

JANUARY 7  
Genesis 18, 19

Genesis 18 and 19 is a riot. I am having fun reading this stuff. Aren't you?

One thing about this passage we need to briefly note is that while Abraham's earlier encounter with Melchizedek may have been a theophany (or direct encounter with a physical manifestation of God Himself,) what we see in Chapter 18 clearly is one of these very special experiences. It simply says, "*The Lord appeared to Abraham*". And the Lord said, "*I will surely return to you at about this time next year.*" (Chapter 19 tells us that two of those three visitors were angels. We are left to infer that the third was none other than the Lord Himself.)

The second thing you need to see with me is that it is in the heart of God to reveal His plan related to Sodom to Abraham. "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I about to do?*" What an astonishing question! Everything in Scripture points to the fact that our God is a God who reveals Himself and His plans to those who truly seek His heart. The whole of Scripture is a communication of His heart to ours to tell us not only about what He has done in Christ to redeem us, but to tell us of His plan for us, His plan for the nations, and for the entire creation. To be sure, God does not tell us everything that is going to happen - and if He did, we would not be able to bear it - but He does tell us all we need to know. If there is something about which we need wisdom on a personal level, there is this open invitation - "*If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask, and the God who gives liberally to all - He will give it!*"

*God is speaking if you are listening.*

Are you still with me? Just two more things to notice - Abraham actually negotiates with God in one of the most remarkable prayers ever recorded. "Lord," he pleads, "your character is one of mercy and justice. If there are 50 righteous people in Sodom, will you still destroy it - what if there are only 40 - 30 - 20 - 10?" Abraham's boldness in pleading with the Lord is absolutely astonishing. Notice - God nowhere rebukes him for it. In fact, Abraham's prayer stands as a model for us. I wonder if God announced today that He was finally going to judge New York City or San Francisco or some other great city for its wickedness - would we have the spirit of Abraham, or would we stand cheering in the wings? Abraham's heart of compassion had him pleading for the lives of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. I wonder what would happen if God's people began to intercede for the great cities of our day the way that Abraham interceded for Sodom.

Well, Sodom and Gomorrah did not survive, as we will discover tomorrow, but God agrees that they would have been spared for the sake of just ten righteous men. A small number of righteous people will have a mighty preserving influence upon the society around them. As we look at our society with increasing amounts of discouragement, never ever forget that we have been called by Christ to be the salt of the earth - that which exercises a preserving influence on the meat around it...that is what salt does. Just a few righteous people can make a mighty

difference. For the sake of just ten righteous men, God would have spared the civilization of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 19 is one of the low points of Scripture. In fact, Martin Luther, one of history's greatest students of this book, refused to allow this chapter ever to be read aloud in his presence. I probably won't read it for a Scripture lesson on Sunday morning either, but for all its sordidness, I am glad it is here for us. You see, the Bible is a real book of real history. It doesn't just have the wonderful stories of the saints who had it all together, who walked from victory to victory with the Lord. It also tells the stories - sometimes very sordid stories - of the men and women who failed, who slipped, who "fell short of the glory of God," and these too are here for our benefit...reminders to us in the words of Timothy, that "*All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.*" (II Tim. 3:16) There are several significant lessons here for us this morning and if we ignore them, we do it to our own great peril.

The first thing we need to understand if we are to benefit from this tragic account, is that Lot was a genuine believer. He was not an unbelieving pagan trailing along behind Abraham - a wolf in sheep's clothing just looking for an opportunity to break free and rebel against God. The Lot we meet in Chapter 12 of Genesis doesn't appear to be the same man we find in chapter 19, but in many ways he is. I know all this because Peter in the New Testament devotes a few verses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to talking about Lot. He says that what Lot found in Sodom, and what he had to live with there, was a terrible burden to him because Lot was a righteous man. Because he knows we might have trouble believing that, he tells us three times in just a couple of sentences that Lot was a righteous man. (I think we will see him in heaven!). Lot was a believer - he started out where Abram was and he began with all the best of intentions - but something went badly wrong. It's not very difficult to figure out what happened. Put in its most simple form, Lot made a whole lot of bad choices and he ended up reaping the bitter harvest of the whole succession of bad choices. Paul in the New Testament says, "*Don't be deceived. God is not mocked; whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap.*" Friends - that's just as true for Christians as it is for pagans. God does forgive us when we ask for forgiveness, but whatever we plant in the gardens of our lives we are going to grow, and the crop Lot planted was a bad one.

