

## The 5 Traits Of Highly Effective Christians

### *Passionate Prayer*

The Bible is a remarkable book. It doesn't claim to be about God, it claims to be the very words of God given through human authors. It claims to be made up of words that are alive and powerful, spiritual and life giving.

When you begin to read through the Bible a couple of things quickly surface to the top. First, sometimes it covers less about the things you'd think it would cover more of and more about the things you wouldn't think are that important.

A great example is the Old Testament, which in my Bible, covers 965 pages. It will go on and on about genealogies and relationships of various people and sometimes what seems like obscure events.

Then you get to the life and words of Jesus Christ who is the heartbeat, the culmination, the cornerstone of our faith and there's 135 pages. And that's with 4 gospels so there's some repetition.

That's a whole lot of info on Israel's history and what seems like just a little about the Savior we worship.

What it turns out is, that God doesn't tell us what we necessarily want to know, He tells us what He knows we need to know.

The Bible's long enough. You could already spend a lifetime studying it. Just think if it told us all about Jesus life as a child, all about the mechanics of the creative process, all about the emotions the characters were going through, it would be 4 feet thick!

A second thing that will strike you about the Bible is that there's passages that are fairly easy to understand and there's parts that will leave you scratching your head.

We're going to look at one of those "head scratching" passages today. As we do just remember, a lot of things become easier to apprehend as you learn the over-all message of the Bible. It's like the more you learn, the more you understand other parts.

But also remember this, if the Bible is really the mind of God as it claims to be, we'd expect that there will be things we don't fully understand. It's like Romans 11:34 says, *For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His*

*counselor?* Obviously, our ability to comprehend God has tremendous limitations.

So some things may seem unique, or even a bit difficult, but God has them there for us for a reason. And even though we may have to wrestle with them a bit, they're still part of this body of truth that God wants us to know.

So with that in mind, I'd like you to turn to our passage for today, **Genesis 18 page 16**

We're currently in a series we're calling *The 5 Traits Of Highly Effective Christians*. In these 5 weeks we're looking at those traits, or characteristics, of Christians who are really successful at living out their Christianity. These are qualities that you'll find in people who take their faith seriously and have a consistent lifestyle that reflects God and His principles.

So far we've looked at Having a Biblical Mindset, and Having a Heart for Worship. Today we want to look at the third trait and that's being Passionate in Prayer.

The Bible is the way God speaks to us. That's why it's called The Word of God. But communication is a two way street. God speaks to us generally through creation and specifically through the Bible. We speak to God through this thing called prayer.

Today I want us to focus on one specific, unique, instance of prayer in the life of a man named Abraham.

Just some background before we look at what's happening.

God had a plan from eternity past to provide a Savior to the world. About 2000 years after Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden, God chose a man named Abram out of the people on the planet and made him a series of promises.

Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, became the father of the Jewish people. God promised the land of Israel, a large population, and that the world would be blessed through the Jews.

That blessing came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew from the house of David, who was actually the Son of God in human flesh. He lived a perfect life and then died on a cross to bear our sins. Three days later He rose from the dead and today He's seated at the right hand of the Father.

It would be another 2000 years after Abraham until Jesus would come, but on the basis of what Jesus would do, God forgave Abraham and everyone who placed their faith in God as Savior.

Just a few chapters back in Genesis 15 is this very clear declaration: Abraham *believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.* Genesis 15:6

Abraham was forgiven because of His faith.

Abraham has a nephew named Lot who decided that the bright lights of Sodom looked a whole lot more appealing than living in a tent with Uncle Abraham and company so he moved his family in the city. Sodom was a wicked place. Lot didn't move there to be a missionary.

Lot and his family in Sodom is an important lead-in to the prayer we're about to read in chapter 18. We'll see 4 specific things about passionate prayer here, the first is...

### *I. Passionate Prayer Is Very Personal*

#### **Read verses 1-3**

Talk about a unique passage of Scripture. A thousand years after Abraham, Solomon, the son of King David built a very impressive temple for God in Jerusalem.

