

Revivals And Church History :: Pleading for God's Mercy by Richard Owen Roberts, April 2004**Pleading for God's Mercy by Richard Owen Roberts, April 2004 - posted by revival9 (), on: 2004/8/20 2:16**

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By Richard Owen Roberts

The following message was given at the Heart-Cry for Revival Conference, April 2004, at The Cove, Asheville, North Carolina U.S.A.

Let us turn in the book of Genesis to chapter 18: "Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. And when he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, 'My Lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. Please, let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread that you may refresh yourselves; after that, you may go on, since you have visited your servant.' And they said, 'So do, as you have said.'

"So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make bread cakes.' Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf, and gave it to the servant; and he hurried to prepare it. And he took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate.

"Then they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'Behold, in the tent.' And he said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child when I am so old?'

"And the Lord said unto Abraham, 'Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?" Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.'

"Sarah denied it however, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. And He said, 'No, but you did laugh.'

"Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. And the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.'

"And the Lord said, 'The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.' Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord.

Abraham Intercedes for Sodom

"And Abraham came near and said, 'Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of 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 and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?'

"So the Lord said, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.'

"And Abraham answered and said, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and as

hes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, wilt Thou destroy the whole city because of five? And He said, I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.

"And he spoke to Him yet again and said, 'Suppose forty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not do it on account of the forty.'

"Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.'

"And he said, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.'

"Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it on account of the ten.' And as soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the Lord departed; and Abraham returned to his place."

Our Plea to God

Lord, we know that You are the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We know that You are the God who said concerning Yourself, "I change not." We would not dare to ask You to spare us or America or any or all the nations of the earth because we are deserving. We acknowledge to You that our sin is every bit as great as the sin of Sodom. We feel deeply, and even more so on certain occasions, how worthy of Your wrath we are. We often within the privacy of our own closet marvel that we ourselves personally were not turned into hell years ago. We cannot under any circumstance find any claim within ourselves upon Your mercy. We acknowledge to You without reservation that we are indeed wretched sinners deserving the wrath of God.

Yet at the same time we know that we are recipients of the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know deep in our hearts it has permeated our entire beings the realization that Jesus Christ died in our place that we have no righteousness in and of ourselves, but He is our righteousness. We know that by Your mercy, this little gathering here does not constitute the entire population of those who have the righteousness of Jesus Christ credited to their account. We thank You, Lord, that there is evidence before our eyes that there are hundreds of thousands across this land who have fled from their sins, who have indeed repented and embraced the Lord Jesus Christ, who are clinging to Him and who see Him as their only hope.

But we face the Genesis passage, and we know that the population of Sodom in comparison with the population of America is very small. We have no means by which to even calculate percentages. We could not possibly arrive at any satisfactory figure with which to argue with You as Abraham did. But we thank You and we bless You and we praise You that You are indeed the God of mercy. And while things that have been said this week have indeed sobered us even more than in the past, and while we are certainly to a degree at least, cognizant of Your great holiness, and apprehensive on behalf of our fellow citizens, whether it be South Africa, Canada, United States of America, or simply planet Earth, we come before You and we plead that by Your grace You will give us an enabling to lay hold of the truth of this passage and to use it in the way that will most honor King Jesus, and if it please Your heart, that will save our lands. Help us, we pray. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

A Conspiracy of Righteousness

For a brief period in my life, my wife Maggie and I prayed, that if it pleased the Lord, an open door would come where I would be invited to accept a pastorate for a period of time when the children were young so that they would know their dad and he might have some influence upon their lives. My itinerant ministry was taking me away from home much of the time, and my son hardly knew who his father was. In a sense out of the blue, came an invitation to serve a church that had 2,400 members, about thirty of whom we calculated were born-again believers. Billy Graham had held a crusade in their city and there were twenty-some of the apparent converts of that crusade in this church.

We went there knowing perfectly well that we were not called by a majority vote. They voted on three men. One got about 500 votes, the next one about 600, and I got about 900. I knew perfectly well that 500 and 600 added together amounts to more than 900. But we went anyway, and we had the time of our lives.

The very first Sunday that I preached as the pastor, the large board of deacons waited on me and they said, "We will not allow you to preach that way. From now on, you must write your sermon out and submit it to us, and we will review it. If we don't like it, you can't preach it."

I said to them, "I have read the constitution of this church, and the constitution says the deacons are to serve the pastor. So let it be understood, I am serving the Lord, and you are serving me. So I will take my orders from the Lord, and you will take your orders from me."

They said, "No, you either do what we tell you, or we are going to put you out."

I said, "God sent me here, and when God's time for me to leave comes, you do what you like." So they went right to work immediately, but it did take them one year. It was the best year of our lives.