Remember a few days ago when you read Chapters 13 and 14, I asked you to take note that when Lot left Abram, he chose to pitch his tents "towards Sodom" - he went to live in the vicinity of Sodom. Now I really believe that when Lot went down there he was thinking, "I'll never let myself be dragged down by those pagans. Their lifestyle is despicable; I won't be influenced by them." The Bible makes it very clear that Lot's choice was motivated primarily by economic considerations. He saw how prosperous the area was and figured on how much he would make if he could only pasture his flocks on those well-watered plains. "I'll live near them, he thought, but they won't change me."

Well the next time we read about Lot is in Chapter 14 when Abram is organizing a rescue party because nephew Lot was living in Sodom and was taken hostage in a hostile military operation. By the way, when Abram rescued Lot, God was giving Lot a class one opportunity to wake up and move out of Sodom. God always gives believers on the wrong road opportunities to turn around and retrace their steps. But Lot didn't take his opportunity. Maybe he didn't even see it.

Then we come to chapter 19. The angels whose mission it was to rescue Lot and his family, then destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, came to Sodom and where do they find Lot? He was not only living in Sodom, but sitting in the gate. That's significant because the city gate was where official business was conducted and the people who sat there were the civic leaders - the town officials! Lot is now a recognized leader in Sodom - a dubious distinction if I ever heard one! First, he pitched his tent toward Sodom - then he moved into the town - then he ran for public office there. What a progression!

Now here's the main part of all of this. Lot wasn't strong enough to survive all by himself in the hostile, wicked environment of Sodom. When he chose Sodom in Chapter 13, he cut himself off from the most godly influence in his life and voluntarily exchanged it for the most ungodly. From that point onward the result was absolutely predictable. May I gently suggest to you, that you and I are not a whole lot stronger than Lot - we too need a godly support system. There may be times when God calls believers to go it absolutely alone because he has work for them to do in a place where there are no other Christians. If He ever calls you to that kind of "Elijah" experience, then you may be certain that He will give you all the supernatural strength you need to sustain yourself. But if you chose that experience for yourself like Lot did, if you choose to walk away from other Christians who could be and would be God's ministers to you, then I need to tell you quite bluntly that you will be choosing failure and ruin for your life - you won't make it - you will fail - it is absolutely predictable.

If you look around your church, there may be a lot of new people all around and that's wonderful, but look again, and you'll notice that there are also a lot of people missing who not too long ago were there with you - what's happening? Sometimes the answer is the same as in Genesis 19. The results may not be quite as extreme but they are just as tragic: no support system spells disaster. Friend, if all you ever do is come to a worship service with some other people on Sunday morning, my guess is that sooner or later you'll disappear. Just like Lot, we need to have a support system of Christian people who will encourage us, nurture us, and hold us accountable. When Lot gave up his support system, he got into big trouble. You need to have a small group of people to whom you can be accountable. If you choose not to have that lifeline, my guess is that you may very well live, as Lot did, to regret it.

Note also with me that Lot's failure was progressive - we've already seen that really - but do you see how fuzzy Lot's thinking has gotten by the time the angels came to push him out of Sodom? The unruly mob of Sodom wants to brutalize Lot's guests

- (oh, by the way, these angels were traveling incognito and the New Testament says they still travel that way)! The men of the city want to use Lot's guests - he wanted to protect them - and his idea of a viable solution is: "here - take my daughters!" Do you see how twisted that is? ...how far in the wrong direction Lot the righteous man has come? How could he possibly think that was a solution?!

William Thackeray, the English poet, once penned this line - "Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an action and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character, and you reap a destiny." Christian - be careful of your choices.

This is Mark Ashton reminding you that *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness."* *Peace be with you.*