Solomon was struck with the inadequacy of building a dwelling place for the Almighty. He said, *But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!* I Kings 8:27

Obviously a building couldn't contain the totality God, but God still chose to dwell there through His Spirit.

Then another 1000 years after Solomon, the Second person of the Trinity took on a body, was born of the Virgin Mary, and lived and walked the planet. That was Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament you will find what the theologians call Theophanies. *Theos* is Greek for “God” and *phaino* means “to show” or “to shine.” So a theophany is God showing Himself.

Since God is spirit, I believe these Theophanies are actually pre-incarnate appearances of Jesus.

However we interpret this though, the Bible says that the LORD appeared to Abraham. The word LORD or GOD in the Old Testament is a translation of יהוה, the God of Israel. This is Jehovah God showing up on Abraham’s doorstep! Talk about personal. It doesn’t get any more personal than this!

I don’t know all the ins and outs of how Abraham knew who approached his tent but he knew it was God. What he sees is three men. In chapter 19 two of the men are identified as angels.

One of the men who comes walking up to his door is obviously a Theophany. In verse 10 He speaks as God to promise Sarah a son in her old age. In verse 13 it says, *The Lord said to Abraham*. Then in verse 17 it says, *And the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?”*

Three times in the Bible it calls Abraham the friend of God. The most powerful is Isaiah 41:8 because there it’s God Himself doing the speaking. It says, *But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend.*

Abraham doesn’t know it at this point but he’s about to get into an intense time of prayer. This is going to be passionate prayer. And I believe the key that allows him to pray the prayer he’s about to pray is his intimacy with God.

If you don’t know God, or you don’t spend time with God, talking to Him is going to seem awkward and stilted. If you have a personal relationship with God that’s vibrant and fresh it’s going to be alive and natural.

We all know what it’s like to meet somebody for the first time. Until you get to

know that person conversation can be a uncomfortable. Once you know them, you feel a whole lot more at ease. And if you know them really well and get to be friends conversation becomes spontaneous and effortless.

A highly effective Christian prays with an acceptable familiarity and openness. Hebrews 4:16 *Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace (not with arrogance but confidence), that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

*I. Passionate Prayer Is Very Personal*

*II. Passionate Prayer Sees Needs And Jumps In*

### **Read verses 20-21**

Some people equate prayer and faith to crawling out on a limb and then begging God to keep the guy approaching with the chainsaw from sawing it off, but that is not real prayer, that is presumption.

If God makes it clear that He wants you out on a limb, fine -- you will be perfectly safe there. If not, it is presumptuous of you to crawl out on a limb, expecting God to keep you there. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I can't die before my time but I'm not going to step out in front of a semi on I97. If I do God says, "Time's up!"

The difference is this: Praying in faith is acting on a previous knowledge of what God wants. It is always founded upon a promise. It begins with a proposal which God makes, or a conviction He gives, or a warning He utters.

A prayer of presumption is discovering something we would like to do, and then asking God to bless it. That kind of thing is doomed at the getgo.

Now prayer certainly involves more than asking. It's an intimate dialogue with God that includes praising Him and thanking Him for who He is and what He has done.

But in it's essence, most prayer is built around requests. That means we're aware of what's going on around us and what God is doing.

There's believers who haven't realized yet that the events around them provide remarkable opportunities for prayer. Whether it's praying for the safety of our

troops in Iraq or praying for Mahmoud Ahmadineja, or Osama Bin Ladin, or praying for that person in the ambulance that just passed you on the road, passionate prayer sees needs and jumps right in.

And even though God didn't specifically say He was going to destroy Sodom He did say, *the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, because their sin is very grave.*

God said in Ezekiel, *Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit.* Ezekiel 16:49-50

I don't know why we think that somehow we can live in abject rebellion against God and not be accountable to Him. Everything from the perverseness of the media in our country to the way many Christians compartmentalize their lives between the Christian part and the rest to justify sin, all of that isn't a secret to God.

