

Foundations: City of Destruction
By Jason Huff
October 10, 2021
Amos 5:21-24; Luke 13:1-9; Genesis 19:1-29

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 19:1-29. While I've never done this before, our reading and our sermon today are going to talk about sensitive subjects that are not appropriate for young children, so parental discretion is advised. Scripture does not cover over the dark parts of human history, so it's important for us to learn from them, but I want to give those in attendance today fair warning. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and inspired Word.

“The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. “My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.” “No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.” But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate.

Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.” “Get out of our way,” they replied. And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.” They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door. But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.”

The two men said to Lot, “Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.” So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, “Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!” But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.” When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them.

As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” But Lot said to them, “No, my lords, please! Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can’t flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I’ll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it—it is very small, isn’t it? Then my life will be spared.” He said to him, “Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it.” (That is why the town was called Zoar.)

By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.”

John Bunyan had a lot of time on his hands. He spent over twelve years in prison for preaching without the authority of the Church of England. During his time in jail, he wrote much of his book *Pilgrim’s Progress*, an allegory about the Christian life. It’s been printed in over 200 languages and has never been out of print. He tells the story of a man named Christian who lives in the City of Destruction for many, many years. Finally, he realizes that he is doomed, and he strikes out for the Celestial City, the city of God’s Kingdom. While he struggles along the difficult path towards his new home, for him to make any progress along the way, he had to make the first step of leaving the City of Destruction. It isn’t until he leaves that anyone takes his spiritual journey seriously.

Pilgrim’s Progress is a great read, and its picture of the City of Destruction is not unlike that of the picture we see of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. Most people live there without a care in the world about the evil right in their midst. There are obviously actively wicked people there intending for the harm of others. But then there are those who just live and let live, who get along fine, who don’t rock the boat. They carve out a place for themselves. And yet, the city rubs off on them. They are changed because of their environment.

And that’s what we see in Genesis 19 – a picture of God’s righteous wrath and destruction mingled in with a story of mercy to a man living in the city of destruction who desires to do what is right but is deeply morally compromised. It’s a warning to us on multiple levels. It teaches us about the righteous anger of God while it instructs us of the dangers of moral compromise in a society that no longer fears God.

As we saw the previous two weeks, God has sent two angels disguised as men to fully investigate just what is going on in Sodom and Gomorrah. He does this not because He isn’t all knowing, but because God’s justice is personal and direct – not a pronouncement from on high, but one well aware of all the facts on the ground. The angels are here as witnesses.

As the passage begins, Lot is sitting in the gateway to the city. This suggests that Lot was an elder in the city; he has a place of authority. It's a spot where the leaders of the city would gather to make decisions. Given the wealth of Lot a few chapters back, it's easy to imagine that he's bought his way into the city's good graces.

When the angels arrive, Lot convinces them to come to his home despite their protests that they will stay in the town square. Already, this suggests that Lot well knows the evil prevalent in the city. City gates were closed to keep out robbers and bandits and wild animals. In a good town, the square behind the city gates would have been a safe haven for travelers to stay. That it's not foreshadows what's to come. We should note that while Lot is gracious, his hospitality is lacking in comparison to his uncle Abraham when the angels visited there two passages back. Lot is doing what's right to do, but at a minimum, not a maximum.

Eventually, word gets out about these strangers in town, and a large contingent of men show up at Lot's house. While it's not every man in town, the way it's worded means that it's an assortment representing every age group and person in town. Their plans to violently assault these strangers is not the whole of their sins; we tend to think of Sodom as characterized by this one thing. But much later, God through the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the sins of Sodom this way: "She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me." While this is awful, it shows off the lows to which Sodom has fallen because they have gone down this path. The men of Sodom have stooped this low because they've been on the path of sin for some time.

And Lot's unbelievable response shows that he's been living among these people and picking up their ways for far too long. Lot has been put in a no-win situation, or so it appears. Offering someone your protection was your oath and bond in the ancient world; someone who would not keep this oath couldn't be trusted for anything. But as their father, Lot has an explicit duty to protect his daughters as well. He has no plan; he's making it up as he goes along, and the reason that the Scripture tells us of the horrible compromise he suggests is to show us that Lot too has been hardened and darkened willfully living among these people. Lot is no missionary trying to make a breakthrough for God's Kingdom; he's lived in Sodom for his own gain. He's stuck in a horror of his own making by willfully living in this city to enjoy its luxuries.

And this is where I'm going to suggest a first concept to remember from this week: *guard your integrity, because moral compromise wants to rob you of it*. I'm going to skip forward in the passage just to see how Lot's reputation has fallen and how compromised he really is. When Lot tries to urge these men to reject their wickedness, they scoff at him as an alien trying to tell them how to live. When Lot goes to warn his future sons-in-law, they think he's playing a practical joke. After the warnings from the angels, Lot is still hesitant to leave – the angels have to take all his family members by the hands to get them out, and they do that to show God's mercy to them even in their disbelief. Lot tries to haggle with the angels to not leave the entire region for the desolate mountains, which they agree to. Lot can't even control his wife, who longs to return and pays the ultimate price for her disobedience to the angelic commands. The Apostle Peter will eventually call Lot a righteous man dismayed by his city, but Genesis is clear that Lot is also, at best, a compromised individual who no one respects and no one fears and who escapes the wrath of God only because of the prayers of his uncle Abraham.

