

STUDY SIX – GENESIS 18-19
JUDGEMENT + MERCY

P R O M I S E

— G E N E S I S 1 2 - 2 5 —

GOD'S GRACIOUS INITIATIVE
IN THE LIFE & TIMES OF ABRAHAM

OVERVIEW

Genesis 18:1-15 – Though we are not immediately sure when the penny dropped for Abraham, it would seem as though he wasn't initially aware of the identity of his visitors (Hebrews 13:2).

Abraham's frenzied activity and lavish hospitality is the kind of expression of faith repeatedly affirmed throughout the Scriptures (Heb 13:2; Rom 12:13; Matt 25:34-36; Lev 19:34) – as those who graciously welcomed by God we are to do the same for others.

As per the sidebar, this episode is an extraordinary expression of God's gracious friendship with Abraham – God meets and eats with Abraham so as to reaffirm his covenant promise of descendants and to iron out Sarah's lingering doubts as to the certainty of this promise. In so doing, God reveals himself to be omnipotent ("Is anything too hard for the Lord?") and omniscient (he knows Sarah's internal thoughts cf. Ps 139:1-4).

Genesis 18:16-33 – God's friendship and partnership with Abraham to bring his blessing to the nations, finds further expression through the disclosure of his intention to bring judgement upon Sodom and Gomorrah. It would seem that this disclosure has the added intention of aiding Abraham in directing his household in the way of righteousness (v 19) by witnessing sin's consequences.

Though the sin of Sodom is popularly connected with its sexual perversion, the language of 'outcry' (v 21) indicates brutality and oppression were prevalent also (cf. Exo 2:23). Indeed we learn later in Ezekiel 16:49-50, *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...* These are sobering words for us here in wealthy Sydney.

We thus learn that the all-seeing and all-powerful God is also righteous and just. And it is on the basis of God's character that Abraham pleads boldly for mercy. This friend of God is also a friend of sinners and makes intercession for them just like his future Seed.

Abraham's implicit reasoning is likely that a sufficient remnant of righteous people in the city might be enough to turn the tide (cf. Prov 11:11). Chapter 19 however attests to the reality that there was no such sufficient remnant. Yet God hears and responds to the intercession of his friend and rescues Lot and his household.

Duguid thus writes, "Time ran out for Sodom – but it has not yet run out for us. We may still turn to Christ and receive salvation from his nail-scarred hands. We may still intercede for our friends and family, recognizing God's right to judge, but pleading the merits of Christ." (p 105). Like Abraham, we can do this as friends of God.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

FRIEND OF GOD

Throughout the Old Testament, Abraham is the only one given the stunning designation 'friend of God' (2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; cf. James 2:23).

We see this friendship beautifully worked out as God manifests his presence via the 'Angel of the Lord' (cf. 16:7-11) and consumes a meal with Abraham – the only time he does so prior to the Incarnation. As God does so, he lovingly confronts Sarah's doubts and reveals to her afresh his omnipotence and omniscience. He also reveals his plans of judgement to Abraham – for friends know and make known their desires and plans.

This friendship is remarkable given the holiness of God and the sin of humanity. Yet God initiated this friendship so as to restore His blessing to the nations through Abraham.

Indeed, as Isaac was to be an unlikely child (born of an elderly woman), it was through another unlikely child (born of a virgin), that Abraham's Seed would come into the world and so enable the nations to share in this friendship with God. Jesus himself says in **John 15:15-16** –

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. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

OVERVIEW CONT'D

Genesis 19:1-38 – Though nowhere near the lavish feast provided by Abraham, Lot's hospitality toward the angelic messengers stands in stark contrast to the lust-crazed mob, thus vindicating God's verdict and reflecting Lot's relative righteousness (cf. 2 Peter 2:6-9)

The mob's indignation at Lot in verse 9 is indicative of a sinful tendency to attack others who don't condone our sin. Of this Hughes (p. 272) writes, 'Sinners...are offended because you do not give hearty approval to their action (cf. Romans 1:32). In their eyes, absence of approval is unforgivably judgmental.' How true this is in our day.

