

St. Paul's, Muskego, Wisconsin

July 2, 2017

Prayer is Powerful: Your Will Be Done

Genesis 18

Your will be done on earth as in heaven.

What does this mean?

God's good and gracious will certainly is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also.

How is God's will done?

God's will is done when he breaks and defeats every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, which try to prevent us from keeping God's name holy and letting his kingdom come. And God's will is done when he strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word and in the faith as long as we live. This is his good and gracious will.

Last Sunday, after I spoke how God's foreknowledge and power could encourage us to pray "Your Kingdom Come," a brother in Christ sent me an email sharing his struggles with that concept. If God knows the future and he has almighty power, then why doesn't God protect us from so much evil in the world? Why has he allowed drugs to be made that can kill us? Why doesn't he rescue us from the temptations and addictions with which we struggle? How can we pray, "God's will be done," when it seems that God's will is so often harmful?

And then later in the week a dear sister in Christ sent me an email questioning God's will. If God wants all people to be saved, why was Jesus born in an out of the way place like Palestine? What about the billions of people living on the earth right now who never hear the name of Jesus? Think of all those in these Muslim nations. If God's will is that all people be saved, then why does he condemn those who never even had a chance to believe? How can she pray, "God's will be done," when God's will seems so wrong?

Finally, on Saturday I received the latest edition of *The Voice of the Martyrs* about the plight of the Christians in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. One paragraph really struck me as I enter this 4th of July holiday weekend:

Imagine sitting in your church listening to the pastor's sermon and suddenly feeling a rush of adrenaline as you and those around you begin to recognize the familiar whine of a plane approaching. In an instant, everyone runs for cover, leaping into foxholes or seeking shelter behind rocks. Four of the most dangerous places to be in the Nuba Mountains are church buildings, schools, hospitals and fields of crops. (*The Voice of the Martyrs*, July 2017 Issue, page 15).

If God is all knowing and is all powerful, then why are our Christian brothers and sisters in Sudan being targeted? How can we pray, “Your will be done,” when God can’t even protect his own people?

These are the questions that have been on my heart this week as we look at the next petition of the Lord’s Prayer. “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” I sought answers for questions in the account of Abraham praying for Sodom. The same issues are there.

If God’s will is good, then why didn’t God step in to keep “righteous” Lot (2 Peter 2:7) from making such a dumb decision in Genesis 13, choosing to live in Sodom? Why didn’t God spare Lot from the loss of his wife, who would look back in longing at Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt? Why didn’t God spare Lot’s family from the disgrace of incest? If God’s will is good, then why did all this bad stuff happen? How could Lot and his uncle Abraham possibly pray: “Your will be done”?

I found the answer in the little word “favor” in Abraham’s remarks to his guests in Genesis 18:3, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord...”

Favor. Grace. Mercy. It is the request of an inferior to a superior. It is the request of a subject to a king. It is the request of a human being to God. If I have found favor or mercy in your eyes...

This entire account shows that Abraham and Sarah, Lot, and you and I have found favor or mercy in the eyes of our God. It is because you and I have this mercy from God, that we can pray: “Your will be done.”

As I read over Genesis 18, I found that the LORD’s mercy makes me laugh, it makes me bold, and it makes me strong to submit to those difficult words: “Your will be done.”

Let’s consider the first part of the conversation that Abraham had with three guests and see if the LORD’s mercy doesn’t make you laugh too.

1. The LORD’s mercy makes me laugh.

The chapter begins with this announcement: “The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre,” near Hebron. With the LORD are two angels. Abraham prepares a feast for these three guests. The conversation begins in verse 9.

⁹ “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him.

“There, in the tent,” he said.

¹⁰ Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

¹³ Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

The LORD’s mercy made Sarah laugh. Think how long she had been praying for a child. She is 89 years old at this time. How difficult it must have been to hear the LORD finally say, “Now it is my will that you have a child”! I would have laughed in unbelief too.

In fact, sadly, I do laugh in unbelief at the promises of God. The words of James 1 convict me:

⁶ When you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

God makes incredible promises about prayer. “Ask and it will be given to you” (Matthew 7). But a story Pastor Kuehl told at our Ministerial Team meeting on Tuesday reveals the doubts that make my prayers so worthless. “That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.”

Pastor Kuehl told us about a major outreach event at his former congregation. They had gone door to door in their neighborhoods. They had been praying. All leading up to the special “Friendship Sunday.” On Saturday before the service, someone asked Pastor, “Have we set up extra chairs?” No... all that work... all those prayers. But no one really thought anyone would come. No one expected God to actually answer their prayers.

“Ask and it will be given to you”? I’m Sarah, laughing in unbelief in the tent. That’s impossible. It isn’t going to happen.

“I didn’t laugh.” Yikes, then Sarah lies to God. God’s next step would certainly be to strike her dead for laughing in unbelief. But instead, God shows mercy. God fulfills his promise.

A year later, when Sarah is 90 years old and Abraham is 100, they have a little boy. You know what they called him? Laughter! Isaac means “he laughs.” Sarah explains, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (Genesis 21:6).

