

8 November, 2009

God's Grace in the Midst of Judgment

Reading: Genesis 19:1-29; 2 Pet 2:6-9

You know, if you have been coming to the church for any length of time, that we preach systematically through sections of Scripture. Well, I should let you into a little secret. When I plan a series, I deliberately look for the contentious subjects and the more obscure passages and allocate them to my colleagues. That leaves me free to preach on the easy passages, the ones that are edifying and non-controversial.

Now if you happen to doze off in the next few seconds, please don't tell people that I admitted to this sneaky tactic. The truth of the matter is that I have sufficient confidence in my colleagues to know that they prepare diligently and are able to expound the not-so-easy passages well. So we take the passages as they come.

While the approach we adopt here is certainly not the only one, it has distinct benefits.

- It helps us to see the bigger picture. We are able to look at passages as part of the flow of Scripture. This is better than dealing atomistically with passages and jumping here, there and everywhere.
- It forces us to look at passages and subjects we might otherwise have ignored. "*All* Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). So, instead of developing blind spots, we ought to attempt to proclaim "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

This means that we will sometimes look at important passages we might have been inclined to skip. Today, we are looking at one such passage. By personal inclination, I may well have leapfrogged over this passage and alighted upon the story of God's concern for a distraught Hagar and Ishmael or the amazing account of Abraham's offering of Isaac to God. But I would have done so to your detriment and mine!

The passage before us is rich and sobering.

It is both fascinating and frightening.

It depicts mankind at our worst and at our best.

We see the catastrophic consequences of compromise.

And the effectiveness of prevailing prayer.

It raises questions about natural disasters.

Could some recent catastrophes be seen as God's judgments?

It depicts God's as the righteous judge.

(That's not too popular nowadays).

It also reveals him as "the God of all grace."

It speaks to us as Christians living in one of the most congenial, secular societies on earth and, if we're honest, we enjoy living here. It raises questions about our witness and our priorities. What we have before us is a single story with a number of related episodes. Let's think of it, scene by scene, as a play.

SCENE 1: (MIDDAY: THREE UNEXPECTED VISITORS)

The curtain lifts and we see Abraham trying to get some relief from the intense heat of the midday sun. We have to picture a region that is arid and almost unbearably hot. But Abraham is encamped at the best available spot, near the great trees of Mamre. He has finished his morning work and is probably preparing for his siesta.

He looks up and is surprised by the appearance, seemingly out of nowhere, of three men standing not too far from his tent. This was the oriental equivalent of knocking at the door. He immediately recognizes, from their regal bearing, that they are people of some importance.

"Hospitality with a capital "H"

It was customary, in that region, to offer hospitality to strangers. But Abraham was particularly generous and warm. He rushes to meet them and bows low to the ground. He senses that one of the three is the leader and addresses him directly. "My Lord (*Adonai*)," he says, "if it pleases you, stop here for a while. Rest in the shade of the tree while water is brought to wash your feet. And since you've honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some (a morsel of) food to refresh you before you continue your journey" (18:3 NLT). The word he uses to address the leader is a word that is used for God. Usually when you see the word Lord (uppercase "L" and lower case "o-r-d," it is a "translation of the word *Adonai*. But the word is also used in Scripture as a term of respect to address human beings. In fact, it is used to this day in Israel as a polite form of address. So, we don't know how aware Abraham was, at this point, about the true identity of his visitors.

A "bite to eat;" actually a sumptuous meal

They accept his kind offer, and Abraham *runs* back into his tent and asks Sarah to bake a generous quantity of bread, using the finest flour. He then *dashes* to the herd, selects a choice tender calf and instructs a servant to prepare it. He brings out some yogurt and milk and sets the meal before them. The syntax in the original creates the impression of great haste, almost as if Abraham was doing all these things simultaneously.

As any good eastern host would do, Abraham serves them and then stands discreetly in the background, allowing the guests to enjoy their lavish banquet. He had offered them a bite to eat (“a little bread”), but he lays a sumptuous meal before his special guests

Since Pastor Andrew gave us some very helpful insight, last week, about the LORD’s interaction with Sarah, I am not going to say anything about the conversation that took place after the meal.

