

A Sight Never to be Forgotten

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn for a short time to Genesis 19 and looking at that passage from verse 23 down to verse 29. At verse 27 we read, And Abram went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord.

And he looked down towards Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley. And he looked, and behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.

When we study such as the life of Abram, as we saw previously, we need to consider parts of the Bible that are very solemn and indeed very difficult to deal with.

We need to consider passages like these that are so largely set aside by many people today who don't really want to come near to think about those issues that involve the judgment of God and the wrath of God, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness.

But we would be untrue to God if we just left it out. Or if we passed over it just quickly as if it wasn't really in itself significant for us today.

[1 : 20] Quite a number of years ago now in South Africa at a conference there, we spent some time afterwards. And one of the places we went to was a place or a viewpoint called God's Window.

God's Window is a very high viewpoint and it looks out over the plains and you can see literally for miles and miles and miles in front of you and to each side of you.

It's like a window really out over a huge chunk of the country as you can see it from that viewpoint. Well that's the kind of thing that Abram has here.

He has a viewpoint from which he is now in verse 27 looking out over this scene, over the plains of Sodom, Gomorrah where these cities of the value were situated before they were destroyed.

What he sees is a view never to be forgotten. He sees the smoke after God's judgment has fallen.

[2 : 25] The smoke from the plains, from the cities rising. As it says here, like the smoke of a furnace. Just like a chimney belching out smoke.

That's what he saw, that's what he's staring at. And what I'd like you and I to do this morning is to come alongside him. Put yourself in this literary photograph that you've got here of Abraham.

But put yourself into the event. Imagine yourself standing beside him as he stared out from this viewpoint over this awesome scene. What do you see?

What are your thoughts? What's going through your mind? What was going through Abraham's mind? What was he thinking about? How did this affect him?

Let's stand with him. Let's look out over this scene. And let's really take stock of what he's saying to us. Maybe Abraham didn't sleep much the night before.

[3 : 30] God had revealed to him what was going to happen to these cities. And we read here that early in the morning that he arose and went to this place, to this viewpoint.

He went early in the morning to the place where he had previously stood before the Lord. Where he had dealt with God. Where he had prayed indeed. As we saw when we looked at the prayer that he offered for Sodom in chapter 18.

But in any case, this is the scene. This is where he is. He's gone back to this point. He's looking out over this scene. And as he looks out over this scene. What did he see?

And what do we share with him? As he sees this terrible, awesome sight. Two things. First of all, he considered surely human sinfulness.

Human sinfulness as graphically brought forth in the judgment of God. The description in verse 13 of chapter 13.

[4 : 32] Remember that when we went through that part of Genesis. How Sodom was introduced to us. Really just in a sentence at that point. Because it's just forewarning us of what was going to happen to Lot.

And the destructive influence that Sodom was going to have on his life. Even though he was going to be rescued from the overthrow. Nevertheless, his life was the life of such decay spiritually and morally as we saw.

That's what the introduction of Sodom was. Now the men of Sodom were wicked. Great sinners before the Lord. Chapter 19. Then verse 13. You find the same sort of language used there. For we are about to destroy this place, the angel said. Because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord. This is something that has come up before the Lord, the angel said to Lot.

This is something that's introduced to us. Where Sodom is introduced to us as being the chief characteristic of the place. It is a place of such sinful behavior. Such wickedness.

[5 : 35] That it's like a great outcry against the Lord. It's like a massive, great, rumbling, gathering momentum as it comes up into the face of God.

It is antagonistic to God. The first thing you learn about human sinfulness from the passage is that it's antagonistic to God. That's what makes sin serious.

That's what makes your sin and my sin serious. Remember, when you're looking at this, you're not just looking at the sin of Sodom. You're looking at sin, human sin, your sin, my sin. What the Bible describes as our natural condition.

That's what we're looking into. That's what we're looking over. That's the scene that we have as you look at it. It brings to us human sinfulness as antagonistic to God. That's what's so serious about sin.

It's not really so much the damage it does in human relationships. That's not unimportant. We have to take account of that. But what makes sin really serious ultimately is the way that it is antagonistic to God and against God.

