

“THE JUST JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH”

In the preceding passage, the Lord visited Abraham in order to reassert his promise of a son in the hearing of Abraham’s wife Sarah. In this passage, the setting is the same, but the topic is entirely different. God is still present with Abraham, but as he begins to depart, a new topic is raised, as God deliberates with himself about telling Abraham about what he is going to do to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their wickedness had incited God’s wrath to the boiling point, and their end was near. And in these verses, as God reveals his plans to Abraham, we are assured that God is completely righteous and just in the exercise of his justice.

This passage can be divided into three sections, each of which consists of a different type of communication: there is a divine soliloquy (a speech that God makes to himself); there is an announcement; and then there is a negotiation. We begin by taking a look at the soliloquy, where God considers, in our hearing but not Abraham’s, whether or not he should tell Abraham what he is about to do. Now obviously, this is not intended to convey any indecisiveness on God’s part. God does not need to stop and think. He knows exactly what he wants to do. Instead, this is another example of anthropomorphism, as God describes himself and his actions in human terms, in a way that is comprehensible to us.

The purpose of God’s deliberation with himself is to call attention to the reason why he is about to tell Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah. Why is this a matter of concern for Abraham? What does he have to do with these two wicked cities? The answer is

stated in verse 18, where God says that Abraham is his instrument to bless all the nations of the earth. The Lord had entered into a covenant with Abraham, making him his partner in his plan to bring redemption to the world. It would be through Abraham's offspring, through Jesus Christ, that the way of salvation would be brought to all the peoples of the world. This was the reason why God wanted Abraham to know about the judgment that was about to fall upon Sodom and Gomorrah. In order for Abraham to be the recipient of God's promised blessings, it was imperative that he have an understanding of God's judgment. And the same is true for us. The only way we will have a true appreciation of the gospel, the only way we will have true sense of the urgency of telling others about the gospel, is to be aware of the fate that lies ahead for unredeemed humanity.

God had given Abraham a great responsibility. He said, "For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." God had given Abraham great promises, to be sure, but in this verse he reveals the means by which those promises will be fulfilled. God's promise to be God to Abraham and to his children after him will be brought about through Abraham's godly nurture of his children. Abraham is to command his children to keep the way of the Lord. Notice that the promise of covenant succession, God's promise to build his kingdom through Abraham's offspring, was conditional. It was contingent upon Abraham's faithfulness in teaching his children to follow the ways of God. This is the meaning of

the words “so that” in the last part of verse 19. God chose Abraham that he might teach his children the ways of the Lord, *so that* God might fulfill what he has promised him. The reason why God tells Abraham about the coming judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah is to call his attention to the fate of those who are outside of the covenant. These cities were to serve as a warning, both to Abraham and to his offspring, against neglecting the Lord and his ways. We must never lose sight of the fact that this world is inching closer and closer to a final day of judgment. We need to remember the awful fate that awaits everyone who is not found in Jesus Christ on that day.

This brings us to the second section of our passage: God’s announcement of his judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. He tells Abraham that “the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great.” What a sobering picture this is. The wickedness of those cities resulted in a cry for divine justice. This shows us that the sins of mankind are an affront to the holiness of God. This is something that we should be able to understand. We all have a sense of justice. We all know that crimes need to be punished if justice is to be upheld. This came to light in the recent trial of O.J. Simpson. I believe it was the judge who was presiding over his trial who went out of his way to emphasize that this trial was not about the murders for which Simpson was acquitted fifteen years ago, but only about the recent charges brought against him for armed robbery. Of course, it was right to say this. It is the way our justice system works. But the reason why such a thing had to be said is because many people believe that Simpson literally got away with murder, and our sense of justice is very troubled by that. Unpunished sin cries out to God for justice, and

the Scriptures tell us that there will be a day of reckoning, a day when God's justice is served.

God's response to the outcry that resulted from Sodom's sin reveals his holiness. It shows us that he is a God of justice, a God who will not allow sin to go unpunished. The holiness and justice of God is perhaps one of the most difficult things for people in our culture to comprehend. This has been less of a problem at other times and in other cultures. Even pagans have sometimes had a fairly accurate sense of holiness and divine justice. As C.S. Lewis once put it, the pagan who wrings the neck of a chicken and pours out its blood before an idol is closer to the truth than the anthropologist who observes this act and explains it away as mere superstition. It is true that the pagan offers his sacrifice to a false god, but at least he understands that there is a deity that he has offended. At least he has some sense of divine justice. This is a foreign concept for most of the people in our culture. I recently listened to an interview in which a person said that just about the only virtue left in our culture is that of "niceness." And because niceness is the supreme virtue, the image that best represents how people in our culture think of God is the image of a golden retriever: gentle, easy to train, good with kids, and not very threatening. This is how most of the people around us think of God. He is gentle and easy to manage. He is certainly not a being who would rain down burning sulphur on a wicked city.

