

Genesis (18, 1-33): Abraham's Intercession and the Lord's Mercy



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Abstract

Abraham's intercession with God on behalf of the few righteous people who might be found in Sodom is both insistent and deeply moving. Abraham speaks with the humility of a servant before his master. God consents to all of Abraham's requests, even to the greatest one, saying that if there are at least ten righteous people in the city, He will spare the whole population for the sake of those ten. What strikes us deeply is the near simultaneity of God's wrath and mercy. Both boundless. Abraham asks, and God listens and grants. In Biblical Theology, mercy is considered a defining attribute of the Almighty. In this regard, in *Redemptor hominis*, Pope John Paul II speaks of a "merciful and God of all consolation", echoing Paul in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. But the ten righteous of the Abraham-God covenant were not found in Sodom. Thus, God unleashed his tremendous but just wrath upon those sinners, guilty of great evil. Yet even here, God's mercy is revealed before the destruction of the two cities: mindful of his servant Abraham, He allows the two Angels with Him to save Lot and his family.

Keywords: Abraham; God; Intercession; Mercy; Pope John Paul II; Paul (II Letter to the Corinthians); Sodom and Gomorrah; Lot and family

Introduction

Genesis is the first of five books that constitute the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) which the Hebrews regard as 'law' (Toràh) or 'the law' (Hattoràh) [1], even if the term Toràh does not mean law but teaching or instruction. We are interested in the episode that, in the writings of the Old Testament, precedes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The two cities that, regardless of the creed and ideology of human beings, are known by many in the world for the state of depravity reached [2]. More precisely, we will investigate and focus on what happened before the two cities were destroyed by God. This is a very interesting episode because it also tells us about the Lord's visit to his servant Abraham.

From Genesis we learn that three men approached Abraham while he was sitting in front of his tent in the hottest hour of the day. As soon as he saw them, he ran to meet them, prostrated himself on the ground and invited them to stay to rest and refresh themselves, immediately giving precise orders to his servants on the preparation of the lunch. He knew that in his tent he was hosting the Lord and the two Angels who accompanied him. When the three got up and set off to reach Sodom, God is still undecided whether to hide from Abraham the real reason for their presence.

God has already chosen him so that he could become the head of a great and powerful nation following the way of the Lord, acting with justice and right (see Chapters 12, 15 and 17 of Genesis). Finally, the Lord said that he had come because the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had sinned in a very serious way and wanted to verify if they had done all the evil that had reached Him [3].

Abraham, tried to intercede and, always maintaining his attitude of servant, asked: Lord, there could be righteous people who do not deserve to die; if there were fifty righteous men there, would you also kill them? The Lord immediately replied saying that for those fifty he would save everyone. And Abraham tried with forty-five, then with thirty and twenty. He always has the same answer. Finally, just as the three were leaving, Abraham said: may my Lord not be angry if I speak only once more to say if there were ten. God's answer: I will not destroy them for the sake of those ten. So he set off towards Sodom, to see if the inhabitants had done all the evil whose cry had reached Him, while Abraham returns to his tent.

The two angels arrived in the city in the evening and went to Lot's house. Soon they had the opportunity to see to what level of degradation the inhabitants of Sodom had reached. In fact, so many people had gathered around Lot's house. They wanted the

two angels to be able to abuse them. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah follows as described in the Old Testament: Gn (19, 12-29) [1]. God’s wrath manifested itself with all its power: tremendous but just. The exact opposite of what happens to man who is driven to anger by sin and wickedness. Today human beings have almost abandoned the concept of mercy. He believes in the development of science and its subsequent application to technology. Man thinks he is the master of the world and in the future even something more. These themes, already present today, will be more so in the future. Therefore, they deserve to be carefully investigated.