A “Theophany”

But perhaps a word of explanation is in order concerning this remarkable appearance of the LORD and two angels to Abraham. We cannot be sure when Abraham realized who his visitors were. At first he assumes, as we might have expected, that they are men. But as the conversation progresses, he comes to realize that these are no ordinary visitors. By the time they are ready to leave, he knows that one of the three is none other than the LORD and the other two are angels.

It may seem strange to us that the LORD should appear in this form to Abraham. We generally refer to such appearances as *Theophanies*. They were few and far between. Some have gone as far as to describe them as “pre-incarnation appearances of the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is, of course, a huge subject. In view of God’s trinitarian nature, it is amazing, but not unthinkable.

Here’s what happens. A man appears. He is sometimes referred to as “*the* Angel of the LORD.” At first the biblical character thinks he is interacting with another human being, albeit an exceptional person. But he comes to realize during the encounter that God has manifested himself in finite form. Besides Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and Gideon had encounters of this nature.

After the meal, the three visitors are about to leave and Abraham walks along with them to see them on their way. After a short walk, he will return to his tent. From the hills near Hebron, they could look out towards the Dead Sea plain and the city of Sodom.

SCENE 2: (LATE AFTERNOON: IT’S “TIME-UP” FOR SODOM)

The Outcry

In a remarkable episode, the Lord then reveals to Abraham what he is about to do to Sodom. As they looked down toward the city, bathed in the setting sun, all would have seemed still and peaceful in the region. If you have ever been on a mountain overlooking a bustling city, you know that there is activity and noise, but you don’t hear a thing. From a distance, in the hush of the closing day, the city emitted no sound. But to God there was a thunderous roar!

In the words of F. B. Meyer,

It was the cry of the earth compelled to carry such a scar. The cry of inanimate creation, groaning and travailing in pain. The cry of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the victims of human violence and lust. The cry of the young woman, the wife, and the child. These are the cries that had entered into the ears of the LORD God of Hosts (Almighty; *Tsvaot*). And each sin has a cry (like the cry that went up when Cain killed Abel and God said, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”) And it will go on crying unless it is silenced by the yet greater voice of the blood of Christ “that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”¹

The LORD explains to Abraham how great the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is and how grievous their sins are. Abraham got the message. God is about to destroy these cities. With that, the two angels went on towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. No doubt he was concerned for the city for which he had previously gone to battle. Once again, he remembers his beloved nephew, Lot. That, surely, was his main concern.

The petition

So he politely petitions the LORD. “LORD, what about the righteous people living in the city? Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are *fifty* righteous people living there. Far be it from you to kill the righteous with the wicked, making no distinction between them. Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

The LORD says, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Clearly there were not even fifty.

Abraham acknowledges that he is but dust and ashes but he pleads again. “What if there are just five too few. Suppose there are *forty-five*. Will you destroy the whole city for the lack of five people?”

“If I find forty-five there, I will not destroy it,” says the LORD.

Emboldened by the concession, Abraham keeps reducing the number: Forty, thirty, twenty, and eventually ten.

Clearly, there were *not even ten*. The LORD leaves Abraham and Abraham returns home. He has poured out his heart. It appears that his “prayer” is to no avail. The LORD has heard him. He knows that. But Sodom is done for!

¹F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham* (Lynnwood, Washington: Emerald Books, 1996), 121.

A day of ups and downs

What an incredible day of ups and downs. Abraham has entertained angels without knowing it. His heart must have soared as he heard the promise God had made to him confirmed to Sarah. Just a year to go before their promised son is born. But his heart must have sunk as he heard the announcement concerning Sodom. His nephew had been in trouble before, but his compromise has at last caught up with him. This, it seems, is the end of the road for Lot! It was with mixed emotions that he returned to his spacious tent. The light air of Hebron was now heavy with foreboding. We can see why as we encounter one of the ugliest scenes in the Bible.