Lot knew the city he lived in was wicked, but if you remember, he moved there in stages. First, he chooses the land near Sodom to graze his animals and to give his people room. Then, a few passages later, he's living with his family in Sodom. Then, by the time we pick up here, he's an elder in the city. Little by little, he became enamored. No doubt Sodom was an enjoyable city, full of pleasures and delights galore. But wickedness also ruled the day. And Lot was nearly consumed by it when the day of judgment came.

Friends, we do not lose our integrity so much as trade it away piece by piece. We do not expect that a single compromise will cause much damage down the line. It's not typically that thing that day that harms us as much as the choice we've made to compromise. Because once we've made that compromise, we make another choice and another, and pretty soon, we're overwhelmed by all the compromises and we realize our integrity is lying dead on the floor. Even if no one else knows it, we know it.

No one thinks that glancing at someone else's test answers is going to lead to a habit of lying. No one thinks that glancing at a dirty magazine or video is going to lead to a habit of lust. No one thinks that saying an unkind remark is going to lead to a habit of gossip and backbiting. But it's precisely why we have to guard our integrity so very carefully. Not because God hasn't given us forgiveness through Jesus Christ, not because God's mercy isn't wonderful, but because we are broken people prone to stray. As the old hymn says, "Let your goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to Thee. For I am prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love, so here's my heart, Lord – take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above."

Where we've been compromised already, there is always the chance to be forgiven and made clean. The table we will celebrate together in a few minutes isn't meant for perfect performers but forgiven followers. It reminds us how we need to feast on Christ, how we need His sacrifice given for us. Don't ever fear that God will not forgive any heart that longs for Him and comes to Him in humility. But the best choice is to avoid wandering near to our modern Sodoms and Gomorrah. The world has given us so many ways to indulge ourselves, but that's not God's design for us. Let us guard our integrity, our purity, our holiness. When we become believers, God calls us clean in His sight. Let us move forward in that integrity Christ purchased for us on the cross.

Now I want to turn our attention to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the righteous anger of God on full display. Perhaps you're like me and you've heard complaints about the wrath of God, things like, "Why is God so angry?" "My God would never condemn people. He wants us to be happy." "Isn't God supposed to be loving? If God commands us to love our enemies, why is He destroying people in His wrath?" Sodom and Gomorrah is exhibit A. God hears an outcry against the place, He comes down Himself to show He is not a distant God, and when the facts are established, He consumes it with burning sulfur. It is not pleasant. It is not comfortable. It makes us fearful, even. Can this view of God align with our view of God in the New Testament as loving and kind? It has to, because God does not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

What I am stuck by is this truth: *God displays perfect mercy even while displaying perfect judgment and perfect wrath.* We know that Sodom and Gomorrah were full of people doing pure evil. Yet there are warnings to all those people. The men are struck blind as the angelic visitors reveal their true nature. Now I don't know about you, but if someone has the power in and of themselves to render an entire mob blind, I'm going to pay attention to what they say. The city itself is not destroyed for hours; had they had any sense, any remorse, any guilt, even any respect for the supernatural in their midst, they could have gotten away themselves. The men who were pledged to Lot's daughters had direct warning. So did Lot's wife. Everyone who receives the wrath of God has some sort of clue that they ignore to their own peril.

Also notice this: as was said in previous passages and repeated here, an outcry has gone up to God about the wickedness in this place. God's wrath is not about human anger that flares up in a moment, often over things that are inconsequential. No, God's wrath brings about justice. No more will the innocent be found guilty or the weak exploited or the traveler brutalized in this place. No more will the decadence and hedonism and anarchy of this place be tolerated. God's judgment is fair and based on the evidence.

Jesus commands us as His followers to forgive; as people forgiven of our sins, we too forgive others. That does not mean, however, that there will not be justice or no accounting for the wicked. It's that those things are left in the hands of God. We do not make eternal judgments because we don't have all the facts. We do not seek revenge because God is our judge who will set things right, whether in this world or the next.

But we do believe that there will be a reckoning. God has the right to make those reckonings in His timing at His command. As 2 Peter 3:9 tells us, "God is not slow in keeping His promises. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief." God always balances His righteous wrath and judgment with mercy and patience. No one will ever truly be able to accuse the LORD of unfairness.

And as Jesus would teach His disciples, tragic deaths aren't the result of some form of divine karma. The righteous sometimes do perish with the wicked. We cannot say that some deserve heaven and some deserve hell. Without Jesus, all of us would be utterly lost. Our hope is not in divine rescue from everything down here because we live in a world deeply corrupted by sin. Our hope is in an eternal home with God in His dwelling place, that we receive not because we were good but solely through faith alone in the saving and redemptive work of Christ.

Maybe you aren't, but I am comforted by God's anger. God who created this world and all of us should be more upset about the awful treatment of His people and His creation than I am. A god who isn't angry at the brutality of man against man isn't a god worth serving. God is not only angry at those things, He is perfectly angry at them, whereas my anger leads to nothing good. God's righteous anger does something about the horrors of this world; we have His promise that all will be made right. I am not disturbed by God bringing judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. I'm more disturbed that I am more like the hedonistic residents of that doomed valley than I imagine. That's why we need Christ's rescue, to save us from ourselves.

As the passage ends, Abraham sees smoke on the far distant horizon. God has remembered Abraham and his pleas for mercy, and his nephew Lot has been saved. For all the horrors of this passage, the ultimate message is one of mercy to a man who had lost his way in a city sunken deep into sin. May God show mercy to us, and may we who love Him turn to Him and ask Him to restore our integrity and help us live in integrity from this day forth and always.