Maggie and I spent a lot of time in prayer. There were days when the congregation was a sea of handkerchiefs. Never did we see more tears on a regular basis anywhere than there. But we never saw a single convert in that entire year. We talked to large numbers of people personally and told them about the cross and the resurrection. I could spend the entire day narrating incredible experiences from that situation, but I have a point to my story. Dear Maggie and I had our heads together and our hearts together and we were struggling. "Lord, why no breakthrough?" we asked. "Why no converts? How can there be such conviction and yet no breaking loose whatsoever?"

And then one day as we were sharing our hearts and struggling, it dawned on us: there is a conspiracy of evil in this church. The people are banded together to keep one another from violating the status quo. When a person begins to show signs of conviction, suddenly a swarm of relatives, because it was a very closely related church, militated together to keep one another from a breakthrough. I suppose in some ways that is an extreme example of what is a typical problem in the church.

The church ought to be a conspiracy of righteousness, where the entire church is banded together to pray and to labor and to witness and to bring the entire community to Christ – to reach into every layer of society and every den of iniquity and to lift people in a giant conspiracy of righteousness before the Lord and to hold them there. But instead, most of our churches do have a status quo, and they do, perhaps a little less definitely than in the church I pastored, band together to keep people from righteousness. I believe that one of the great calls that God has put upon us is to develop within our churches, if you will, a conspiracy of righteousness to see that the entire community is profoundly impacted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we are going to have to break that conspiracy of evil.

Standing Alone

In the passage we have read, we have a man standing alone. That is an awesome thing. I suppose if I were to summarize my life, I would say that perhaps its most difficult aspect has been the years when I had to stand alone. It is always much more pleasurable, and I think even much more beneficial, when you have others with you who stand where you stand, but some of us have not had that as a regular privilege in our lives. But I look back, and this is no boast but an expression of thanksgiving to God, I am grateful that by His grace, when I looked around often to see who was with me and I was alone, I was still standing for the Lord.

Some of you may be in that kind of a position now, where you and you alone are taking a stand for Christ in your situation. Well, accept that. Don't murmur, don't think of trying to escape. If God has got you there, and like Abraham, you are standing alone on behalf of your community, stand! But if by the grace of God there are others, draw as many as you can together in a conspiracy, if you will, of righteousness for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's think about the passage that we have read. We have a pretty good notion of the role of Sodom in human history. Abraham stood alone. It's not easy; it's not pleasant, but it is urgently needed. If you are in a community where nobody will stand with you, in a church where you are all alone, take your stand! You're not alone. The only One who matters is with you.

But be sure that the Lord is with you. I have heard a lot of people say, "If God is for us who can be against us?" I'm not certain I ever heard anyone say, "If God is against us, what does it matter who's for us?" In these days, that is the more urgent statement of the two. But I thank God that no righteous man or woman ever stands alone. God does stand with

hus. With all my heart I encourage you to become courageous and to take your stand for Jesus Christ and righteousness without any regard whatsoever for what it costs.

Here we have Abraham, and he is standing alone. He is standing facing a situation that he only partially comprehends. He doesn't have any real idea of the depth of iniquity in Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain.

I am reading from Isaiah 1:7: "Your land is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, your fields—strangers are devouring them in your presence. It is desolation, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a watchman's hut in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. Unless the Lord of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:7-10).

In Ezekiel 16:49-50 we read: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore, I removed them when I saw it."

The Church Must Repent

I don't think the big problem in America is the homosexual community. I think the real problem in America is the Church that is haughty. So haughty that we feel we have the right to reject certain races from the churches. So haughty that we don't feel any deep-seated burden for the poor and the needy. So haughty that we don't even feel the need to fall on our faces in repentance before God. If America is destroyed, it will not be because of the homosexuals. As vile as their conduct is and as aggressive as their agenda is, the real problem in America is a haughty Church that will not bend its proud neck.

I am reading as well from Luke 17:28-32, which consists of the words of Christ: "It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let not the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house go down to take them away; and likewise let not the one who is in the field turn back. Remember Lot's wife."

Read that powerful passage in the first chapter of Romans about God turning them over to reprobate minds. As bad as things are today, is it legitimate to say that they are worse than they were in Sodom? I don't think I could answer that. I don't know. But I do know there are a lot more than fifty righteous in the land. More than 500 for sure.

I want to read a little quotation from that incredibly useful servant of Christ from Cambridge, England, Charles Simeon. These words were written in approximately 1830. Simeon said, "We bless our God that the abomination referred to in this context is held in universal abhorrence. And the very thought of it excites a general indignation among us."

