right, then maybe he'll give something to me."

Can I tell you how most of us live? We live like God has leaned back like *this* with his arms crossed, and you have to pry blessings and power out of him. How dare we accuse God of being such a bad dad? Do you know what Jesus said about the heavenly Father? He said in Matthew 7:11, ***"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"***

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's drawing a comparison. He's saying, "If you who are evil and flawed and broken as parents love to give good gifts to your kids, how much more does your perfect heavenly Father love to respond to your prayers?" Guys, I did not grow up as a dog person. Anybody testify with me? You're just not a dog person. You're out on dogs. Okay. Three people. Or you're not raising your hand. That's fine.

I didn't grow up as a dog person. I didn't want a dog. I have four kids with another on the way. I didn't need a dog. Do you know who wanted a dog? My daughter Annie. Do you know what she understands? Persistent intercession. Do you know what I now own? A Goldendoodle. That's what I own.

I just eventually got to the point where I was like, "I love my daughter so much, and she has asked so many times. Even though I don't really want a dog, I want to see her smile."

Let's be honest. I've fallen in love with my dog. It's kind of pathetic. His name is Chance. Guys, if even flawed, sinful, broken dads and moms love to give good gifts to their kids, how much more does your heavenly Father love to hear and respond to your prayers?

Can I ask you a question? Are you living like an orphan or like a daughter? Are you living like an orphan or like a son? If at the very bottom of your heart you are not convinced that God loves you because of the work of Christ and invites you into his presence, you will never be able to intercede. Intercession springs from intimacy. Would you draw near? God is drawing near to you. Here's what happens next. Verse 24. Abraham says:

"'Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death 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?' And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.'"

This is the first example in the Bible of what is called *intercessory prayer*. *Intercessory prayer* simply means when you pray to God on behalf of someone else. That's all it means. Abraham is the first in a long line of intercessors in the Scriptures. It includes Moses, Samuel, David, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, and culminates in the New Testament with Jesus himself.

Do you remember John 17? What does Jesus do? He prays for his disciples. He intercedes for them, and he intercedes for all who would believe in his name through their witness, which includes you and me. In fact, Romans 8:34 tells us that right now, Jesus is at the right hand of the throne of God praying for us.

Has one of your kids ever asked you that at the dinner table? "Hey, what's Jesus doing right now?" It's a great question. Do you know what the answer is? Praying. I love the prayer culture you're building at Two Cities Church. I love the prayer rooms. I love the fact that there are men and women on their faces right now, interceding for me and for you as the Word of God is preached. How encouraging is that?

Do you know what I'm even more encouraged by? That right now, at the right hand of the throne of God, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, is interceding for us. Right now, this is what Jesus is saying: "Father, I know what she has gone through this week. I know her faith is very brittle. I know she's losing hope and she's close to despair. Father, encourage her today. Give her a word today.

God, I know Pastor Josh is weak and fragile and doesn't have the right words. God, give him what he needs to preach to this church today. God, I know the church in Winston-

Salem is always encountering spiritual oppression, because the kingdom is going forward, so the kingdom of darkness is coming against it. Lord, strengthen them today. Don't let them grow weak. Don't let them grow weary, Father."

That's what Jesus is doing right now. He is praying for you even when you are not praying for yourself. We are never more like Christ than when we are interceding for others, which leads us to the second principle: *God is looking for intercessors*. He's looking for them. Think about it. Why did he even tell Abraham about this? Abraham doesn't live in Sodom.

Why does God go out of his way to say, "Hey, Abraham, by the way, this is what I'm about to go do"? Because God knew Lot was in Sodom, and God wanted Abraham to intercede on Sodom's behalf. God was inviting Abraham to function like a priest, to stand between the justice of God and the wickedness of the city and mediate between the two.

God was looking for intercessors *then*, and God is looking for intercessors *today*, for people like you and me who will stand in the gap and pray on behalf of the people we love and the city we live in. So, how do you actually do that? How do you become a man or a woman of intercession? Let me give you four ideas.

Here's the first one. You have to *embrace supernatural solutions*. The real reason a lot of people don't pray is because at the heart level they don't believe prayer actually works. I get it. I spent a lot of my life acting like prayer didn't work. That's because many of us have absorbed beliefs from the Enlightenment.