SCENE 3: (EVENING: BEYOND DISGUSTING)

Lot at the city gate

In the evening the angels arrive at Sodom. And who should be sitting in the gateway of the city but Lot himself. The “gateway” was the public square of the city, where the elders sat, public meetings were held and legal disputes were adjudicated. Some think that Lot was there because he was aspiring to be a citizen. It is more likely, as Bruce Waltke says that “politically he had become one of the Sodomites, if not a leader among them.”²

Protective hospitality

Like Abraham, Lot greets the unexpected strangers with deference and invites them to spend the night as his guest. They politely decline his kind invitation telling him that it is their intention to spend the night in the city square. Lot knows that the city square is no place to be at night in Sodom, so he insists that the strangers accept his offer. The wording in the original is so strong that Gordon Wenham translates it “manhandled” later in the chapter. Lot was not taking “No” for an answer.³

Sex-crazed violence

He prepared a meal for them and when they were about to go to bed, the whole city turned up on Lot’s doorstep. “All the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. We get an idea of just how perverted the city was. They shout out: “Where are the men who came to spend the night with you? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them!” If *we* find this shocking, it was even worse in that culture. If a guest came into a region, it was the responsibility of the entire city to treat them with respect. If they were treated badly by anyone in the community, it was a slur on the entire community.

²Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 275.

³Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 2. Ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 35, 54.

Lot understands their mood, and is under no illusions about their debauchery. So he steps outside immediately, closes the door behind him, and pleads with them: “No, my *friends*. Don’t do this wicked thing.” But clearly, they are in no mood to listen. So he offers them his two virgin daughters and tells them they can do as they please with them. Just as long as they don’t do anything to the men who have come under the protection of his roof.

Imagine *that!* How could any father contemplate such a thing? Whatever you think of Lot, you realize how desperate he must have been. I don’t know if you have ever been close to an inflamed mob. I have. Reason and control are gone. It seethes and eventually erupts. Individuals are incited to uncontrolled behavior. You see the explosion coming and you’ll do anything to allay it. But offering your own daughters? How awful!

“Get out of our way,” they shout and they begin to hurl insults at him. “This fellow came here as a foreigner and now he wants to play the judge! They surge forward, pushing him back towards the door. Now their rage at being denied is out of control. The angry mob is about to break down the door.

Suddenly the door opens; the men reach out and pull Lot back in to the house and slam the door. At the same time, they strike the men who were at the door with blindness so that they cannot find the door.

SCENE 4: (EXITING THE CITY BEFORE DAWN)

By this time, Lot realizes that the men are, in fact, angels. They ask him what other relatives he has in the city.”Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place.” There’s not a moment to waste!

Rounding up the righteous

Lot rushed out and spoke to his two sons-in-law to be and begged them to leave the city in a hurry for the LORD is about to destroy the city! Well, they weren’t buying it. They thought he was joking. “How exactly does he propose to do that, Lot? We have tolerated your religion, up to now. You know, ‘Live and let live!’ But give us a break! That’s going too far! Destroy the city; I ask you. See you tomorrow, Lot, and the next day, and the next day after that.”

As the dawn approached, the angels urged Lot to take his wife and his two daughters, who had narrowly escaped rape, and leave the city at once. Lot hesitates. I guess he looked around at his many possessions and it began to dawn on him that he would be reduced to poverty and have to start all over again, this time without Uncle Abraham. Perhaps his wife was crying at the prospect. The angels grasped the four of them by the hands and led them safely out of the city. “There’s not a moment to waste. Flee for

your lives! Don't look back! Don't stop anywhere in the plain. Head for the mountains as fast as you can or you'll be swept away!"

Strange logic

Here, we see that Lot's thinking had become distorted. A pattern of compromise tends to do that to us. He doesn't want to go to the mountains because he imagines disaster will overtake him and he'll die there. *The man and his immediate family are in the process of being rescued from disaster!* So he pleads to be allowed to go to a small town nearby. And he is granted permission to do so.

SCENE 5: (THE CALAMITY AT SUNRISE)

Shortly after sunrise, the LORD destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, just as he said he would. It says here: "The LORD rained down burning sulfur from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land."

It has been suggested that the massive inferno was the result of an earthquake in the Syrian-African Rift. Heat, gases, sulfur, and bitumen would have been spewed into the air through fissures formed during the earthquake. The lightning that often accompanies an earthquake would have ignited the gases and the bitumen.⁴ Whatever means the LORD employed the devastation was sudden and complete. *The cry of the city had reached him and Sodom and Gomorrah had run out of time.*

"Remember Lot's wife"

There's one more tragedy to recount. Contrary to explicit instructions, Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. She loved Sodom so much that she shared its fate. Apparently there was one large missile of lava that engulfed her. Jesus' terse words in Luke 17 remind us of the danger; he said simply, "Remember Lot's wife!" (Luke 17:32)

Judgment today

Before I leave the scene, I must ask a serious question. Most of us, nowadays, don't like to think that God would judge in such a devastating way. We know that he will judge the world at the end of the age, but are there intermediate judgments in history? Could God hear the cry of a Las Vegas, a Vancouver, an Amsterdam, a Paris, or a Johannesburg and say, "Enough"?

