

Judgement on Sodom

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of September 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Judgment on Sodom and is from Genesis chapter 19 verses 1 to 29. Let's pray that God helps us to understand this passage.

God, you speak clearly to us in the scriptures, revealing yourself, your character and your purposes to us. We pray that you'll do so tonight.

Speak not only to our minds but to our hearts, that we may be found righteous. In your sight. Amen. A few days ago, a guilty John Laws, the radio announcer, walked out of court with a suspended sentence.

Was that fair? The angry letters to the age, and no doubt, especially the Sydney newspapers, have condemned the leniency, so-called, of his sentence.

[1:19] There's public outrage that because he is so rich, he gets away with things that poor people would not. In the last couple of weeks, a paedophile convicted, served his sentence in England, was released after serving his term.

Fair? Well, some people didn't think so, because arsonists destroyed his house in Norfolk. The trouble was, he'd moved from that house, and an innocent family just escaped with their lives.

Damon Courtney died of AIDS about ten years ago, the son of Bryce Courtney, the novelist.

He died of AIDS not because he was gay, but because he was a haemophiliac, and his blood transfusion in the early 80s was obviously contaminated.

His mother, Benita, wrote about this event in words that also express outrage at injustice. She said, We are supposed to forgive, but I'm not a Christian.

[2:37] I can't commend Damon's life to God and walk away and forgive everyone. Somebody should pay. Somebody should be brought to account, or it will all be repeated again and again.

Her bitter anger was because nobody in the medical profession was brought to account for her son's death.

Whatever its moral standards, our world is incensed when people who seem to be guilty get off leniently or scot-free.

And no doubt we're no exceptions either. We're outraged when people who are, seems obviously guilty, walk free.

The Slobodan Milosevic's and Radovan Karadich's and so on who seem to walk free in Bosnia and Serbia and so on. But maybe, maybe to a lesser extent, we're also outraged when the innocent suffer unfairly.

[3:50] When people who are not guilty seem to get treated badly or unjustly. It was okay if you were in England for NATO to be dropping bombs on Belgrade, but the outcry began when innocent citizens at a hospital were bombed by accident.

Or do you remember being in school and the whole class was given a detention because somebody in the class had done something wrong but had refused to own up.

And so the teacher said the whole class can stay back after school and serve a detention. And if you're like me, an older brother who's got two younger sisters, you probably remember countless times when you were sent to your room or punished by your parents because your sisters, being younger and louder, complained that you'd done something wrong that you hadn't done.

Issues of justice raise our passions. Whether it's the guilty getting off leniently or it's the innocent being punished unfairly, we don't like it and we're outraged.

And the world is, whatever its moral standards are, if ever a city deserved punishment, Sodom was it. And from the start of its first mention in the book of Genesis, it's like the film *Titanic*.

[5 : 21] Everybody knows that the ship is going to sink. When somebody told me that before I saw the film, I thought it would probably spoil the story. Well, it didn't. But with the case of Sodom in Genesis, we know from the beginning that it is going to be destroyed by God.

So when it's first mentioned in chapter, way back in chapter 13, we're told about Sodom, this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom. So we know that at some point he's going to destroy the city.

And just after that, we're told now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. So it comes as no surprise when in chapter 18, a little bit before the passage that was read tonight, God reveals to Abram that he is going to investigate the outcry from Sodom about its wickedness and its evil.

And so he says to Abraham in chapter 18, verse 20, and you may like to follow this on page 12, we've got quite a lot of passage to look at tonight, including a bit that wasn't read tonight, the bit before it.

The Lord said to Abraham in verse 20 of chapter 18, how great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin. I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me and if not, I will know.

[6 : 52] Now Abraham takes up this issue with God. No doubt his concern for Sodom is provoked by the fact that his nephew lives there.

His nephew's name is Lot. Lot initially in chapter 13 had gone to live near Sodom and even then in the context of it being a, having a reputation of being an evil city, we're meant to think Lot has done something rather unwise here.

And then in chapter 14, when Sodom is conquered by some visiting kings, Lot is carried off. and he's now living in Sodom, not just near Sodom.

So again, we're meant to think this guy Lot is rather stupid. He's meant to be from Abraham's family but firstly he chose to live near a disreputable city. Then he's living in it and what's more he's captured in battle although Abraham rescues him in chapter 14.

So Abraham debates the issue with God about Sodom. and he's a bit like a Middle Eastern trader.