In the Enlightenment a couple of hundred years ago, a bunch of professors and philosophers and people who didn't know God got together, and they decided, "The only things that are really real are the things you can test in a laboratory, but if you can't test it in a laboratory, it's not really real.

So, things like love and human rights and…I don't know…God are not really real. They're just sort of subjectively real. They might be real, but let's be honest, guys. If you want to pray because it's going to help you emotionally, that's fine, but we all know it doesn't make a difference." That's the culture we live in, and many of us have absorbed that worldview.

Guys, this book, the Scriptures, the final authority for life and practice if you're a follower of Jesus, rejects that. Here's what the Scriptures say. There is a seen realm full of things you can see and taste and touch and test in a laboratory, and there is an unseen realm full of God and angels and demons and principalities and powers (Ephesians 6), and it is just as real as the seen realm. Oftentimes, you have to do work in the unseen realm if you want to see things change in the seen realm.

Let me give you an example. You have a teenager who does not care about the things of God. You tried to get them here this morning. They refused to get out of bed, and you're burdened for them. You've tried everything. You've gotten on Claude, and you've gotten on Chat, and you're like, "How do I reach my 15-year-old?" They've given you all of these ideas, and none of them work.

You've read a bunch of books, and you've tried to get them to go to student ministry, and they just won't do it. The problem might be that you're trying to do everything you're doing in the seen realm, and you need to start going to battle in the unseen realm, because your son or your daughter's heart is hardened. That's the problem.

They don't know Christ. No amount of you belaboring it and nagging them is going to change their heart, but you can get on your face before the Father, and you can do war in the unseen realm that then can change things in the seen realm, but that can only happen if we live like Christians and not like practical atheists.

So, here's what I have to do, and here's what I think you probably have to do every single day. You wake up in the morning, and here's what you have to do. Take yourself to task and say, "Self, I'm a Christian. I believe in the unseen realm. I believe in the power of prayer. I believe in the intercession of the Holy Spirit, so I'm going to pray. I'm going to embrace supernatural solutions."

Here's the second thing you can do if you want to become a man or woman of intercession: *establish a time and place for prayer*. This is simple, guys. If you want to get in better shape, you have to decide *where* you're going to go to the gym and *when* you're going to go to the gym. "Okay. I'm going *here* at *this* time four days a week," or whatever. If you want to invest in your marriage, you have to say, "Hey, we're going to go on dates on Fridays twice a month."

Imagine that I came down here this weekend and Pastor Dave saw me and I said, "Man, Pastor Dave, I've been trying to get into really good shape like you and Pastor Kyle, but I'm not having any luck," and Pastor Dave was like, "Well, where do you go to the gym and how often do you go?" and I was like, "Oh, well, I don't go to the gym, but I kind of work out all the time spiritually." He'd be like, "I think I know your problem, Josh."

Hey, can I tell you what I have no time for? I have no time for this: "Josh, I just pray all the time in my spirit." *Err!* I hope you pray all the time in your spirit. Do you know who else did that? Jesus. Do you know who else had a time and a place for prayer? Jesus. If the incarnate Son of God needed to have a time and place of prayer, guess what, Scooter? You do too.

I'm not telling you where it has to be or how long it has to be. I'm telling you you need something. I'm so tired of people being like, "I'm so spiritually weak. I don't understand it." I'm like, "You never pray, ever!" So it's like, "All right. When I wake up in the morning with my cup of coffee." Great. "It's on lunch break at work. I walk around my office-plex." Fantastic.

"It's me and my spouse before bed. We kneel by the bed and pray." Fantastic. I'm not really concerned with *when* it is or *where* it is. I'm concerned that you act toward prayer the way you act toward everything else in your life and you actually have a time and a place of prayer, because the truth is intimacy springs from consistency. So, you need to create a pattern in your life where you pray if you want to be an intercessor.

Here's the third idea. *Consider praying with other people*. Prayer is a deeply personal practice, but it is not intended to be an exclusively private one. Let me say that again. Prayer is a deeply *personal* practice, but it is not intended to be an exclusively *private* one. Have you ever noticed that every pronoun in the Lord's Prayer is plural? "*Our* Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Give *us* this day *our* daily bread."