Obviously things have turned around and now there is almost universal acceptance of this abhorrence. Again, I don't want you to think I'm focusing on the problem which is in my judgment a minor problem in comparison with the Church that has become arrogant. I believe there is hypocrisy to think that God has hatred toward this abomination and love toward its root. What is the root of homosexuality? Obviously, if you go through all the Scriptures bearing on the subject, the root is pride. The root of all sexual sin is pride. And to be tolerant of pride and to treat its fruit as an abomination is raw hypocrisy.

It wouldn't surprise me that if every person were required to stand and make a five-minute statement about himself, if he were perfectly honest, he would say that he has a terrible problem with pride. Everywhere I go, I meet people who acknowledge this. But even though we acknowledge the problem, most of us are very tolerant of it. Most of us excuse it.

How do any of us dare to tolerate pride when we know what our Father in heaven says concerning it? I remind you of Genesis 15:16: "...for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." So the Lord spared the Amorites. But Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2 says the iniquity of the Jews is full.

I believe that we are very close to that point where it must be said by our sovereign God, "The iniquity of America is full." But I don't believe we've quite reached that. With all my heart I believe there is hope. I can't see hope in the dista

nt future, but I see hope at the moment. I believe that if somehow America would return to God at this time there would be indeed a gracious response of our Father in heaven.

Discerning God's Ways

But let me take you step-by-step through the obvious aspects of the passage. The Lord appeared to Abraham. Three men stood opposite him. He was not altogether aware of the meaning of the encounter. But because Abraham feared God, the secret of the Lord was revealed to him. Many of us are deaf and dumb concerning the secret of the Lord. We don't know what the Lord is doing. We don't know the meaning of the things that are occurring around us because we do not fear the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And because Abraham feared God, God determined to reveal to His servant what He was about to do. If God hadn't revealed to Abraham what He was about to do, Abraham could not have intervened and pled as he pled in this passage.

Some of us are wasting prayer time because we don't know what the Lord is about. Oh, that the secret of the Lord's heart might be revealed to us, and it will be if we fear Him! Because it was revealed to him, it enabled Abraham to become an intercessor.

Abraham drew near to God. He didn't question the justice of God in the destruction of Sodom. He did question the destruction of the righteous with the unrighteous. And we've grounds to do that. If God destroys America, it is a fact He will be destroying both righteous and unrighteous. Abraham had the courage, he had the conviction, he had the help of God even in seeing how unlike God it would be to destroy the righteous with the wicked.

Part of the reason we are so hesitant in this area is because of the deep-lying sense of guilt that inhabits so many. We like to think we're Christian, but somehow we have been so neglectful of holiness that we're not sure we really qualify as the righteous. But it's the imputed righteousness of Christ to which we cling. I'm sorry if you have failed to cultivate the beauty of holiness in your own life. You ought to. But it's His righteousness to which we cling. It is where our hope lies.

Now there is a logic in Abraham's reasoning with God. Verse 23 says: "Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Verse 24: "Wilt Thou indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous?" Verse 25: "Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike."

Have you got that conviction? Have you said to God, "Lord, it's not like You. You are the God of justice. If You destroy wicked America, what about the ones who have been given the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ?"

God is just, and unlike any earthly judge, our God is not blinded by prejudice. Our God is not affected by impassioned arguments that are off center. Our God is not inflamed by personal passions. Our God is not swayed by personal friendships. Our God is not deterred by bribes. Our God is not confounded by lying witnesses or titillated by physical beauty. Our God is unaffected by anything other than justice itself. And if God destroys America, it will be an act of divine justice. But I think we have grounds to plead with God not to destroy us.

There is a tone in Abraham's intercession that I believe is worthy of our notice. There is something very bold about the line of reasoning going from fifty to forty-five to forty to thirty to twenty to ten. There is a link obviously between the boldness that Abraham exercises and the knowledge of God that Abraham had already received. There is a caution as well as a boldness.

Isn't it quite clear in the passage that there is not arrogance in it? "I have already spoken, Lord. If You knocked me down and told me to say no more, I'd understand that. But I've got Your ear, and while You're listening, Lord, let me lay it all out." There are times when we don't have God's ear. But by His mercy there are times when He inclines His ear toward us. And when He does, don't hesitate to lay the facts in front of Him as well as the grounds upon which you are building your hope.

There is a success in Abraham's intercession. It obviously has been earnest. It's been specific; it's been very sensible; it's been persistent. It's been from a humble heart, and it was successful. What if Abraham had dropped the figure another time? What if he had brought it down to one? Well, we don't know. But we have grounds to plead with our God to save America...to save the world.

I don't believe in saying that God needs America. I believe He could raise up some other country or countries. He could open up the sea to swallow up this whole continent. But I do believe that God has shown His love in incredible fashion already. And I believe that though there is much evil among us, there is a substantial base of righteousness and grounds to plead with God for something precious and wonderful.

My prayer has been for a God-sized solution, the kind of solution that God and God alone can bring about. Will you join me in this?

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