[8 : 02] He starts haggling. I remember the first time I went to Jerusalem it was rather over and overroaring to try and buy something in the old markets of Jerusalem because nothing had a price labeled on it and if you would ask the price you'd get something grossly inflated.

the idea was that you haggle. I remember buying an Arab headscarf one of those Yasser Arafat type headscarves and I knew that they were worth not very much and the first offer this chap made to me was 68 shekels.

Now off the top of my head I can't quite work out how many dollars but it's many many many times what you would want to pay for one of those things. And I just said I wasn't interested. 65 special price for you my friend.

60 55 50 45 40 and down it went. And I just kept standing there saying I'm not very interested in that price.

In the end I bought it for free. But I also know that they'll never sell anything for under the price so I wasn't worrying about ripping anybody off.

[9 : 13] I'm sure I was still ripped off. Abraham's a little bit like that with God. So he opens the bidding if you like in verse 23 in response to God saying that he's about to destroy Sodom in effect.

Abraham came near to God. We've got to get a sense here of Abraham daring to approach the Lord. This is not an easy thing. It's not actually like the market of Jerusalem.

He's drawing close to Almighty God. And he says to him in rather careful and very polite sort of language will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?

Far be it from you to do such a thing to slay the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous fare is the wicked. Far be that from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?

[10 : 22] Abraham is pleading for Sodom for the sake of a hypothetical fifty righteous people in the city. Note that he's not seeking to save the righteous only but rather that Sodom would actually be forgiven for its sin for the sake of the righteous people who live in it.

Abraham's bargaining with God is not God can you save the righteous and punish the wicked? Abraham's bargain is that God actually saves the city for the sake of fifty righteous people.

He's concerned in a sense that Sodom be spared and no doubt it's his nephew Lot and Lot's family that is provoking him to this bargaining. And God assures him in verse twenty-six if I find it Sodom fifty righteous in the city I will forgive the whole place for their sake.

Abraham tentatively bargains him down a bit further. Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord I who am but dust and ashes.

Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. That is suppose there are only forty-five righteous there. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?

[11 : 44] And again God reassures him I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there. And step by step bit by bit Abraham goes down and down nervously and each time he speaks he is less certain.

There's a sense of fear at pushing God too far. And each time God's responses to Abraham are a little bit briefer even shorter in the sense that maybe God is beginning to lose patience here.

Eventually Abraham gets down to ten. And again God reassures him. Abraham says I do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more.

Suppose ten are found there. And God answers for the sake of ten I will not destroy it. And that's the end of the Hagelin.

Not because Abraham is now too afraid to go further but because as verse thirty-three says the Lord went his way. God has called an end. In the Arab marketplace if I had gone down under cost price the trader would have walked away probably.

[13:13] And that's what's happening with God. He's not prepared to go underneath ten. And he walks away. In effect he's saying to Abraham enough. And Abraham goes back home.

Abraham's pleading with God is a bold move. He's drawn near to the Lord himself and he's pleaded for the sake of a wicked city for just a handful of righteous people.

In effect this is a prayer of intercession for somebody else but it's a bold one about a city he knows to be wicked and evil and to a God whom he knows to be righteous and just.

but at issue in the prayer is the character of God. Is God righteous or not? The questions that Abraham asks encapsulate what this prayer is about.

Will God sweep away the righteous with the wicked? In verse 23. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right? In verse 25. And God hasn't answered those questions and God has walked away and now Abraham has to wait and see.

[14:37] But notice what Abraham is doing here. He is exercising faith in a righteous God. He is calling God to account. He knows what God's character is. He knows that God is meant to be righteous.

He knows therefore that God is not going to punish righteous people and so he is calling God to account. He is holding him to account for the sort of character that God has.

This is bold faith at work. Notice that Abraham is not fatalistic. He is not saying oh well whatever is going to be will be que sera sera. That is not faith that is fatalism.

Faith prays. Fatalism doesn't. Abraham's faith means that Abraham prays. And it is a good example to us I think.

To pray and even pray boldly and pray on the basis of the character of God as it is revealed to us in scripture. That is holding God to account that he will not do something that compromises his character.

[15:40] That he will not act unrighteously or unfairly. That he will not execute justice partially or wrongly. God has been with two angels and had a meal at Abraham's tent.

We saw that last week when he promises Abraham's wife Sarah a child. God has lingered while his two angel companions have gone off to Sodom. And they come to Sodom at the beginning of chapter 19 where Cecily began the reading tonight.

And they've gone there to check the evidence. That is the outcry has come to God. This is a wicked and evil city deserving of punishment. Remember what I read from verse 20 and 21.