But the Bible disagrees with this picture of God. The God of the Bible is not "nice" - at least not in terms of how niceness is typically defined in our culture. The Lord is a just

God, a God who must punish the evildoer. God's response to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah should cause us to dread sin. Moreover, this passage should cause us to be extremely careful as we go about our lives in an increasingly wicked society. Corruption spreads very rapidly, like the plague. As we will see in the next chapter, the Lord found only one righteous man in the entire city of Sodom, Abraham's nephew Lot. And he barely escaped. His wife did not. And the later actions of his daughters revealed how much they had been influenced by the immorality of their city. It is a very dangerous thing to live among a wicked people. As Calvin puts it, "For nothing is more dangerous than to live where the public license of crime prevails." This should cause us to tremble, should it not? We live in a land that has legalized the murder of unborn children; a land that promotes gay marriage; a land that encourages and celebrates the vices of lust, greed, and sloth. We need to take great care in how we live, lest we be polluted by the evils of our age.

We turn now to the third section of our passage: the negotiation between Abraham and God. This is simply astounding. It sounds as though Abraham is haggling with God. Here is the first place in the Bible where a man initiates a conversation with God, and Abraham has the audacity to ask God change his mind. Now it is important to point out that Abraham was not being irreverent here. He was certainly not casual in his approach to God. He acknowledges that he is but dust and ashes. He pleads, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak." His requests were made in reverent fear. Nevertheless, he does plead for the Lord to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. Why does he do this? Certainly

he would have been concerned for his nephew Lot. But his request is not just for Lot. He asks God to spare the entire city. He shows a concern for the lost. This is a trait that should be present in the lives of all of God's people. God himself says that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Neither should we. Like Abraham, we should seek the salvation of lost people.

But compassion for the lost does not seem to be the chief motive behind Abraham's request. Notice what he says: "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" Abraham was concerned that the Lord not punish the righteous alongside the wicked. He wanted to be certain that God would be completely just and fair in the exercise of his judgment.

Is God just? Does he ever sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Well, an honest assessment of history would seem to indicate that he sometimes does. Sometimes, the righteous (those who are right with God) are caught up in the punishments brought against the wicked. This is what happened to the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel at the time of the Babylonian exile. They were faithful Jews, but they were taken into captivity alongside of those Jews who were being punished for breaking the covenant. And surely there were some faithful Jews among those who were killed when Jerusalem fell. The righteous often share the fate that befalls the ungodly. This is certainly true, but it does not mean that God is unjust. We need to remember that God is able to discriminate between the righteous and the wicked, to maintain a distinction between them, even when they share the same fate. God is able to use the same circumstances to bring about

judgment and punishment for the wicked and to further his work of redemption in the lives of the righteous.

That being said, we also need to remember that God often does spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous. God's people can serve as a preserving influence in a society. As wicked as Sodom was, it would have been spared if God had found just ten righteous people in it!

We might wonder why Abraham stopped at ten. Perhaps his faith in God's justice had been strengthened to the point where he did not need to go any further. But the text does not say that. In fact, it indicates that it was God who brought this negotiation to a close. Whether or not Abraham was finished, God went his way, and the conversation was over. And as we reflect upon this, we begin to see that God was in control of this conversation all along. Even though Abraham seemed to be the initiator, it was ultimately brought about by the Lord himself. Why else would he have told Abraham about his plans for Sodom? Why else would he have lingered and waited for Abraham to speak? In prompting Abraham to intercede for this wicked city, God revealed his holy justice to him. And this revelation points forward to the supreme revelation of God's justice: the revelation of his justice at the cross of Jesus Christ. The just judgment that befell Sodom and Gomorrah strikes terror in our hearts. If human sin brings such an outcry before the ears of a holy God, then we are all doomed. But the cross gives us hope, because it shows us that God is willing to spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous, for the sake of the only One who was truly righteous. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, God

put Christ “forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” [Rom. 3:25-26] The requirements of God’s holy justice were perfectly met at the cross of Christ. And if you have faith in him, you will be spared from the judgment that is yet to come.