Guys, we were designed to pray with other brothers and sisters. Do you know why? Because we will often need to borrow their faith. Do you ever need to borrow faith? I need to do this all the time. I've borrowed a lot of faith from Pastor Dave recently. By God's grace, my church bought a 45,000-square-foot building this past fall that we're renovating and are going to move into, but it was just a labor. It was so hard. There were so many difficulties, and there were so many things that went wrong.

I remember calling up Pastor Dave and being like, "Pastor Dave, it's so expensive. They're all so mean to me. They won't do it." Do you know what Pastor Dave did? He said, "Hey, these are some deep waters, and I'm going to walk with you through them, and the Lord is going to walk with you through them."

Can we praise God for Pastor Dave? Dave let me borrow his faith when I needed it. Maybe you're different than me. Maybe you never need to borrow anyone else's faith. My assumption is that you do. You need to pray with other people. Gather our faith together. Encourage one another.

Do you know what else will happen if you pray with other people? You'll learn more about God. There's a young woman in our church named Tinadeg. Tinadeg is from the continent of Africa, and she just prays in a way I've never prayed before. Every time I pray with Tinadeg, I learn more about the character of God. One of the reasons God gives us the body is that we can help one another know God better. So, learn to pray with other people.

Here's the fourth idea: *pray the names of God*. You may know this or you may not. God has revealed himself in the Scriptures by different names that emphasize different aspects of his character. So, he is El Shaddai, the almighty one who goes before you. He's El Roi, the one who sees you even when you feel invisible to everyone else.

He is Jehovah Rapha, the one who heals what is broken. He is Jehovah Jireh, the one who provides what you need. He is Jehovah Nissi, the one who fights your battles. It has been said that there is a name of God for every worry you carry. Learning the names of God and learning to pray them over the people you love will help you draw near to God like Abraham did.

Friends, the story of revival is the story of intercessory prayer. In 1857, a man named Jeremiah Lanphier became burdened for the spiritual condition of businessmen in New York City. So, he rented a little room in a church right off of Wall Street, and he organized a lunchtime prayer hour. He passed out invitations and pasted up flyers, and he said, "Hey, come and pray."

The first time they went to pray, for the first 30 minutes it was just him. He was interceding on behalf of Wall Street. By the end of that hour, five more men joined him…six men from Wall Street praying in the middle of their day. He felt like God wanted to do something, so he said, "Let's do it again." So, the next week, the six men regathered, and 14 more men joined them. They had 20 men praying over lunch adjacent to Wall Street. They said, "We think God wants to do something. Let's keep doing it."

The third week, those 20 men came back. They brought 20 more men. We're at 40 men gathered adjacent to Wall Street, praying for the salvation of bankers on Wall Street. Then the panic of 1857 struck, leading to a massive market collapse and massive economic recession. Suddenly, the thousands of businessmen who were on Wall Street being prayed for… Many of them were bankrupt, anxious, and looking for answers. God did something unique.

By January of 1858, there were so many bankers gathering at lunch to pray that Jeremiah Lanphier had to take his prayer ministry multisite. He had three different buildings packed to the brim praying during lunch adjacent to Wall Street, 1858. This thing was so powerful it started to jump to other cities. Prayer meetings started in Chicago and D.C. and Philadelphia. A movement of prayer was birthed out of the burden of one man.

The spiritual impact on New York City was so significant that when boats would come into the harbor, they were engulfed by the manifest presence of God and sailors fell under conviction. Churches started to station chaplains at the docks so that when the

sailors came onto the docks and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" someone could lead them to Christ.

Historians estimate that as a result of this prayer revival, over one million people in North America gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Can I tell you something? That's not a fantasy; that's a historic reality. Let me ask you a question. Does God still do stuff like that or has he gotten so old, so weak, and so tired he can't deal with our modern culture? I mean, what is God going to do with AI and Uber Eats? Oh my gosh!