Let me skate right on the edge of political incorrectness. *Yes!* Sometimes civilizations self-destruct. God tolerates an awful amount. He allows weeds to grow amongst the

⁴ John E. Hartley, *Genesis*. NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 191. Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 279.

wheat in his world without prematurely rooting out the weeds. But it remains his prerogative to send penultimate judgment if he so chooses.

We need, of course, to be extremely cautious when we talk like this. Do you remember what was said when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans?

- Some asked: “How can a God of love allow such a terrible thing?”
- Others declared, “This is simply the way mother nature works. Why, on earth, didn’t they keep the levees in good repair?”
- This was God’s judgment on New Orleans, which was known for its immorality. Sadly, some Christian preachers took this line.
- There were many Christians who rolled up their sleeves and did all they possibly could to help the victims. That, I would submit, is what we should do instead of being presumptuously judgmental.

You see, *we cannot look at suffering and infer that this must be God’s judgment*. That’s what Job’s comforters did. It is one thing to say: “Sin leads to suffering,” and another altogether to say, “So-and-so is suffering; therefore he/she must have sinned.” That is not only a logical fallacy but theological nonsense.

Well, I don’t know how much Abraham slept that night. “Early the next morning he got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.”

I CAN NEVER READ THIS ACCOUNT WITHOUT BEING DEEPLY CHALLENGED BY IT.

The cost of compromise

Yes, God was gracious to Lot and he answered Abraham’s prayers, but Lot paid a huge price. It’s easy to get down on Lot as a man who didn’t really want to follow God. I have read too many commentaries and sermons that depict him as everything we should *not* be. But I must heed the word of 2 Peter that we read earlier this morning:

If (God) condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷ and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless ⁸ (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— ⁹ if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment (2 Pet 2:6-9).

Lot is described as a *righteous* man! But he made some disastrous decisions and these decisions cost him dearly. He lost his wife, compromised his daughters, and forfeited the possessions that had inclined him to head for Sodom in the first place. He forever stands as a warning concerning the danger of compromise. And his compromise did not start when he offered his virgin daughters to the lewd crowd of debased men trying to beat down his door.

Compromise starts in small, almost imperceptible ways. But it dilutes faith and sucks us deeper into no-win situations. Best to stay out of Sodom altogether!

Grace abounding

But then, tragic as these events are, who cannot be struck by the Lord's grace? He is "the God of all grace" (1Pet 5:10). Even when we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:13). Why do you think the LORD initiated the conversation with Abraham in the first place? I believe it was largely because he had Lot in mind. Our passage ends with these telling words: "So when the LORD destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot lived" (19:29).

TALKING OF JUDGMENT, SOME MAY WONDER *NOT WHY GOD JUDGES A CITY LIKE SODOM, BUT WHY HE ALLOWS WICKEDNESS TO CONTINUE UNABATED IN TODAY'S WORLD.*

Peter tells us the reason for this. In answer to some who mockingly said, "Where is this coming he promised?" he says: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). There is no question that he will judge sin, but the *really good news* is that he has already judged it at Calvary, where Christ died for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Pet 3:18). There is no need for anyone to face retribution!

Conclusion

Like Lot, you may find that you are in a Sodom of sorts. Perhaps you got there by choice. And it makes life so very difficult. You are distressed and tormented by evil. Maybe you are grieved by what goes on around you, perhaps even in your own family.

No, this is not a call for us to get into a holy huddle. We are meant to be in the world but not of it. We are thinking of Sodom more as a state of mind than a particular place. If the lure of "Sodom" is causing you to compromise, then why don't you take decisive action? Get out of harm's way!

And be encouraged by assurance: "*The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.*" If we really want to be rescued, there is no limit to the lengths to which he will go. He will either

preserve you in affliction or extricate you from the imprisonment of Sodom. If so, get up and go. And, whatever you do, don't look back!