

JUDGEMENT & MERCY [GENESIS 18-19]

Intro – The City that was a Warning for Us

Up until six weeks ago, we were all becoming quite complacent with regards to COVID-19 weren't we? Infection rates were dropping, community transmission was negligible and restrictions were easing. Though the virus was wreaking havoc around the world, we patted ourselves on the back and figured that we had beaten the worst of it and that what was happening out there wouldn't happen to us. Accordingly we started to become less vigilant about social distancing, some began hugging and hand-shaking whilst others felt comfortable being in over-crowded spaces.

All of this of course until Melbourne happened – the swelling infection rates, devastating death toll and movement into stage four lockdown changed the nation's outlook. We were confronted with the reality that the virus wreaking havoc out there in the world was the same virus that confronted us and that even we in Australia weren't immune to its serious consequences. Accordingly, back here in Sydney, masks are now commonplace, testing rates have sky-rocketed and vigilance has returned.

Though the circumstances in Melbourne are tragic, the experience of this city has served as a merciful warning to the rest of the nation.

1) The Wrath of God

I mention this by way of introduction because in this morning's passage, the experience of two other cities – Sodom and Gomorrah – similarly function as a warning for all of us. The Bible repeatedly recalls these dark chapters of God's outpouring of wrath as a picture of the serious consequences of sin. We can't be flippant; we face the same virus as they and are not immune to the serious consequences we see in these chapters.

Though the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is often equated with the extraordinary sexual perversion of chapter 19, the language of 'outcry' in 18:20 is the same used of the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 2:23) and indicates more broadly that brutality and oppression were common place in Sodom. Ezekiel 16:49-50 confirms this – **'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. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.'**

Arrogant, overfed and unconcerned – this hits a little closer to home doesn't it. This could easily be a description of the millions of us in Sydney who are self-interested, materialistic and unconcerned at the plight of the poor and oppressed around the world. The same virus that ravaged Sodom is the same virus that ravages us and we are not immune to its consequences. This virus is sin and the debilitating consequences are the terrible and furious wrath of God.

Jesus in fact recalls the experience of these cities and states that they are a picture or a warning of God's end time judgement. Listen to what he says in Luke 17:28-30 - **"It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.**

Hear that? What we read this morning is a picture of what will befall humanity when Jesus returns. Don't let our current set of circumstances cause you to become complacent, God's judgement will come and when it does, it will be universal in scope just as it was comprehensive upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Hear again the sobering account of total destruction of these cities in 19:24-25, **Then**

the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land...

This comprehensive judgement came, because as you can recall from Abraham's prayers at the end of chapter 18, no one righteous could be found (apart from the foreigner Lot). And as it was with Sodom and Gomorrah, Jesus indicates that it will also be with humanity when he returns once more to rule, reign and execute judgement.

We all share the same virus and none of us are immune from its terrible consequences. As Romans 3:23 says **for all have sinned and fallen short of the righteousness of God**. Or consider what Jesus says in Luke 13. Here, Jesus is asked to explain how God could have allowed a Roman massacre of some Galileans. Listen here to his surprising response, **Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."**

This is a hard hitting passage. On the question of these tragedies, Jesus in essence replies, "Don't be astounded that this tragedy has befallen these worshippers; be astounded that given your sin, it hasn't yet come upon you." The same virus and the same terrible consequences.

No escape. No survivors. No exceptions. This is challenging for us who live in a permissible society and are not used to decisive consequences. When a parking fine is issued we claim a first time offence. When a penalty is received we challenge it or seek an exemption. Yet as Abraham says in 18:25, **Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?** Our God is a just judge and he will do right and the result of this is none other than an eternal outpouring of his just wrath upon humanity in sin at the end of time.

2) The Friendship of God

Time for the good news. I've mentioned Melbourne; I've mentioned Sodom, now I want to share with you about another city – Laodicea. Laodicea was located in Asia Minor, Modern Day Turkey. We've spoken of cities overfed and unconcerned, well Revelation 3 tells us that 2000 years ago, Laodicea was wealthy and lukewarm. Yet listen to what Jesus says to this church in Revelation 3:20 - **Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.**

What Jesus says to the church in this city is what he says to all of us. He desires friendship with unworthy sinners because our God is in the business of turning enemies into friends. In the words of John 15:15, **I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.**

How can this be? Well through Abraham's long awaited Seed or offspring, God did the unthinkable in Abraham's eyes. Remember what Abraham says in 18:25, **Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike.**

On the cross, God's love and justice met. Here Jesus was not just swept away *with* the wicked (crucified between criminals) but *for* the wicked. The fire and fury of God's wrath that was reserved for us, and pictured at Sodom and Gomorrah, was placed on his shoulders so that all who repent and trust him in shall not be consumed by the flames. Just as Lot found refuge in the tiny town of Zoar,

so too can we find refuge from God's judgement from finding shelter in Jesus. Just as Lot was saved by the intercession of Abraham, so too have we been saved by Jesus mediating with God on our behalf. Look again at 19:29, **So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.**

When we come to Jesus in faith to intercede on our behalf with God, God remembers his sacrifice and counts us as righteous by faith. Through Jesus we become God's friends.