Is God overwhelmed by secularism and affluence? "Oh, it's just so hard. I just can't…" Or, is he the same God who split the Red Sea in half? Is he the same God who brought Pharaoh to his knees? Is he the same God who made the walls of Jericho fall down? Is he the same God who delivered his people from 185,000 Assyrian soldiers?

Oh, is he the same God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead? Is he the same God who planted the church and caused it to grow and flourish over 2,000 years in the face of all opposition and all attack? Is he the same God? Is his arm too short to save or is he the same God of the Scriptures? Guys, he's the same God of the Scriptures.

If God can bring revival and renewal to New York City in 1858, he can bring revival and renewal to Winston-Salem and Davie County in 2026. Hey, imagine if, because of the prayers of this church, there was such a manifest presence of God that as people drove on I-40 they were convicted of sin, and they pulled off the interstate, pulled into your parking lot, and said, "I saw this was a church. Can someone tell me how I can be reconciled to the Father?"

Guys, that has happened before and it can happen again. God is looking for men and women who will stand in the gap and pray, just like Abraham did for Sodom, just like Jeremiah Lanphier did for New York City. So, this is what Abraham did. He started to pray. What does it look like for us to intercede? He gives us a picture. Verse 27:

"Abraham answered and said, 'Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' 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 forty I will not do it.' 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 undertaken 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."

Abraham seems like a pretty shrewd negotiator, doesn't he? He's like, "O God, we're not going to lose this deal over five people, are we?" He's almost like an auctioneer, like, "Give me 40. Give me 30. Give me 20." He walks him all the way down until he's at 10, which leads to the third principle: *intercession requires contending*.

That's what Abraham was doing. He was contending with Yahweh in prayer. He was like, "Yahweh, what if 40? What if 30? What if 20? What if 10?" He was contending with Yahweh in prayer. What does it mean to contend in prayer? It means to pray with intentional, persistent, and faith-filled effort. It means to break a sweat. It means to be in pain in prayer.

Guys, Jesus loves it when we pray this way. Do you know Jesus only told two parables about the importance of prayer in his ministry? Do you know what they were? The parable of the persistent widow and the parable of the neighbor at night. Do you know what the theme of both of those parables is? "Don't stop asking."

The widow went again and again and again, and finally the judge is like, "Oh my gosh! Just so you'll leave me alone, I'll give you what you want." The neighbor went… Again, he's just banging on the door. "I need some bread! I need some bread!" Finally, the guy is like, "I don't even like you, but I want you to leave me alone, so here's some bread." Jesus says, "Pray like that."

God loves it when we contend with him in prayer. Do you know why? Because it purifies and strengthens our faith. It's a way we say to God, "I really trust you. I believe you're good. There is no plan *B*. You're the only one who can do this, and I believe you want to do it, so I'm coming again and again and again and again." In fact, our belief in the goodness of God is often measured by how long we contend in prayer when the answer doesn't come.

Let me ask you… Is there something you need to start praying for again? The great Charles Spurgeon talked about this constantly in his ministry. I love what he said. He essentially said, "Take God's promises and plead them before him. Turn his word into arguments and say to him, 'Do as thou hast said.'" Guys, you need to learn how to argue with God based on his own character and Word.

Let me tell you what this looks like in my life. This is how I pray for my kids. It's a little intense. I hope you're ready for this. This is what I say. "God, you have said in your Word you are patient, desiring that none should perish but all should come to repentance and faith. You've told me my children's hearts are hard like stone, and I cannot change my

children's hearts, but you've told me the power of the Holy Spirit is great enough and the work of Jesus is sufficient enough that they can be saved.

So, Lord, I am demanding…I'm demanding, Lord…for your glory and based on your Word and your commands that you save my children. I'm demanding it. God, you've told me I'm an instrument in your hand, so help me to be an instrument you use." Hey, can I get in your business a little bit? Do you know what you need to stop praying? Weak, doubtful, "If it's your will, God" prayers. Stop it.

Guess what? God is going to do his will no matter what you say. Stop backing out of prayer with that phrase. Stop it. I talked to a man after the 9:00 a.m. service. He said, "Josh, I've been a Christian for 18 years. I've only ever prayed 'if you will' prayers because I was afraid." He said, "I came down here for the first time in my life. I argued with God based on his Word and his character."