[6 : 39] It's an assault upon God. It's an assault upon God's rights. You know, we hear so much about individual rights, about human rights. We have a society where virtually every day you hear about equality and where people's relationships are put in terms of equality and people's faith or what they believe are put in terms of equality.

And therefore, equality really means that each one has the same validity as others. Whatever your behavior is like, if it's okay to you, then it's fine. It should fit in along with the rest.

People shouldn't criticize it. What about God's rights? What about God's rights to determine how human life should be lived?

To actually say, this is what I actually demand of those humans that I have created. It is God that has given us life.

And our sin is an assault on him and his rights. It's an assault on his authority. It's an assault against him in all his attributes. And as somebody once said, not only would God, if it were possible, not only would our sin bring God from his throne, it would, if possible, un-God him altogether.

[8 : 09] It would deprive him of what he is as God. Now, we're not obviously going to spend all our time looking at the doctrine of sin.

But it's so important that we give it the place the Bible gives it. That we don't minimize its seriousness. That we don't try and whittle it down to something that really is just important in passing, but we move on without giving it real consideration.

Sin is an assault upon God, on his rights, on his authority. And every sin is that. But when you put them together and see how cumulatively or altogether the sins of Sodom, the behavior of Sodom, had actually reached the face of God in its antagonism, and he had now come to judge it.

It's then that you see that the gathering of sin, the momentum of sin, the addition of one sin to another, is really what makes it so terribly serious in its relation to God.

Now, we saw last time that the sin of Sodom was complex. You mustn't think that Sodom was a place where only one particular sin was practiced.

[9 : 27] Sin of homosexual relationships. But that is what is specifically brought to the top of the pile, if you like, in the teaching of Scripture.

That is what God in particular finds offensive. That is what you find in the previous verses of the chapter, where the visitors that came to Lot's house were actually sought by the people, the men of Sodom, to bring them out, to abuse them.

That is characteristic of the sins of Sodom. God is saying, there are many sins, but I'm particularly taking note of this. Now, I don't need to tell you the place that's given to that kind of behavior today.

Please don't think that what we're doing in speaking like this is to just single that out and focus on such behavior and such people as if there are no other types of sinners in the world or as if this is the worst of all sins.

What we are saying is that it is wrong to discount it as a sin. However much we want to help people, however much we want to see them saved, however much we want to see, counsel them through problems like that that they may have in their behavior, in their outlook morally.

[10:52] The fact of the matter is, again and again in the Bible, Sodom is mentioned in relation to this particular sin and it's mentioned in terms of God's judgment of it.

So we have to bear that in mind. We have to give it its due place. We have to be compassionate, loving, concerned, tactful with people, whatever they are, whatever kind of behavior they are.

But we mustn't displace what the Bible says and think that that's being compassionate to people. It's not a kindness to anyone to pretend the Bible just sweeps this under the carpet or to pretend that really nowadays we don't think in terms of the way the Bible states things.

This is either God's word or it is not. If it is not, throw it away. If it is, then every page of it has God speaking to us.

And every page of it is relevant for every generation. God does not change his mind as to what is and isn't sinful.

[12:02] He never will change his mind. So that's the first thing that comes across to you, that sin, human sinfulness, in the way that Sodom especially is brought out in this chapter.

It antagonizes God, but it attracts God's judgment as well. Because it's the judgment of God that actually fell upon Sodom. You see, this is how this passage put, The Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah, sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.

And verse 29, So it was that when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham. It was God who did this. He himself is the agent.

He himself is the one who's actively engaged in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is not something that happened and then it was attributed to God by people who didn't really know what they were talking about.

This is not something that happened and then people who were religious decided that they would say, Ah yes, but this is God. Oh God did this. So there's a kind of invention of God sort of to try and explain what happened in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

[13:09] The Lord did this. It's a real event. And God is saying to us, This is my judgment. Not only does sin antagonize me, but I am drawn to it in judgment.

Now people today don't like our actually mentioning such things, particularly in preaching the gospel. If you went out even around ourselves today and said, Would you like to come and share with us in hearing the gospel?

And they would ask you, Well, what did your minister preach on? Oh, he preached on Sodom and Gomorrah. We don't want to hear any of that. That's not the kind of place I want to go to. God's judgment.

