

“Outcry Before the Lord,” Genesis 19:1-26 (Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, November 4, 2018)

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth ² and said, “My lords, please turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the town square.” ³ But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. ⁵ And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.

⁸ Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” ⁹ But they said, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door down. ¹⁰ But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the entrance of the house, both small and great, so that they wore themselves out groping for the door.

¹² Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” ¹⁴ So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up! Get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

¹⁵ As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶ But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city. ¹⁷ And as they brought them out, one said, “Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.” ¹⁸ And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords. ¹⁹ Behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. ²⁰ Behold, this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!” ²¹ He said to him, “Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²² Escape there quickly, for I can do nothing till you arrive there.” Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar.

²³ The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. ²⁴ Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. ²⁵ And he overthrew those cities, and all

the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶ But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

PRAY

We've been walking through the book of Genesis on Sunday mornings and today we get to the very famous and, frankly, controversial account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I think it's worth reminding everyone on a Sunday where we cover a text like this that we have a practice at Grace Bible Church of expository teaching of the Bible.

I did not wake up yesterday and think, "You know, I want to preach on Sodom and Gomorrah tomorrow!" There are passages I get excited about preaching and have wished I were covering the next Sunday, but this isn't one of them.

Rather, I did wake up one day back in the summer, come to work, and decide that I wanted to preach on a certain big chunk of Scripture this fall, the life of Abraham from Genesis 11-22, and walk through virtually all of it, talking about whatever we come across. Why did I make that decision? Because we as elders at Grace Bible Church are convinced that the whole Bible is the Word of God and God's people need to hear all of it. We think the best way to accomplish that is to take big chunks of the Bible, in all the genres of the Old and New Testaments, spend four or six or eight or twelve weeks on them (nine, in the case of our series on the life of Abraham), and see what we come up with, even when some of those passages are awkward and difficult.

And this passage is certainly awkward and difficult. Not just because the subject of human sexuality comes up, which is probably most controversial issue of our day, but also because in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah you have an account of the God of the Bible, the God Christians worship and have given their lives to, killing thousands of people. This is a very uncomfortable part of the Bible. But it's still God's Word, and we need to hear it.

How do you reconcile the idea of a loving God with a God who would do something like that? We'll look at this under three headings, and then we'll take the Lord's Supper: first, Sodom's sin. Second, God's judgment. Third, God's mercy.

First, Sodom's sin. Lot is Abraham's nephew. We're first introduced to him back in Genesis 11, and by the time we get to Genesis 13 he's a wealthy man. In fact, he and Abraham have grown so wealthy that they can't live close together anymore. Their flocks of sheep and goats and cattle need more room to graze. So, Lot chooses to migrate down to the area of Sodom and Gomorrah, which at that time was located in a very fertile valley just south or just east (we're not exactly sure which) of the Dead Sea.

Lot is not a citizen of Sodom, he's a sojourner in the city. When the angels arrive in Sodom, Lot greets them and offers to host these angels in his home. They refuse at first and say they'll sleep on the street. But Lot insists they must stay with him. They go with Lot, Lot feeds them, but then we read this: "But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. ⁵ And they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.'" Genesis

19:4-5. The word “know” is clearly used here in a euphemistic way – it means in this context “sex.”

What, then, was the sin of Sodom? A lot of Christians over the centuries have said, “Do you even have to ask the question? It’s obvious, isn’t it? Homosexuality is the sin of Sodom.” And for 1900 years the question was settled in the church. In the West, certain sexual acts got their name from the city of Sodom.

But in the last hundred years there have been those who claim to be Christians but who have said that’s not the sin of Sodom. It’s safe to say the people in this group wish to legitimize homosexual practice in the eyes of the church, and they have said, “The sin of Sodom had nothing to do *sex per se*. What the men of Sodom wanted to do to Lot’s guests would not have been consensual – it would have been forcible. This was rape. That has nothing to do with sexual identity or orientation.” And, of course, they are right in saying that more is going on in Sodom than just two consenting adults doing something in the privacy of a home.

This group as a part of their argument has also pointed to Ezekiel 16:49, which says, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.” The people in this movement have said, “See, the sin of Sodom wasn’t about sex at all – it was all about greed and refusing to care for the poor. The Bible clearly teaches this was an extremely prosperous and wealthy region – that’s why Lot moved there in the first place.” The people in this group have taken this verse to turn the tables on the majority in the church and they’ve said, “Sex has nothing to do with Sodom. But if you are stingy with money and you don’t agree with our ideas on helping the poor then, in reality, you’re the Sodomites, not us.” I’ve been a pastor fifteen years and time and time again over that relatively brief period of time I’ve seen this argument win people over, including pastors and other church leaders, who in turn become a part of this movement themselves.