In verse 21 God says to Abraham I must go down and see whether they have done all together according to the outcry that has come to me. And the sense there is not all together is that report accurate but in a sense almost are their sins complete now?

Is it now time to judge them? There's a sense in which God has been patient to this point with Sodom. But now it's come to the end for Sodom. Their sins are complete.

[16:51] But notice too God's care in exercising judgment. He's not acting on hearsay. He's checking it out for himself. He's being careful to check out what Sodom is really like before he judges it.

And so he sends his two angel companions there and they come to Sodom in the evening at the beginning of chapter 19. And they're welcomed by Lot. Very hospitable Lot is, just like his uncle Abraham as we saw last week.

Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, he bowed down with his face to the ground, he shows respect, he may not have realized they were angels, quite probably not, but he knows that they seem to be somewhat important and he's showing them respect as visitors to his town.

And he said, please my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet, then you can rise early and go on your way. Standard Middle Eastern hospitality. There were no best western motels in Sodom or anywhere else in the ancient world for that matter.

If you were visiting a place for the night, you either slept in a square or somebody would take you in. Very few hotels in places like this. But they said no, which is a strike unusual because usually it would be the custom to accept offers of hospitality.

[18:06] But they said we'll spend the night in the square. But Lot urged them and there's a sense there of something that is almost desperate. He's pleading with them. He's very, very concerned that they do not spend the night in the square but that they actually accept his offer of hospitality.

So they turned aside to him, they entered his house, he made them a feast, he baked unleavened bread and they ate. And then what happens?

We're told in the next verse 4 that the men of the city, the men of Sodom that is, both young and old, all the people to the last man surrounded the house.

No one's left out of that. It's emphatically saying that every man in the city without fail, young and old, has come to Lot's house. It's probably not a huge city, but it's probably a reasonable crowd of people now around Lot's house.

Nobody's left out. If Sodom is wicked, every inhabitant is wicked, perhaps apart from Lot. Lot. And their request to Lot in verse 5 is, where are the men who came to you tonight?

[19:17] Bring them out to us so that we may know them. Now the word know in this context could be a little bit ambiguous. It could mean just basically we'd like to get to know them, we'd like to make their acquaintance, we're being sociable here, we'd like to find out who they are and say hello and find out where they're from and where they're going.

The word could mean that. But the word know also in some contexts has a sexual connotation. Adam knew his wife Eve and they produced a son.

That is, for a man to know his wife means that they have sexual relations. Undoubtedly, that is the context here.

Not because of the sentence in verse 5, but because of the response by Lot to what they say. Lot goes outside to the men, he shuts the door after him, he says, I beg you my brothers, do not act so wickedly.

He wouldn't say that if their intention was, we'd just like to get to know who these people are. Clearly, Lot understands their request to be a request of a sexual nature. The men of the city are wanting to have sexual relations with the two men who have visited and are staying at Lot's house.

[20:35] Their motives are wicked and evil. Lot responds by offering his daughters. Look, he says, I have two daughters who have not known a man.

That is, they're virgins. They've not had sexual relations. It's not that they don't know any men, it's that they haven't had sexual relations with a man. He's presumably got other daughters because there are sons-in-law mentioned later on.

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. It's an appalling offer.

Lot is never condoned for what he does here by offering virgin daughters to these vile men. But they're not satisfied with that offer.

Stand back, they said. This fellow came here as an alien and he would play the judge. That is, Lot is not originally from Sodom. Of course, he comes from Mesopotamia with Abraham. Now we will deal worse with you than with them.

[21:40] And there is very explicitly their motives. They were going to deal badly with the two men. They're now going to deal even worse with Lot. Ironically, Lot has been trying to protect the two men.

But it's the two men who are visiting him who protect him. The crowd presses hard against Lot. They came near the door to break it down. But the two men who are inside, the two angels that is, the ones whom Lot is trying to protect, they reach out and they grab Lot and bring him inside.

They protect him, not vice versa. And they struck with blindness the men who are at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they're unable to find the door. It's almost a little bit of comic relief after the grossness of the sins that were about to be committed.

These people groping around unable to find the door. Sometimes this story is used in the debate about homosexual practices.

practices. It's sometimes used by those who condemn homosexual practices to say here is God condemning Sodom and their sin was a sin of homosexuality.

[22:51] But others, usually in those who argue in favour of Christian acceptance of homosexual practices, argue that what is going on in Sodom is not homosexual practice, but rather gang rape or homosexual violence or rape.

It is far from two consenting male adults having sexual relations. And they are right. This is not a text, I think, that really in the end can be used in the debate about homosexual practices.