Do you know what Jesus never glorifies? He doesn't tell a parable about the "weak faith" widow who came one time and was like, "Hey, Judge, if it's your will… I don't want to be disappointed, so if it's your will, would you give me justice?" That's not the parable he told. He said, "Here's how I want you to pray. Don't leave God alone. Keep coming. Keep banging on the door." God loves it. He loves it.

Guys, if I'm a good enough dad that when my daughter keeps coming I get her a dog, what kind of dad is God? He loves to hear from his people. He loves it when we contend in prayer. He loves it when we don't back down because we're so afraid that God is not going to answer our prayer and it's going to ruin our faith that we tag everything with "If it's your will" and quit after 20 seconds. The parables Jesus told about prayer were all about persistence and contending in prayer.

So, here's the question…*How do you learn to do that?* This is intense. You have to learn to contend for what God burdens you with. Why did Abraham contend so aggressively for Sodom? Because his nephew lived there. He had a burden for that city. Have you ever noticed that what breaks your heart doesn't break your friend's heart? Have you ever noticed that there are certain people or certain issues or certain things in your city that just weigh on you? Why is that? Because God wants you to bring his promises to bear on your burden.

Guys, I have a burden for my city. I was born and raised in Virginia. I do ministry in Charlottesville, Virginia, which is a beautiful town. There's a lot to like about Charlottesville, but it is one of, if not the most liberal city in Virginia. It's a place where people are generally suspicious of conservative, biblical Christianity. It can be very, very hard to be a Bible-believing Christian raising my kids in Charlottesville. It really can.

There are days where I want to move from Charlottesville to North Carolina where the taxes are lower, the real estate is cheaper, and the politics are more conservative. That's what I want to do. I just want to quit my job. I want to come get a job in Winston-Salem and become a member of Two Cities Church. That's what I want to do. But that wouldn't be faithful unto the Lord, because the Lord has given me a burden. Sometimes it feels crushing, but until he releases me from it, it's my burden to carry.

So, here's what I've learned to do. I've learned to say, "Lord, this city is very hard right now. It's very dark. But what if 25 years from now, because of the ministry of our church and other churches in this city… What if we change the spiritual climate of Charlottesville? What if people in Winston-Salem and Richmond and Northern Virginia started saying, 'Oh my gosh! Have you heard about what God is doing in Charlottesville? There's a revival happening there.'" That's my burden for my city.

Let me ask you… What are *you* burdened for? Is it your teenage son? Maybe it's your roommate from college. You were involved in a campus ministry together, but she's now in a same-sex relationship. Maybe it's students at Wake Forest or other moms in your homeschool co-op. Maybe it's other nurses on your floor at Baptist hospital. What if you turned your burden into prayer? What if you turned your worry into specific requests you brought to your Father again and again and again? What might change?

Hudson Taylor was one of the greatest missionaries of the last 300 years. He founded the China Inland Mission in 1858. By the end of his life, that mission had baptized tens of thousands of Chinese believers. Many of the strongest churches in China today (which is the fastest growing church in the world) trace their spiritual heritage to Hudson Taylor.

But do you know what Hudson Taylor was as a 16-year-old? He was a prayer request. He found his parents' faith boring, naive, and exhausting. He could not wait to get out on his own. So what changed? His mom prayed for him. Amelia Taylor would not stop. She prayed, she prayed, she prayed, and she prayed. She devoted five hours to praying for her son's salvation, an entire afternoon.

She said, "I'm going to put my face on the ground in front of my heavenly Father, and I'm banging on the doors of heaven until something changes." In that moment, a switch flipped. Back at home where Hudson Taylor was, he came to faith in Christ, transformed. Then he went to China, and God worked through him to change the spiritual history of a nation. The spiritual history of China hung in the balance of Amelia Taylor's intercession.

Let me ask a question. What if the next Hudson Taylor is sitting in this room right now not paying attention to a word I'm saying? He thinks I'm an idiot. She's on her phone. She could not care less, but you're their mom. You're their dad. You're their grandma or

grandpa. You're their youth leader. What if you said, "Nope. We're not losing that one. I'm coming again and again and again and again"? What nation's spiritual heritage might hang in the balance of your intercession?

