

**“DESTRUCTION AND DELIVERANCE”**

This is obviously a passage about divine judgment, a passage that the rest of the Bible often regards as the paradigmatic illustration for the day of judgment that will come at the end of history. But judgment is not the only theme in this chapter, even though it is the primary one. We also see God’s mercy on clear display, as he rescues Lot in response to Abraham’s prayers. In addition, the influence that Sodom had upon Lot and his family serves as a warning against the dangers of worldliness. When we put all of these themes together, remembering that Moses originally wrote Genesis while preparing the Israelites to take possession of the Promised Land, we can see how this passage would have warned the Israelites of the great danger of getting entangled with the neighboring Canaanite peoples.

Our passage begins with the two angels from the previous passage arriving in Sodom to conduct an investigation over the outcry that was raised against the city. As they arrive, they are given two shockingly different receptions by the people of the city. First, there is the warm and hospitable welcome that is extended by Lot, a welcome that brings to mind the hospitality shown by Abraham in the previous chapter. As I said in my sermon on that text, hospitality was an extremely important virtue in the ancient world, far more important than it is in our culture. The angels would have seen it as a good sign that Lot was willing to open his home to them. Here is at least one righteous man in the city of Sodom.

But we already begin to get an ominous sense by the way in which Lot addresses the angels. It is true that he invites them to spend the night in his house, but notice what else he says: “Then you may rise early and go on your way.” Lot does not want these men to hang around. He wants them to get out of town, bright and early. And on top of this, there is the fact that Lot is so insistent, especially after his offer is declined and he hears the men say that they would rather spend the night out in the town square. What does Lot know that he is not telling them? What is he afraid will happen to them if they spend the night in the square? We suspect that danger is close at hand.

Our suspicions are confirmed by what takes place later that night, as the men of the city converge upon Lot’s house and demand that he send the visitors out so that they might “know” them. These men were not just asking to make the acquaintance of Lot’s guests. Most cultures make use of euphemisms when speaking about sex, and this was certainly the case in ancient Israel. There are a number of places in the Hebrew Bible, and particularly in the book of Genesis, where the verb “to know” is used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. This is clearly the case in this passage. Why else would Lot be so upset at their request? Furthermore, why else would he offer his own daughters to the crowd instead and point out that they had never “known” a man? What we have here is the Bible’s first clear reference to the sin of homosexuality. And it is for this reason that the term “sodomy” came to be used to refer to homosexual practice.

Some modern scholars have attempted to argue that this passage is not depicting homosexuality as a sin. Instead, they say that the sins for which the men of Sodom are

being condemned in this passage are their inhospitality and their attempt to rape the men. Now it is certainly true that those two things added to the picture of wickedness that is set forth here. However, to say that those are the only sins involved here is to fail to read this text in light of the context in which it was written. In many cultures of the ancient world, homosexual rape was treated as a far more serious crime than heterosexual rape. And why was this the case? Because it was not only an act of violence, but also an act that went against nature. In the words of biblical scholar Robert Gagnon, who has written the definitive work on the Bible's treatment of homosexuality,

“What makes this instance of inhospitality so dastardly, what makes the name ‘Sodom’ a byword for inhumanity to visiting outsiders in later Jewish and Christian circles, is the specific form in which the inhospitality manifests itself: *homosexual* rape.

The demand of the men of Sodom to have sex with Lot's visitors, along with their subsequent threat to ‘act more wickedly toward [Lot] than toward [the two visitors]’ (19:9),...establishes beyond doubt the utterly evil character of the city's inhabitants.” [*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 76]

In other words, it is extremely misleading, and blatantly false, to suggest that this story has nothing to say about the immorality of homosexual behavior. It is certainly true that there are other passages in the Bible that speak more directly to this, but there can be no

doubt that Moses, who also wrote the account of the origin of sexual differentiation and marriage in Genesis 2, intended this description of the actions of the men of Sodom to be taken as overwhelming evidence of their depravity.

Sadly, however, the sin of the Sodomites is not the only sin that is depicted here. We also see the sin of Lot, as he responds to the demand of the wicked men at his door by offering them his daughters instead. Here is a case in which a virtue (Lot's desire to protect his guests) causes someone to commit a vice (Lot's offer to prostitute his daughters to the men). What a sad reminder this is of the great danger of thinking that the ends can justify the means.

At this point in the story, the angels apparently decided that they had seen enough. Sodom was indeed every bit as wicked as advertised, and its time was up. But because of his great mercy, and because of his love for Abraham, the Lord chose to spare Lot and his family. They would be delivered from the judgment that was at hand.