All of that isn't going to go unnoticed by God. God knew Sodom's sin and God knows ours.

So God says, "I've heard the outcry and I'm going to check it out for myself." It's not like God didn't already know what was going on in Sodom but this is an anthropomorphism, in which God is saying, "Just so everyone understands that what I'm about to do to Sodom & Gomorrah is completely just, I'm clarifying that My actions are based on first-hand knowledge."

Remember, passionate prayer sees needs and jumps in. Abraham who is a friend of God is deeply concerned for his nephew Lot in Sodom.

They had a falling out but Abraham still knows that God's judgment is about to fall so look at what he prays. **Read verse 23-25**

The angels were already heading towards Sodom to destroy it. But Abraham stood before the Lord. He lived in hope that God's mercy would spare the people. He persevered.

You know, God is looking for people to stand before Him and intercede for this nation and the countries of the world. In Ezekiel 22 God says this about Israel, *The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.*

Somehow in the mystery of prayer, and the phenomenon of the sovereignty of God, God incorporates us into what He's doing in the world. He's at work in getting His message of salvation out and He uses us.

We're called to *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.* Mark 16:15 A New Testament apostle asked a church to pray this prayer for him, *that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel.* Ephesians 6:19

The gospel is summed up in John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Forgiveness of sin comes when people place their faith and trust in Christ alone. God uses us to proclaim that Good News, and God uses our prayer to energize that message so it resonates with the people who hear it.

God also uses the prayers of His people to energize His message of impending judgment on sin. That's why we, as effective Christians, need to be people of prayer.

Unfortunately that passage in Ezekiel 22 has a sad ending. God was searching for an intercessor to stand before Him but didn't find one. So the last verse says, *Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord GOD.* Ezekiel 22:31

Well, here in Genesis 18 Abraham is the guy who's standing in the gap. The imagery is the walls that protect the city are broken and he's standing in the gap.

Now I have to tell you, every time I read Genesis 18 I'm amazed. I'm amazed at Abraham. "Lord if there's 50 righteous people there, You wouldn't destroy it, would you?"

*I. Passionate Prayer Is Very Personal*

*II. Passionate Prayer Sees Needs And Jumps In*

*III. Passionate Prayer Understands The Character Of God*

When you read Abraham's words you understand that He understood God. Verse 23, *Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?* Verse 25, *Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?*

I don't think Abraham was trying to butter up God here and get on His good side. Abraham understood that God was a righteous God and will do right. He understood God was a God of grace and that God doesn't take pleasure in the death of the wicked.

A person who's effective in applying God's truth to life understands God's priorities. They have a window into the heart of God.

And here we are with a real advantage over Abraham.

You might say, "Wait a minute, he's face-to-face with God. God's speaking directly to him. How can we have an edge on him?"

Here's how. With all that he had, Abraham didn't have one page of the Bible. Moses, who God used to write Genesis, the book we're reading, didn't live till almost 400 years later.

Today we not only have Genesis but we have all 66 books, all bound together in one volume, in our own language, with cross references, study notes, concordances, and maps! Not only that, but we have it on our computer and our PDA and our cell phone. We can search out words and phrases in a flash.

We know the whole story. We know what happened and what's going to happen. We have God the Holy Spirit living within us.

If Abraham could know the character God, we should be light years past his understanding. We should have an unrestricted comprehension of the integrity, and the reputation, and the disposition of God. God has told us, He's revealed, He's demonstrated His character and nature. You can track it all the way from Genesis through Revelation.



Passionate prayer is always going to be a reflection of our understanding of the character of God.

Leon Hergert writes, We can ask God for anything and everything. Where we tend to stray from Abraham's example is in our failure to understand God. We have not taken the time to develop a basic understanding of God, so we cannot come to God and say, surely you would not. . . I believe that we also fail to allow God to be the authority he is. When we don't really know God then we fail to trust him to be the expert. Instead we become the expert and God becomes more of our genie in a bottle. We believe we know what is best, and then we fail to allow God to really be God.