Is drawn towards human sinfulness. God has to punish sin. He can't leave it alone undisturbed as if it wasn't really serious to him.

You know, when you look at the cross of Jesus and the death of Jesus, more than anywhere else, more than even Sodom and Gomorrah, it actually brings out the heinousness, the seriousness of sin, the way in which it is antagonistic to God, the way it attracts God's judgment.

[14:22] Because the death of Jesus is sin judged. Sin judged in the person of Christ, where he bears the judgment, where he, as Paul puts it in Galatians, has been made the curse for us in our place to redeem us from the curse of the law.

In other words, God is really saying to us, do you really honestly think that I would have done this to my own beloved son, my eternal son?

Do you think he would have gone through with all that he went through in the cross and its suffering and the death that he died if sin was not serious to me?

You cannot look on the cross and see sin as something small. It is so serious that God cannot but judge it.

And that is what he did here in the Lord's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. We will see in a minute God's patient, the positive side to this as it emphasizes some of the attributes of God that come to the fore in this event.

[15 : 39] But it is God who sets the standard for us, isn't it? When God created Adam, he did not leave him without instructions. Adam, the perfect human being, and Eve, the perfect human woman that God had created, he didn't leave them without instructions.

He didn't leave them to make up their own minds about what was right and wrong. He gave them specific instructions. He gave them a command. He gave them every single thing in the whole of the Garden of Eden but one particular tree which they were not to eat of.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil and as the serpent came to tempt Eve, one of his chief suggestions was that God was not being fair in the way that he had arranged their lives in keeping this tree from them.

And many people find the God of the Bible to be completely unacceptable because he is the God who gives us laws. And fallen human beings don't like laws.

They don't like being dictated to. They don't particularly like the idea that God is the one that gives us the moral law. And that it's to God that we're answerable for the way that we live our lives.

[16 : 59] And that it is God who specifies sin as a transgression of his law. That's why we're saying that God has specified what is and isn't right and wrong.

But that's not cruelty. That's not tyranny. That's not anything short of kindness on the part of God. Do you think that God was being unkind in specifying for Adam and Eve that they could not touch or eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

Was that an unkindness? No, of course it wasn't. It was such a kindness to them to point out how their life should be lived. The law that God has given us is not given us because God is stern and God doesn't really want us to enjoy life and it's all about law and keeping commandments.

God has given us a moral code and he has given us a conscience accordingly so that we would know what is beneficial to us.

What is good for us. What is harmful to us. That's not unkindness. It's the opposite. It's kind consideration on the part of God.

[18 : 15] And what sin does is just flout that. It just throws that off and it rebels against God. And so God sets the consequences of breaking his law as well.

It's not just that in his kindness he's given us a moral code to follow to appreciate. He has told us if you break that code the outcome will be death.

that's what happened. The moment Adam sinned he fell. He died spiritually and morally.

and it's only through the sheer grace of God that salvation has come to Adam's descendants to rescue them from that death.

That's the beauty and the power of Jesus Christ. human sinfulness. It's human sinfulness. But secondly let's move on to see how it also brings to us this passage divine attributes.

[19 : 26] And we've mentioned God's wrath when God destroyed the cities of the plain then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven. Now the wrath of God is in the Bible here and throughout the New Testament as well Romans particularly has a lot of emphasis to it in the opening chapters the wrath of God is not some kind of impersonal force.

If you pulled one of these plugs or sockets out from the wall and pulled it right out and saw the bare wires and then you were foolish enough to take hold of the positive lead you'd get a shock and in all likelihood it would kill you.

There's a force there. There's something lying there that's destructive and the moment you actually touch it it kicks in in your personal experience and you know its effects.

But the wrath of God is not like electricity an impersonal force. The wrath of God is a personal thing to himself. It is part of that personality if you like or that person of God where like his love and his power and his wisdom his mind all of these things his wrath is as personal as any of these things. When God acts in wrath he's acting personally. It's his anger coming into action. It's his anger. It's an aspect of his being.

[21 : 01] So don't think of it as sometimes you might read about this that it's some kind of force that God has built into the creation but God's not really involved in it therefore you can leave God out of the picture.