You see, if Genesis 19 is a picture of God's coming judgement, Genesis 18 is a picture of God's offered friendship. Abraham stands alone in the Old Testament as the only person designated a friend of God. We see that played out here as he eats with God, shares his plans and walks with God. Through Abraham's offspring, Jesus, the curse of sin is lifted and the blessing of God is restored as we are welcomed back into an Abraham-like friendship with God.

I remember years back, Steph and I were in Paris and a sought-after DJ began speaking with us whilst we were in a queue together for some crepes. We were so surprised that this man who was demonstrably cooler than us and evidently sought-after would condescend to our level, seem genuinely interested in us and warmly invite us to his gig later on that night. We were amazed, yet how much more incredible is the condescension of God in Christ.

We stand under his wrath as enemies, but in love he executed justice upon Jesus that all who repent and believe in Jesus might be made his friends. Jesus thus says to us overfed and unconcerned people, **behold I stand at the door and knock!**

Application – Friends of the Sinner but not of the World

So as those who are friends of God, how should we live in light of this passage. As we head towards a close, I want to suggest that we be like Abraham as a friend of sinners and not like Lot as a friend of the world.

Like Abraham – Friend of Sinners

Abraham's seed was accused of being a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34), after all he came to seek and save the lost. We see Abraham following suit as he intercedes with God on behalf of Lot and Sodom in chapter 18. As friends of Jesus, we too must be friends of sinners who talk to people about God and talk to God about people.

As those who talk to people about God we need to be up front about God's judgement and mercy. How reprehensible and unloving it would be to fail to warn someone of serious judgement. That is why people are understandably upset at the suggestion that authorities in China covered up how serious COVID-19 was in those early days – how could they not warn us? Yet how much more reprehensible is it when we fail to warn people of God's coming judgement.

Alternatively, our Prime Minister recently said that we would not withhold the vaccine from any other nations. What an appropriate response, when you have something that brings life and hope you surely do not withhold it. Again, how much more so is this the case with the gospel.

We must be a friend of sinners by talking to people about God. Jesus is their and our only hope, we can't pretend that this is not the case. To do otherwise is self-centered and unloving. I'm not saying that we walk around with placards on, but rather that our lives and lips aren't discordant with these weighty eternal realities. Because if they are, it only confuses people.

After all, I wonder if the response of Lot's sons in law in verse 14 is owing in part to the fact that he never previously ventured to speak with them about the righteousness, let alone reality, of God. Accordingly when it came time to warn them of God's impending judgement, they had no categories to process such a conversation with Lot and simply thought the crazy man was playing a practical joke. May it never be so in our lives.

Yet not only should we speak to people about God, but to God about people. This is what Abraham does in Genesis 18. Never stop praying, never put anyone in the too hard basked. As God says in 18:14, **Is anything too hard for the Lord?** The same God who brought about the miracle of Isaac's birth can bring about the miracle of rebirth in other people's lives. A friend in my life recently came to faith after having been prayed for thirty years!

Unlike Lot – Not Friends of the World

Yet as friends of God, we've got to understand that this friendship is mutually exclusive and that we can't be friends of the world. Hear again Jesus' warning with respect to Lot's wife in Luke 17:31-32, **On that day no one who is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.**

Lot's wife perished not because she happened to simply glance back. You'll recall that judgement came only when they safely reached the village of Zoar, evidently Lot's wife lingered on the plain, she didn't want to leave behind everything in Sodom and as a result was overcome by sulphurous gases and became encrusted in ash, debris and salt. She is a warning for us and so is Lot. Though commended in 2 Peter 2:6-9 as one who grieved the godlessness around him, he nonetheless struggled to let go of it. Verse 16 tells that he had to be dragged out of the city. Chapter 13 tells us that he marvelled over the prosperity that the region brought. Yet in the end, his friendship with the world cost him everything. Most tragically this is seen in the conduct of his daughters, who with the distasteful end to Genesis 19, had evidently imbibed the culture of Sodom under Lot's neglect.

Don't live for the things that will be burned up. Live for the creator of all things and leverage everything he has given you to serve him and love others. Let go of drive for comfort, let go of the need for wealth, let go of the over indulgence in food and prize most your friendship with God.

Jesus has saved us from the coming wrath. Accordingly, as friends of God, let us be friends with sinners, but not befriend the world. Let us pray.