This argument works in our culture. It’s so effective because it’s what most already want to believe. The majority view in our society is now that there is nothing wrong with homosexual practice, so some Christians are grasping for whatever reason they can find to go along with the prevailing winds of culture. *The argument works, but is it true?* No, **it’s not true**. You read the whole Bible and it becomes clear that sex had something to do with Sodom’s sin. In the New Testament, in Jude 7, we read about Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities which “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” Jude 7.

The Bible uniformly teaches that sex is a gift from God, but it’s only a gift when it’s expressed in a marriage between one man and one woman. Any other use of sex is a misuse, and you simply can’t take the Bible seriously as an authority in your life and make it say anything different about sex. ***It’s just not there.***

You know, the very people who love to quote Ezekiel 16:49 are seemingly oblivious to the very next verse. “They [those in Sodom] were haughty and did an abomination before me.” Ezekiel 16:50a. The Hebrew word translated as “abomination” is a very specific word used to describe only two things in the Old Testament, two things that went hand in hand in the pagan religions of

the ancient world: illicit sex and idolatry. That's telling. That gets us to the heart of the sin of Sodom. *It's idolatry.*

You know what idolatry is? It's when you take something in this world, something God made and God made it good, and you use it the way you want to use it instead of the way God designed it to be used.

In Sodom, they made idols out of sex and money (not just one, but both) and they used them selfishly. They "spent" sex and money, so to speak, on themselves, to gratify their own pleasures and lusts.

But here's what I really want everyone to see: **you and I are not that different from the people of Sodom.** Yes, their sin was more flagrant and out in the open than ours is, but at the root it is the same. We are all tempted to this idolatry.

When it comes to sex, our society screams at us to be promiscuous with our bodies. Sex is just an appetite, after all. When you're hungry, you eat. When you feel sexy, you have sex. Be promiscuous with your body. But be conservative with your money. Hoard your money, don't give it away. Giving away money is crazy! *Now, haven't you been tempted to treat sex and money that way? Haven't you actually done it?*

The Bible, though, says, be promiscuous with your money. Give much, give often, give to the poor, give to the ungrateful, because Jesus said, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys." Luke 12:33. Be promiscuous with your money. But be conservative with your body. You give your body only to your spouse, as a way of continually reminding them, "I belong to you, and to no one else."

And I have to remind us all of that just because you're in a marriage with someone of the opposite sex, it does not mean that you're automatically in the clear when it comes to sexual sin. Even inside of a marriage you can use sex selfishly, for your own purposes and desires. You can refuse to do the hard work and sacrifice that it takes for this part of married life to go well – that's selfish. Or, you can constantly berate and grow embittered toward your spouse because of the lack of it in your house – that's selfish, too.

When we don't use God's good gifts according to his design, it's idolatry. But don't you see? ***Sodom's sin is our sin.*** We are just as guilty as they were. We cannot look down our noses at Sodom.

Second, God's judgment. God examined what went on in Sodom, he heard the outcry in the land about its wickedness, and he pronounced judgment on the city and, indeed, the entire region. "Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. ²⁵ And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground." Genesis 19:24-25.

Nothing makes people in our society stumble over the idea of being a Christian like hearing that our God is one who judges. They say, “I don’t believe in a God who judges. I believe in a God of love and peace.”

That sounds good at first. But in truth *we all desperately want there to be a God who judges*. Why do I say that? *Because we all know that anyone in a position of authority and power who refuses to judge wrongdoing is not a loving person*. If a child goes to her parents and says, “Our family friend that lives down the street has been touching me in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable,” and the parents reply, “Well, we don’t believe in judging others. We believe in love and peace. If we go and talk to them, it would probably cause a big stink. It’s best just to forget anything happened,” no one would say they were being good parents. Everyone would rightly condemn that response.

Friends, Genesis 19 is just one place among dozens in the Bible where it says God refuses to make that mistake. There will come a day when God’s perfect, holy, righteous judgment will come down on all wrongdoing and no one, *no one*, will get away with anything. “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.” Luke 12:2-3.

This is important to understand, because in this life you will face innumerable injustices. They may all be small ones, or they may be far worse, and there will be times when everything in you cries out, “I cannot let this person get away with it! I must pay them back!”

Now, obviously, like I’ve already suggested, if you are mistreated, or if you know someone is being mistreated, you need to do something. Call the police, if it rises to that level. But what we cannot do is take personal revenge. We cannot take it upon ourselves to judge and condemn the people who have done us wrong.

Do you know what we are called to do instead? “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Matthew 5:43-45.

That may sound impossible at first. But if you really believe with every fiber of your being there is a God in heaven who will one day perfectly judge all wrongdoing, and you know you can’t helpfully add to his fiery judgment one bit with anything you could possibly do by way of revenge, ***then you can at least try***. You can aspire to love your enemies, because you believe God is going to punish the evil. God says in Romans 12: “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.”