That's not what the Bible says at all. The Lord reigned on Sodom and Gomorrah. The wrath of God Romans says is revealed from heaven against human sin.

God is active in his judgment of sin and he's active in his wrath. It's God's unavoidable action against sin.

Secondly you see God's patience. Sodom wasn't destroyed all of a sudden within a short space of time.

The Lord had given it many many years. Who knows maybe Lot had thought that perhaps he would change the minds of some people in Sodom so that they would begin to believe in the Lord and follow the Lord like himself.

[22 : 08] Well of course his life became compromised as we saw and became of little effect. But the Lord gave Sodom many many years before he came finally to destroy it.

Look at verses 20 to 21 of chapter 18 where you find there where Abraham is told by those who came to him these visitors the Lord and the angels the Lord said because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me and if not I will know.

In other words he is really saying there I have to examine very carefully whether they deserve destruction at this moment or not. God is not going to act out of a outcry that is to say all of a sudden just out of a mere whim.

God doesn't react with a knee-jerk reaction if you like if I can put it that way the way we often do ourselves. God doesn't suddenly see something and then in a knee-jerk reaction says right that is it that is going to be destroyed let's get it out of the way.

God patiently deals with human beings acting in kindness toward them to draw them to consider the seriousness of their sin.

[23 : 35] In Acts chapter 17 you remember Paul there when he was preaching in Athens a place filled with idolatry and he said to them there that for all of these years God had acted patiently towards sinful behavior when he says there in chapter 17 verse 30 the times of ignorance God overlooked talking about idolatry there the fashioning of things of silver stone gold and so on the times of ignorance God overlooked but now he commands all people ever required to repent because he has fixed the day of which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead that's Jesus Christ Paul is saying there to the Athenians all the way through history God was exercising incredible patience with human beings who corrupted their practice into idolatry

God didn't instantly destroy them and begin again remember in Exodus 32 and 33 Moses pleading with God God is saying as he tests Moses leave me alone so that my anger will burn against this people remember this is immediately after the golden cast incident where under Aaron the people have abandoned their practice of worshipping God and fashioned this God and Moses comes so indignant as he sees this but he then is told by God just leave me alone don't pray to me as it were so that my anger will burn against them and I will make of you a great nation a great temptation to Moses as God is seemingly saying to him I'm going to destroy them I'll begin afresh I'll have a new chapter beginning with you Moses said Lord remember your covenant with Abraham

Isaac and Jacob are you not the patient God are you not the covenant God are you not the God of promises in other words Moses was appealing to the forbearance the long suffering the patience of God why has the world not been destroyed why has the gross human wickedness that you see throughout the world in our own land included why when you think of such terrible things as have happened whether it be in Rochester or wherever else in the world you see such terrible things happening involving children and the abuse of children and even the murder of children why doesn't God come and strike such a place as he did Sodom and Gomorrah with his judgment from heaven because God is patient and God is forbearing and God is long suffering he doesn't strike immediately he gives us every opportunity but you know his patience does run out there are times when he will act in judgment and show the seriousness of sin in a destructive way very interesting isn't it that a number of times in this passage and in the chapter we read about the day dawning here it is in verse 23 the sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to

Zohar and in verse 15 you find the same sort of thing as the morning dawned the angels urged Lot so you can see there there's a build up of tension there's a build up of suspense in the way that the account is given to us of this event and the sun had risen on the earth really is pretty much saying to us people were just as every other day before that saying maybe they're saying to themselves it's a very nice day today what am I going to do today it's a day for doing this or that or looking to the sky and say well it looks very settled today I think we're going to get a good spell of weather all sorts of things in the ordinary sense of human lives that's what the day began like the Lord then reigned on Sodom and Gomorrah no wonder we have the phrase out of the blue that's what it was like he

came because his patience ran out and he was saying about this place and these cities they've had every opportunity they've had long enough their sin has always deserved my judgment but instead of turning to me instead of stopping what they're doing they've only increased it they've gone even worse than they were it's accumulated to the extent that now it's come to this my patience has run out please don't experiment with