The LORD’s mercy makes me laugh at answers to prayer! Because of my Sarah-like doubts, I don’t deserve to have any prayer answered. Yet, over and over again God hears and answers.

At my small group meeting this week, one of our group members showed us her prayer calendar. She could see what she prayed about at this time last year and celebrate how many of those prayers had been answered. As we focus on prayer this summer, maybe that is something I can

do too. Maybe I should be keeping track of how many prayers have been answered so that God's mercy can make me laugh at answers to prayer.

2. The LORD's mercy makes me bold.

But how can I be sure that God is merciful to us? That is revealed as the conversation turns toward Sodom.

¹⁶ When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷ Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? ¹⁸ Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Who is Abraham? In the midst of God's conversation about his judgment on Sodom, the LORD reminds Abraham who he is. He is ancestor of the Savior. "All nations on earth will be blessed through him." Abraham could be bold because of this promise of the Savior.

Abraham believed in this promise. He believed that the Savior who could destroy the devil's power over us would come from his descendants. He believed that God would see him as perfectly forgiven because of the sacrifice of the Savior who was yet to come.

That's our faith too. Jesus is that descendant of Abraham. Jesus is the one who went to the cross to suffer for all the doubts and all the skepticism that arises in our hearts. Jesus is the one whose "righteousness" or perfection is credit to us. Jesus is the one who can make us bold in prayer for we are daughters and sons of Abraham.

God's mercy made Abraham bold in persistent prayer.

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

The Lord promises, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will not destroy it." Abraham continues to trust the LORD's mercy. What about for 45? What about for 40? 30? 20? 10?

I am amazed at this persistent prayer! But if you and I are sons and daughters of Abraham, we have the same right and privilege of persistent prayer!

But things don't work out as Abraham had hoped. Chapter 19 of Genesis speaks of the destruction of Sodom. We read, "Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah,

toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace” (Genesis 19:28).

Sodom was still destroyed! It appears that Abraham’s fervent prayer is not answered. There is no way for him to know that Lot has been spared.

3. The LORD’s mercy makes me strong to submit to His will.

It is confidence in the LORD’s mercy that enables Abraham and us to submit to God’s will.

It can seem that submission indicates weakness. You submit because you are forced to do so. But that wasn’t the case with Jesus. He prayed in the Garden, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Submission wasn’t a sign of weakness. It is actually a sign of strength. I am confident that the LORD’s will toward me is good, therefore I put myself into his hands.

And that submission reveals strength.

I think of one of my dear friend in the congregation who shared with me her health concerns. What she is facing would crush me. I am afraid that my faith would have been ground to powder and blown away long ago. But in spite of her pain, she submits herself in the hands of her Father in heaven. His mercy is not evident in what she is experiencing. But his mercy is evident in the incredible strength of faith that she is showing.

This is ultimately the answer to the questions with which I started this message. How can we submit to God’s will when he lets bad things happen to good people? How can we submit to God’s will when he doesn’t change the course of events so that everyone in the world knows about Jesus? How can we submit to his will when he doesn’t seem to be able to protect Christians in places like the Sudan?

What can give us the strength to submit when God’s will doesn’t seem to make sense to us?

Confidence in his mercy. My God is a merciful God, not because I understand his will in every situation, but because I can see it on Good Friday. My God is a merciful God who will make all things work for the good of his people... not because I can see it, but because he rose victorious from the grave. That’s proof of his power. His sacrifice on Friday is proof of his love.

And so even though many times I don’t understand, I submit to his will, because I know that ours is a merciful God.

4. The LORD’s mercy and the Fourth of July

So let’s apply what we have learned to our Christian Fourth of July observance.

Let’s first of all laugh in God’s mercy. As we look at our nation, we see so much guilt that makes it worthy of God’s judgment. As we see how we as Christians have failed to be the salt and light that the world needs, we see that we deserve God’s judgment too. So let’s laugh in joy at God’s incredible mercy, giving our nation another year of freedom and prosperity, another year for us as Christians to fulfill our calling to be that salt and light.

Let's be bold in God's mercy. There is one thing that we as Christians can do that no one else can do, and that is to pray for our nation. We are the sons and daughters of Abraham, recipients of the promise, privileged to come into the very presence of God. So let's be bold in praying for our nation. Let's pray for peace and security. Let's pray for victory and prosperity. But most of all let's pray that God the Holy Spirit would create in our nation a hunger and thirst for God's Word and bring our children and our nation's children to know Jesus as their Savior and to trust in him.

And let's be strong in God's mercy. There are many things happening in our nation and to our nation that we don't understand. But because we are confident of God's mercy in Christ, we can say, "Not our will, but yours be done." Amen.

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My Next Steps

- Be a student of God's mercy. If you are not reading God's word daily, begin this week by seeing God's mercy evident in Abraham's life. Read Genesis 12 – 24, 2 chapters/day.
- Be a persistent pray'er because of God's mercy. Serve your nation by praying for it.
- Be a persistent pray'er because of God's mercy. Serve our youth by purchasing *The Power of a Praying Parent* and persistently praying for the children in your life.