Miroslav Volf is a Croatian theologian. He lived through some of the atrocities that took place in the former Yugoslavia back in the nineties. If you were old enough to pay attention to the news back then you remember what happened, too. Horrible things, nearly unspeakable things. Volf says, “The only way someone who goes through that kind of suffering and abuse can refuse to take revenge on their enemies is by believing that God himself will one day judge the guilty.”

Then Volf at the end of his book writes this: “My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many ... To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone [which, by the way, Volf did – he lectured on not taking revenge on your enemies in the aftermath of the Bosnian war] ... [Imagine a]mong your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, and whose fathers and brothers have [been brutally murdered]. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate because [God will not judge anyone – he is only interested in love and peace]. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban [neighborhood] for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence corresponds to God’s refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, [that thesis] will invariably die.”

Knowing that God will judge evil and hold those who do it accountable makes forgiveness of and love for enemies possible. God’s judgment is a good thing. However, we deserve to have his judgment fall on us. Remember, Sodom’s sin is our sin. You can only believe God’s judgment is a good thing when you believe *that it will never fall on you. How can you come to be convinced of that?*

Third, God’s mercy. God showed Lot mercy. Though Lot was in Sodom, God spared him. But why? Because Lot was such a good guy, right? Because he lived a perfect life? Absolutely not.

Lot in Genesis 19 does one of the most shocking things anyone does in all the Bible. When the men of Sodom come to his house to attack his guests, we read this beginning in verse 6: “Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him,⁷ and said, ‘I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.⁸ Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please.’” Genesis 19:6-8.

The reason God had mercy on Lot was not because Lot was such a good guy. God had mercy on Lot **because Lot believed God’s message.** When the angels came and said, “Lot, you must get out of this city. God’s judgment is coming,” he believed them.

The men of Sodom did not believe the message. In fact, they hated the message. We read in 2 Peter 2 that Lot was greatly distressed by the wicked acts of the men of Sodom. Lot, probably, had been preaching to the men of Sodom, telling them they must not continue to live as they had been. But they wanted nothing to do with his message. They hated the message, and so they hated Lot, too. “But they said, ‘Stand back!’ And they said, ‘This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.’” Genesis 19:9.

Here’s the question for us: ***do we believe God’s message that we deserve judgment, or do we hate it?*** We are all idolators. We’ve all misused sex, money, and a host of other things. One day there will be a day of judgment when everything we’ve ever done, said, or thought will be weighed and measured.

Do you believe that you message, and that you can do nothing on your own to escape the coming judgment? Do you believe you need the mercy of God? If so, God will have mercy on you. You don't have anything to fear. Believing God's message is all it takes to be saved.

And if you ask, "J.D., I believe the message, but I don't know how strongly I believe it. I mean I still slip back into idolatry far more than I'd like to admit." If that's you, then you must know **you are not saved by the quality of your faith.**

Lot's faith was pretty stinky, pretty weak. "As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city.' ¹⁶ But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city." Genesis 19:15-16. Lot's faith in, his belief in, God's message was so weak two angels had to physically drag him out of Sodom. He lingered ... in Sodom! That's weak faith! Christians, I don't know how weak your faith is but it's probably no worse than that.

Weak faith, stinky faith, is still saving faith, because you are not saved by the quality of your faith. I love the testimony of C.S. Lewis. He had been an atheist for years, and he was a professor in Magdalen College, Oxford University when slowly and reluctantly he became convinced of the Christian faith. He did not want to become a Christian, but he couldn't help it. This is what he wrote: "You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?" Weak faith, barely alive faith, is still saving faith. If you have it you can be sure God will have mercy on you, no matter what you've done. No matter what's been done to you.

I want to be clear, though, before we close: you are responsible to act on God's message. Matthew 10:14-15: "¹⁴ And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."

Friends, right now you're sitting here listening to another sermon, getting more information, hearing more words about God's character and the coming judgment. Do you realize what you're doing to yourself by coming to church and hearing this? Do you realize what I'm doing to you by preaching it? I'm making you accountable. ***You're responsible to act on these words.*** It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than it will be for you if you don't believe this message.

But I also want to be clear about this: *what saves us is not the quality of our lives, or the quality of our faith. What saves us, friends, is the object of our faith.*

In a few moments, we're going to take the Lord's Supper. We invite all believers to participate with us in the Lord's Supper, whether you're a member of this church or not. Whether you've been baptized or not. When Christians take the Lord's Supper we are confessing all over again that what saves us is *Jesus Christ*. He is the object of our faith. What saves us is the perfect life of Jesus Christ lived on our behalf, his perfect record applied to us, and the body and blood of Jesus Christ, represented by the bread and the cup, broken and shed for our sins. He took the judgment of God so you don't have to. Believe the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified for you, trust in Jesus however imperfectly, and you will receive God's mercy. AMEN