Notice, however, how reluctant they are to be delivered. First of all, Lot is unable to convince his future sons-in-law to flee the city with them. Those men did what so many others have so foolishly done - they laughed in the face of divine judgment. Fire, brimstone, hell, eternal torments - to many people, such things are little more than fodder for Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoons and Saturday Night Live skits. Many people are just like Lot's prospective sons-in-law; they do not take the threat of judgment seriously.

Lot's sons-in-law were not the only ones who were reluctant to be rescued in this passage. Lot himself hesitated. The angels had to take him by the hand and lead him out

of the city. And even after they did so, Lot actually had the nerve to argue with them. He does not want to go up to live in the hills. It would be too hard. He likes the comforts of city life. Won't they spare just this one small city for his sake? Can you imagine being so bold? Here is God, rescuing Lot from a dreadful fate, but Lot is unwilling to submit to the terms of the rescue. It would be like a person trapped inside a burning building saying to the fireman on the ladder, 'I'm sorry, but I just don't like ladders. Could you find me another way down?' It seems so preposterous and so foolish to hear Lot objecting to the Lord here, but don't we do the same thing? God has clearly set forth the way of salvation, the pathway to life, in his Word, but we often refuse to submit to it. Those who want to be delivered from the judgment that awaits this rebellious world need to come out from this world and be separate from it, but we are not always willing to do so. We like what the world has to offer. There may be many things about it that we do not like, but we do like the security, the comforts, the amenities that it affords us. We are very often just like Lot. And the most amazing thing of all is that the Lord is so patient with us, just as he was with Lot.

But we should be careful not to presume upon God's patience, lest we end up missing out on the deliverance that God is offering us. That was what happened to Lot's wife. She looked back; she loved the world; and she ended up sharing in its fate. Those who love the world will share in the judgment that is held in store for the world.

Once Lot and his daughters were secure, the Lord unleashed his wrath upon the unsuspecting peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah. We do not know exactly how this

destruction came about, but what is clear is that those cities, everyone and everything in them, were wiped out by the hand of God. To this day, that region around the Dead Sea still reeks of sulphur. The wickedness of those ancient cities resulted in their utter annihilation by the Lord.

The notion of divine judgment strikes modern people as offensive, unsophisticated, or just downright ridiculous. Yet the Scriptures repeatedly assure us that there will be a final day of reckoning at the end of history. Listen to the words of Revelation 20:

“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” [Rev. 20:11-15]

The fiery end of Sodom and Gomorrah was only a foretaste of what is yet to come.

Some may wonder why this is the case. Why is the doctrine of a final judgment such an essential element of the Christian faith? Theologian Anthony Hoekema gives four reasons why the doctrine of the final judgment is so significant:

“(1) The history of the world is not an endless succession of meaningless cycles, but is moving towards a goal. (2) The Day of Judgment will reveal finally that salvation and eternal blessedness will depend upon one’s relationship to Jesus Christ. (3) The inescapableness of the Day of Judgment underscores man’s accountability for his life, and asserts the seriousness of the moral struggle in the life of every person, particularly in the life of the Christian. (4) The Day of Judgment means the final triumph of God and his redemptive work in history - the final and decisive conquest of all evil, and the final revelation of the victory of the Lamb that was slain. The Day of Judgment will reveal, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that in the end the will of God will be perfectly done.” [*The Bible and the Future*, 264]

Lot’s story does not end with the judgment that befell Sodom, but is concluded with an epilogue that is contained in the final section of the chapter. We are told that Lot and his two daughters ended up living in the hills after all, because they were too afraid to remain in the city of Zoar. And once they had taken up residence in a cave in the hills, the actions taken by Lot’s daughters demonstrated very clearly that, while they were no

longer residing in Sodom, Sodom was still residing in them. And their incestuous treatment of their father had tragic consequences for generations to come. They would give birth to the Moabite and Ammonite peoples, who would be a thorn in the side of the Israelites throughout the Old Testament period.

The Lord was gracious and merciful to Lot, but Lot proved to be a somewhat unwilling recipient of God's grace. And this had disastrous consequences, both for him and for his family. Lot's reluctance to be delivered was magnified in his wife's decision to look back and share in Sodom's fate. His pragmatic solution to the demands of the angry mob at his door was magnified in the way his daughters dealt with the fact that they had no husbands to give them children. Lot's life serves as a warning against the snares that this world puts before us. He may not have participated in the extreme forms of wickedness that characterized the people of Sodom, but there was still a sense in which he was captivated by what the city of man has to offer. May God grant us grace, that we might always remember the ultimate fate that awaits this world and all of those who love it.