God don't presume that what he is today in his patience he will be the same to you before this day is out many people have tried that and perished in the process yes God is patient God is kind God is long suffering but you have to take advantage of that you and I have to come to trust in him before the day comes when we know it's going to be destructive on the day of judgment when Christ comes or when we die and have to leave this world and go and face him so there's God's personal wrath God's patience there's also God's steadfast love just in a quick word so it was in verse 29 when God destroyed the cities of the valley God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the over isn't that interesting we've mentioned it before but let's just think about it again Abraham was rescued out of the over throw out of the judgment of

[30 : 03] God because God remembered sorry Lot was rescued out of the overthrow because God remembered Abraham it's his covenant with Abraham that God keeps in mind and as he keeps it in mind as Lot has come under the provisions of that covenant's safety so he delivered Lot before he destroys Sodom that is God's covenant that is God's covenant commitment God's promises in Christ when you take them to yourself you know in your soul you know from the word of scripture you know from this and every other passage like it nothing can deflect God from keeping that promise nothing is going to actually influence God to let go his promise to let go his promise of your safety of your security of your eternal life that's why Jesus as the good shepherd as he put it in John 10 said my sheep know me and I know them and none can pluck them out of my father's hand they're secure because God keeps to his covenant commitment to his promises always and the fourth thing is that God is making his appeal to us we've been standing with Abraham we've been standing alongside him we've been looking down on the plain and viewing the smoke ascending like the smoke of a furnace we've concluded in our thoughts that this is speaking to us about human sinfulness about its antagonism against God about how it attracts

God's judgment we've also been thinking in our thoughts as we've looked out over the solemn scene of how it brings to us the reality of God's personal wrath but also demonstrates God's patience and God's steadfast love and now let's turn around and look to the other horizon let's divert our minds and our minds our eyes away from the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah let's turn around and look into the future let's look to the other horizon of Christ's return and as you think of that in the Bible's teaching you come across such passages as we read in Luke chapter 17 as it was in the days of Lot so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man in the day of judgment remember Lot's wife it wasn't so much the Luke with which she looked back towards Sodom it was the longing in her heart she paused there with the longing in her heart to be back in Sodom and that's why the destruction overtook her remember what Jesus is saying don't be like her that's an example to us as he says in 2 Peter chapter 2 verse 6 where it refers to God making these cities an example to us of his judgment of wickedness and sin

God's appealing to us as we look at the horizon of Christ's return make sure that you know him as your saviour as Jesus himself put it be ready also for in such a now as you think not the Son of Man comes reading recently about a man living near the Niagara River in America which as you know eventually falls over the precipice as the Niagara Falls depths of winter and he saw from his his own place he saw looking through his binoculars she saw what he thought was a bird coming floating down on a big large chunk of ice floating down the river and as he looked yes this was actually an eagle that had landed on the carcass of a lamb caught up in the ice and the eagle had landed and I was trying to peck away at it as it floated along on the river and just went past where the man was taken he kept looking at the binoculars and every so often the eagle would lift up its head the man was saying almost as if the eagle was saying yes I know

I know that there's a precipice there I know that there's an edge over which the water plunges but all I have to do is flap my strong wings in time and I'll be away and he noticed through the binoculars as the eagle got carried away nearer and nearer to the falls that just as it was reaching the falls it made this this attempt really to sweep to stoop down so it would just take off and it started flapping his wings and it couldn't because its talons its feet had become frozen to the frozen carcass and he said you could see it panicking beating its wings mightily against the ice and then over the edge it

went down into the depths and the darkness below there are many people friends who persuade themselves that when life gets just that bit near the precipice then they'll believe sadly too many people when they get to that particular position in life they are so stuck to the things of the world that they just go over the edge they never make it that's why the Lord's word says to us in Psalm 95 and the way it's used in the epistle to the Hebrews today if you hear his voice don't harden your heart remember

Lord's wife let's pray we thank you oh Lord for the solemn things of your word and for the way that you teach us to place them alongside those things that have to do with great joy and worth and happiness we bless you that in your wisdom you have brought these things to us for our good we pray that you would give us grace Lord so that we will comprehend those things for ourselves and apply them meaningfully to the lives we live bless us now we pray as we continue this day in your presence be with us this evening grant your presence to us throughout the day for Jesus sake amen