There are plenty of others in scripture that are clearer on the topic, but not this one. This is not really about homosexual sin, although that sort of part of it, it's really about violent sexual activity that happens to be homosexual.

But generally speaking, the people of Sodom are just bad and wicked and evil, full stop. This is just one expression of their evil. But also note that Lot himself, of course, is not squeaky clean.

It's rather horrific that he offers his virgin daughters to these men. And maybe there's a hint there that Lot is compromised by having chosen to live in Sodom, by in chapter 13 living near it, chapter 14 living in it, and now we see how some of the evil of the city is probably rubbing off on him.

[24:12] Well, presumably the angels have now seen enough. It's time for judgment. And they say to Lot in verse 12, have you anyone else here, sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place, for we're 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.

It's confirming exactly what God foreshadowed to Abraham back in chapter 18. Judgment has come to this evil city. Lot does as he's told.

He goes out to get his extended family, presumably the other men who are still blind have gone home or stumbled around. And he goes to get 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. Sense of urgency in his words there. It's not a polite sort of when you're ready, would you like to come over, I've got a few things to discuss with you. Come on, let's get going, God's about to destroy Sodom.

This is urgent. But his sons-in-law think that he's just jesting and joking. They mock him, in effect. Whether Lot himself was a bit ambivalent about it in some other way, we're not told, but they certainly are mocking what God is about to do.

[25 : 28] At crack of dawn, verse 15 literally says, the angels urged Lot, saying, get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city. Seems to be all that's going.

Lot, a wife and two daughters. Four people. Many less than the ten that Abraham bargained God down to. But Lot lingers, we're told in verse 16.

He doesn't flee as he's told. He doesn't race off out of the city with a matter of urgency, despite what he'd said to his sons-in-law. He lingers. Is it that he's trying to sit on the fence?

Is it that he doesn't really want to leave Sodom? Even though he's not really a person of Sodom from the origins, he's rather sort of settled in Sodom perhaps. We're not told.

But again, Lot's not an ideal person here. He's not a perfect person. His example is not one for us to follow. He lingers, and so the two angels, the men who were with him, seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city.

[26 : 37] Can you imagine these two angels picking up the whole four of the family and basically carrying them outside the city? That shows how urgent this judgment is on the city of Sodom.

But notice too those words embedded in that verse, the Lord being merciful to him. Lot is not saved because he's righteous, in the sense of being perfect and ideal.

He's not saved because he's a man of great piety. He is saved by God's mercy. He does not deserve to be rescued. He's offered his daughters over to violent sexual men after all.

He's lingered, perhaps he likes Sodom. He's fearful. When the men say go and flee to the hills, he says no, no, I can't do that in verse 19. Your servant has found favour with you, you've shown me great kindness in saving my life, but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me.

He's fearful of the disaster that the angels are actually saving him from. That is, he's not trusting in God's word, he's faithless. And he's selfish, he just wants to do what is easy for himself.

[27 : 46] There's never any hint that he's a pious person, never any hint of prayers or gratitude to God. God, who is rich in mercy, saves an undeserving lot.

And God remains abundantly patient with Lot's cowardice. At every step the angels keep egging him on and moving him on, saving him and protecting him.

Lot who lingers, Lot who's fearful to go to the hills, lot of and Sodom's destroyed. Lot is taken away to a safe place to the town of Zohar.

And then we're told in very brief and abrupt but severe terms, verse 24, then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.

Maybe there was some natural earthquake or some volcano or something, some people suggest, but the text makes it clear whatever it was, it is God who's done it. It is the Lord who rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.

[28 : 54] Cannot be more emphatic than that. This is God's judgment on Sodom. And he overthrew those cities and all the plain and all the inhabitants of the cities and what grew on the ground.

It's the sort of terror that we see all too often on TV. From natural disaster or war. And Lot's wife defied the angel's command and looked back.

And she became a pillar of salt. Seems rather severe to a wife who looks back. But no doubt the looking back is perhaps some expression of identity with the place.

A looking back in a sense of longing perhaps. A woman who's compromised somewhere along the line perhaps. And she's turned into a pillar of salt.

And still today if you travel down near the Dead Sea where Sodom was reputed to be, some say even buried under the waters of the Dead Sea, there are indeed pillars of salt. One of them is called Lot's wife.

[29 : 59] There's no remains of human bones that anyone suggests is inside it. Maybe it's mythological hell. But nonetheless it's the sort of thing that would happen in this area. Pillars of salt all over the place from the Dead Sea which is so full of salt.