Lot's place at the gate of the city indicated his prominence in Sodom. Yet Lot's rise to prominence in such a city couldn't have come without compromise and we see this reflected in his conflicted state over the coming verses – he staggeringly tries to maintain his virtue as host whilst abandoning his post as a father (v 8); he hesitates to let go of his life in Sodom and needs to be dragged out of the city (v 16); though aware of God's grace (v 19), he struggles to trust his full deliverance and asks for refuge in Zoar (which literally means "Small" ie "Little Sodom"); we then see that the ways of Sodom have been allowed to infiltrate his daughters who ironically subject their father to the same mistreatment that he was prepared to allow them to suffer at the hands of the townsfolk (v 30-39). His utter loss and tragic ending stand as a warning for us who though righteous by faith, struggle leave behind the sinful and worldly values around us.

Furthermore, the parallel drunken endings of Lot and Noah (cf. 9:20-23) are a reminder of the enduring problem of sin which faces humanity – for even those rescued by God were still compromised by sin soon after. We thus are left awaiting Abraham's Seed who is to restore God's blessing to the nations.

Of the fiery destruction which takes place, many scholars have sought naturalistic explanations. The most popular is that an earthquake (of which a series in the area helped form the Syrian-African Rift), 'opened a fissure, releasing gases that then ignited, setting the sulphur and petroleum deposits aflame, resulting in a catastrophic firestorm.' (Hughes, 274-5)

This would explain the salt like corpse of Lot's wife, who likely succumbed to sulphurous gases when she stopped on the plain and was then covered in salt and debris – 'Her backward look was far more than momentary because the destruction of the cities did not begin until Lot and his daughters were safe in Zoar. Evidently she refused all encouragements to leave and lingered far behind.' (Hughes, 275).

PROMISE+FULFILMENT JUDGEMENT

The devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah is used as a motif throughout scripture to warn of God's coming and final judgement upon sin. For example, Jesus says in **Luke 17:28-33** –

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.²⁹ But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

³⁰ "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.³¹ 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.³² Remember Lot's wife!³³ Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

Talk of God's judgement is unsettling and uncomfortable, but the reality remains that humanity's predicament in sin was so serious that Jesus had to go to the cross to rescue us from God's coming wrath. Though Lot sought temporary refuge in Zoar, we can find true and lasting refuge in Christ. The cross is thus the supreme expression of God's love and justice.

As those saved and thus aware of the judgement to come, we are called to pray for, and plead with, the world around us to be reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor 5:20). We are also called to cease trying to hold onto worldly possessions which will perish, and instead live in light of the eternal hope which awaits us.

GETTING STARTED

1. How difficult do you find it to broach the topics of sin and judgement with loved ones or friends who aren't believers?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Genesis 18:1-33

2. What do you think was the purpose of the Lord's visit to Abraham and Sarah?
3. Why does the Lord choose to disclose the coming judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham?
4. Is God's just and righteous character good news or bad news?
5. Abraham is uniquely referred to in the Old Testament as the 'friend of God' (2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; cf. James 2:23). How is that friendship demonstrated here?
6. Read John 15:15-16 & Rev 3:20. How easy do you find it to accept that in Christ, God's judgement has been turned away and that you too have become a *friend* of God? How should this reality colour the way you relate to God and others?

Read Genesis 19:1-38

7. What provoked the Lord's judgement upon Sodom? (cf. Ezekiel 16:49-50)
8. Where does Lot's faith shine and where does it falter in this chapter?
9. Read Luke 17:28-35. In what ways should Genesis 19 function as a sober warning for us?
10. For all his failings, Lot is later commended as one who was 'distressed by the depraved conduct' of the city around him, and as one 'tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard' (2 Peter 2:6-9). Do you think that on the whole we are like Lot? Or have we become callous and unfeeling toward sin in the world around us?

TAKEAWAY

11. Spend a moment in prayer (or song) praising God for 'Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath' (1 Thess 1:10) for indeed 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Joel 2:32). Then, as friends of God, spend time interceding for our city.