What might happen, grandparents, if you not only loved your grandkids and spoiled them but you contended for them? Hey, students, what if you didn't just go to school at Wake Forest or go to school at your high school? What if you contended for it? What if every single one of us just started contending for our generation the way Abraham contended for the city of Sodom? More people might experience what Lot experienced.

You see, after Abraham finished praying, God investigated the city and found it to be just as wicked as was reported. The problem was there was no one righteous to intercede, so the city was destroyed. But do you know what God did before the city was destroyed? He sent two angels to save Lot's family. Genesis 19:29 tells us why. ***"But God had listened to Abraham's request and kept Lot safe, removing him from the disaster that engulfed the cities…"***

You see, according to the Scriptures, there was one reason God saved Lot: because Abraham prayed for him. Guys, it's possible that there will be one reason God saves your dad, one reason God saves your daughter, one reason God saves your spouse, and it's because you pray for them.

I told you earlier that God invited Abraham to act like a priest, to stand in the gap between his holiness and the wickedness of Sodom. He said, "God, will you spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous?" Because God is so full of mercy and grace, he said, "Yeah, I'd love to do that." The problem was there wasn't one truly righteous person in all of Sodom, so the city was destroyed.

You see, the problem for us is there's not one truly righteous man or woman who can mediate between us and God, but God is so full of mercy and grace that he provided one: Jesus Christ the righteous. Jesus came into this world, and he lived a perfect life, the life you and I should have lived that we haven't. Then, on the cross of Christ, all of the wrath of God against our sin was poured out over Jesus.

So, friends, if you are in Christ, you are safe. There is no wrath left for you. Not just on your good days, not just on your good weeks, not just when you've had a good season, but in your worst moments, God is leaning toward you, beckoning you to come to him through the finished work of Jesus Christ. When you realize that, it fills you with gratitude, and it leads you to want to intercede on behalf of those you love and care for.

Guys, here's the truth. American society is in bad shape just like Sodom was. Since the year 2000, 40 million adults have left the American church never to return. Since 1993,

the percentage of people claiming no religious affiliation has grown from 7 percent to 37 percent. That is the greatest proliferation of unbelief in our nation's history, and it has happened largely during our lifetimes.

If these trends continue, then in the next three decades, there will be almost a complete absence of Bible-believing churches in cities, college towns, and rural America, and the societal impact will be profound. We don't need tens of thousands of people to come to faith in Christ; we need tens of millions of people to come to faith in Christ. We need the third great awakening.

Guys, God has done it before. He has done it before, and he always does it the same way. As the quote says, "All revivals have been preceded by a revival of prayer. When God wants to do a great work, he first sets his people to pray." That's what I want you to do today. I don't want you to leave here saying, "I learned some new things about prayer. Josh told some interesting stories about prayer." I want you to pray.

I want you to come down here in a minute. I want you to pour your heart out to God and argue with him based on his character and his promises for your loved ones. I want you to argue for your grandkids. I want you to argue for your parents. I want you to argue for your college roommates. I want you to argue for the lost sinners in Davie County and down in Lexington and in Butner and among the nations of the earth.

I want you to pray, because God loves to hear and respond to the prayers of his people. So, here's what we're going to do. We're going to invite you to stand up with me right now at all of our campuses. Would you stand up with me? I'm going to pray, and then I'm going to invite you to come down and put this sermon into practice.

Father God, I'm so grateful that you are full of grace and mercy and truth and that you lean toward us and love to hear our prayers. Lord, you saved Lot because of the requests of Abraham. God, I pray you would save Lots all across this city because of the requests that are uttered to you today.

Lord, we believe the next Hudson Taylor, the next Lottie Moon, the next great man or woman of the kingdom may be sitting bored in this service right now, but there's a mom or a dad, there's a sister or a brother, or there's a child who's going to come down and pray for them, and you're going to change everything. God, we believe, and we trust you, and we ask you to move for the sake of your glory. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

Church, come pray for the Lots in your life that they might be saved, and we're going to respond in worship. You come and pray. Join me in prayer.