We, in this writing, will focus in a sufficiently detailed manner, on the prayers of intercession addressed to God by his servant Abraham. An event where the Lord appears merciful and willing to listen to his servant to the point of accepting even the final proposal: the presence of at least ten righteous men in Sodom would save the cities. At dawn, since there were not ten righteous people in the city, the two Angels brought Lot, his wife and his two daughters out of Sodom but not Lot’s sons-in-law, convinced that everything was a joke. However, before the wrath necessary to destroy the foolish, the depraved and those eager to abuse the guests, God exudes a mercy capable of temporarily setting aside the destructive wrath and remembers his servant Abraham and saves Lot and his family [4]. This reading has touched us deeply: the tremendous action of the Lord in destroying the two corrupt cities is just (it could not be otherwise!) but His mercy is truly great, immeasurable [5-7]. We can detect a measure of this characteristic by reading many different episodes of the Old and New Testament rich in manifestations of God’s mercy, that mercy that in Biblical Theology [8,9] is considered as a prerogative of God.

Discussion and Conclusion

Now, since the words spoken by the Lord, the Creator of all things visible and invisible, are eternal in time and space, we want to understand whether they are applicable in situations even very different from that described in Gn (18: 1-33). Our intention is to ascertain whether the prayer made by Abraham can also be the prayer of those who perceive the proximity of death and think of the salvation of the soul. We believe that situations similar to the one described above are common among human beings. They will present themselves to God with a burden of sins that certainly exceeds that of the good works typical of the righteous.

We think that even in these cases, eternal salvation is possible. Jesus Christ says so in the Parable of the workers (Mt 20: 1-16). “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire workers for his vineyard” and to summarize: the workers went to the vineyard at different times. Some worked the whole day, others a little less and others only one hour. At the end of the work, the owner gives everyone the same pay: a denarius. Those who had worked the whole day under the sun murmured claiming that it was not correct to pay everyone with a denarius. Especially,

those who had worked only one hour. The owner answers one of them and sends him away, claiming that he had what had been agreed and that He was free to do what he wanted with his money [3]. Through this parable, God communicates to us that any human being can be saved even at the last moment of life. In other words, God is eager to save them all.

So, we ask ourselves: for sinners is it reasonable to think that a number of works done as righteous men can compensate for a greater number of sins? Furthermore, as a number of righteous works, is it possible that ten in an entire life are sufficient to achieve salvation? We say ten, thinking of Abraham’s prayer, even if in that case we were talking about men and not works. A human answer to these questions is very difficult (the Judge is only God). We add that the answer is further complicated because in the reference writing, Gn (18: 1-33), the protagonist is Abraham, already chosen by God for a very important task in the evolution and growth of his people. In our way of thinking, the protagonist is the entire humanity made up of creatures who are children of God. We could object that even Abraham, as part of humanity, is a creature and son of God; but he is a son chosen by God among all the sons.

However, a parallel, between the episode experienced by Abraham [3] and that of our hopes for the majority of human beings [4], even if complex can be highlighted in a simple scheme useful for understanding our question. We remember that righteous people perform righteous works while sinners perform vile actions. These links allow the construction of (2 rows x 2 columns): (Table 1)

Table 1: Scheme for comparing Abraham’s prayer with our thinking.

	Column 1)		Column 2)	
Row 1)	Ten righteous	between	Many sinners	Salvation
Row 2)	Ten righteous actions	between	Many vile actions	Divine Judgment

In fact, observing the left column we notice that: term 1) shows people, while term 2) shows actions. The observation of the right column shows sinners in term 1), vile actions in term 2). The righteous people are those linked to the righteous actions produced. The sinners are linked to their sins. Reading the rows, we observe that row 1) leads to salvation, row 2) to uncertainty because it is necessary to await the Divine Judgment. The analysis made in the table, comparing first the elements of the columns and then those of the rows, shows a sort of crossed link between the four terms: the parallel announced above is possible. We consider this result very interesting because it does not lead directly to a Condemnation. However, to get out of this impasse the only logical hope for the human being is in the mercy of God. John Paul II, in *Redemptor hominis* referring to Paul, in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, feels compelled to discover in Christ the face of the Father “merciful and God of all consolation” [10]. This is certainly greater than

the mistakes made by man. Mercy is a quality of God that allows him to do good to men even when their behavior would deserve the worst of evils. Therefore, the future behavior must be sincerely for the evil done to God and to human beings; then we ask, with the same spirit of Abraham, and we will be forgiven and heard. Perhaps, for many sinners scattered around the world it may not be easy but it is the only path available and we thank the Lord that it is there.

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