And though Sodom has not been found today, the area of the Dead Sea where Sodom was is still eerily desolate. Little grows there. Very strange landscape indeed.

from the distance, where he had pleaded with God, Abraham goes and returns. And he sees the smoke rising from the direction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But of course, Abraham doesn't know the result. He can see that judgment has happened, but he doesn't know if anybody has fled or if anybody is safe.

But we know, the readers of the story know, that the judge of all the earth has done what is just. And evil and wicked sinners have felt the fury of God's wrath, God's righteous wrath, and being punished.

[31 : 11] There's no miscarriage of justice here with respect to the sinners of Sodom. Don't be fooled into thinking that God doesn't judge. Because the destruction of Sodom here becomes a paradigm or model for judgment of God elsewhere in the scriptures.

In Deuteronomy, Israel is threatened that if they are disobedient, then the punishment that God wrought on Sodom will be wrought on them as well. The prophets referred to Sodom by means of threats or warnings that if Israel continued in their sinful ways, they too would face the wrath of God's fury, just as Sodom had done.

God's judgment is real, from beginning to end of scripture. It's not just an Old Testament phenomenon either. Some people think the Old Testament is all full of wrath and judgment and anger of God, but the New Testament is much nicer and more pleasant and loving and tolerant and so on.

But far from that, if anybody in scripture spoke words of judgment, it was Jesus. He spoke more words of judgment than anybody else, than any prophet of the Old Testament.

And his words are a fierce judgment. He pronounces woe on the three cities where he spent most of his adult ministry, Capernaum and Bethsaida and Chorazin. And if the things that had happened there had happened in Sodom, Sodom would have repented, he says in effect.

[32 : 34] So he's in effect saying to three reputable Jewish towns, you are worse than Sodom. Fierce judgment is forced on those three towns, none of which exist today as living towns.

But not only that, on the day when Jesus returns, it will be just like the judgment of God on Sodom.

Oh, we can look forward to the day when Jesus returns, we think it will all be a great big party and trumpets blaring. But listen to what Jesus' words are about that day. Just as it was in the days of Lot, they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.

But on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them. It will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed, the day when Jesus returns.

Who can stand on such a day? If this were severe for little town Sodom, how much more so when Jesus returns and it will be like that for this whole world?

[33 : 46] Who can stand? Lot was saved from Sodom but just by the skin of his teeth, lingering fearful and faithless Lot. Lot who expressed no piety, Lot who offered his daughters over to evil men who would be rapists, Lot whose own weakness is seen in the fact that he chooses to live in Sodom, Lot whose own family is corrupt.

If you read the end of chapter 19 you see how bad they are. Here is no paragon of virtue and yet he's saved. Lot was full of mercy as we saw in verse 16 but also because of Abraham's prayer.

Verse 29 at the end of today's reading so it was that when God destroyed the cities of the plain, God remembered Abraham. Not Lot.

God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow. Lot was saved because God was merciful. Lot was saved because God remembered Abraham's prayer.

He remembered Abraham and the promises that he'd made to Abraham. That's why Lot was saved. Not because Lot deserved it who was good but because of what God's relationship with Abraham was like.

[35 : 07] For the sake of one righteous person we could say Lot was saved. And the one righteous person is not Lot. It's Abraham who we were told back in chapter 15 is righteous by faith.

life. It's no different for us. It won't be different for us on the day when Jesus returns a sort of cosmic Sodom event.

We the ungodly are saved by the skin of our teeth from the judgment of hell. How? For the sake of one righteous person.

Not so much Abraham but Jesus Christ. in him we are reckoned righteous by God. And this is no miscarriage of justice either.

Unrepentant guilty sinners will be punished. That's fair. But guilty repentant sinners will be pardoned.

[36 : 15] Not pardoned lightly. As Damon Courtney's mother wrote so bitterly someone has to pay.

And we can say to her that he has. God's paid. That's why it's no miscarriage of justice.

Jesus dying on the cross took our Sodom punishment so that we could escape by the skin of our teeth. He's paid.

And he's paid with his own pure blood. Guilty, vile and helpless we but spotless lamb of God was he sacrificed to set us free.

here we have the justice of a holy God and the mercy of a holy God meeting together.

[37 : 18] They meet perfectly in the cross of Jesus Christ but even here at Sodom 2,000 years before the cross we see the justice and mercy of God compatibly held together.

Lot is saved for the sake of righteous Abraham as we are saved for the sake of righteous Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God that the judge of the whole earth shall do what is just but that he's merciful to us for Jesus sake.

Amen. to essential thou