*I. Passionate Prayer Is Very Personal*

*II. Passionate Prayer Sees Needs And Jumps In*

*III. Passionate Prayer Understands The Character Of God*

*IV. Passionate Prayer Is Bold But Tempered*

Look what happens next. This has to be one of the most remarkable interchanges between a person and God you'll ever hear. I love this. **Read verses 26-33**

Abraham negotiates for God's mercy: 50 people, 45 people, 40 people, 30 people, 10 people.

On the surface it looks like God gave him a major discount for the number of righteous people. How many of us would even think of asking God like that? But Abraham did and God agreed. Abraham was a great negotiator because he understood God's character.

Abraham knew that God was a merciful and gracious God and dared to ask. He did it humbly, and modestly, but he also did it persistently.

But now to put another facet to this, F. B. Meyer writes this, It looks at first sight as if he forced God back from point to point, and wrung his petitions from an unwilling hand. But this is a mistake. In point of fact, God was drawing him on. This was the time of his education. He did not learn the vast extent of God's righteousness and mercy all at once. He climbed the dizzy heights step by step, and as he gained each step, he was inspired to dare another.

God wants passionate prayer to be persistent. But not because He needs to be talked into doing anything by us. Our prayer shows we depend on Him. Our prayer shows we know Him and His character in a personal way. And our prayer is a tutorial. It's a workshop. It's a two person study group designed to bring us closer to the character and the thinking processes of God.

So passionate prayer, the prayer of a highly effective Christian, is personal, sees needs and jumps in, understands the character of God, and is bold but tempered.

Abraham's prayer was definitely passionate, but there's one more part of this big picture we need to sketch in so we don't miss something vitally essential.

In the next chapter we find out that God flattened the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He burned them to a cinder.

God answered Abraham's prayer for the righteous by saving Lot, his wife, and two daughters. Everybody else was wiped out.

That ought to stand as a sobering testimony to how serious God is about punishing sin.

You know you hear people say things like, "I don't like to read about the judgment of God. I don't like to think of God that way. I like the peace and love part, but not the wrath. That's not my idea of the way God should be."

What they really mean is this. "I want a God who doesn't dispense justice. I want a God who's less than holy. I want a God who just overlooks my sin." In the final analysis it becomes very personal. "I don't want a God who's going to call me into account for my transgressions. I want to live the way I want to live with no consequences."

I know this sounds tough. As we said a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the doctrine of hell, God's judgment isn't my favorite subject. It's a hard subject.

But you can't have forgiveness with out the flip side of judgment. If there was no judgment we wouldn't need God's mercy and grace.

Listen closely on this one so you don't turn me off and miss the essence of God's message to the world.

What happens when the Judge of all the earth does right? Adam and Eve are banished from the garden, a flood destroys everyone but Noah and his family, Sodom and Gomorrah are incinerated, and people who reject Jesus Christ are cast into the Lake of Fire.

God gives warning after warning. If we don't listen, one day the warnings are over and judgment falls.

If you don't believe that God judges sin all you have to do is turn back and take a good look at the cross. If God did not judge sin, Jesus Christ would not have suffered and bled on a cross. The Son of God wouldn't have born the shame and humiliation if God didn't judge. But He did bear those things.

He did so that you and I might have forgiveness and hope. Romans 5:8 says, *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

God demonstrated His love for us, His hatred of sin, and His willingness to become the Savior of His own creation.

Have you received Him by faith? We've been talking about prayer today. This morning you can express your faith toward God in a prayer.

Bow with me.

"God thank you for sending your Son to die in my place. This morning I trust Him as my sin-bearer and Savior. Thank you that He took the judgment that should have been mine for all the times that I have and will fail. Thank you that He rose again and will live out His life through me."