

Fire and Brimstone

Genesis 19:1-29

What image do you get in your mind from the words “fire and brimstone?” No expression is used more often to describe God’s justice and judgment. Those words themselves are often used to speak of the harshness of God’s judgment, and for many people, the words actually describe an attribute of God in which they do not believe. Many people simply choose to believe that God would not ever bring a judgment of fire and brimstone. But how mistaken they are.

The words are used to describe a certain type of preaching, also. “Fire and brimstone” refers to a preacher who finds himself free to preach about hell, and again, those words are often used in a very negative way, as if preaching about fire and brimstone was a bad thing to do.

Well, I don’t think that preaching about fire and brimstone is a bad thing to do at all. In fact, fire and brimstone is the title of my sermon this morning. And it is the subject of this sermon because it is the subject of the text we have come to in our study of Genesis. Because of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, God destroyed those cities by raining down upon them fire and brimstone.

That is a fearful subject, and I am compelled to keep an appropriate solemnness about all of this. One commentator remarks that “there is hardly a more horrible account anywhere on the pages of holy writ. Both the degeneracy here described as well as the catastrophic overthrow of the cities involved are calculated to startle by their lurid and gruesome details. Luther confessed that he could not read the chapter without a feeling of deep revulsion.”

The obvious point is that Sodom and Gomorrah show us the horrible sinfulness of mankind. Those cities are a graphic reminder that,

I. THE WICKEDNESS OF MEN ABOUNDS.

v.1-5

“The two angels” in verse 1 are no doubt the same two angels who appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18:1-2, where we read that, Abraham “lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground”

Three men. One was the Lord himself. Jesus Christ in a pre-incarnate appearance. They went on to Sodom.

Gen. 18:22 “Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD.”

In our text this morning, chapter 19, two men are specified, the two who were angels. They arrived at Sodom.

v.1 “Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom.”

Lot was, by this time well, settled into life in Sodom, despite the wickedness of the city. He “was sitting in the gateway”, well respected, therefore, and perhaps even an elected leader. He offered genuine and sincere hospitality, to visitors whom he must have known would face serious danger if they entered the city alone.

v.1. “When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground. 2 And he said, “Here now, my lords, please turn in to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way.” And they said, “No, but we will spend the night

in the open square.” 3 But he insisted strongly; so they turned in to him and entered his house. Then he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

His fear of danger was well founded.
v.4-5

The Hebrew word at the end of verse 5 is the ordinary word to “know,” frequently used as a gentle description of the most intimate physical knowledge between a husband and a wife. Going right back to the garden of Eden, we read,

Gen. 4:1 “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain.”

So here, the intent of the Sodomites was plain. It was horrible. “Bring them out to us that we may know them carnally.” The attempt was nothing less than a mass, city-wide physical and carnal violation of these visitors. And all the men of the city were involved. It would have been a homosexual orgy and gang rape on the worst order, one which likely would have left the helpless visitors not only physically degraded but even dead.

There was good reason why the wickedness of the city had become so well known.

Gen. 13:13 “But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD.”

We’re told that Lot understood the wickedness of their intent.
v.6-7

Sadly, such wickedness is not hard to understand, for such wickedness still abounds today. The wickedness of homosexuality, and here even worse. A violent attack by the men of the city upon these two visitors in Lot’s house. This is a

particularly heinous form of sexual immorality. And,

A. Sexual immorality is a particularly heinous demonstration of wickedness.

There are several aggravating factors here. Verse 4 speaks of all the men of Sodom, from every part of the city, from young to the old! Even with the wisdom of advanced years, the old men still kept the fires of unnatural lust burning. All the men. Without exception.

And they wished to abuse those who were granted the great privilege of hospitality. That offer of hospitality was so completely replaced by the eagerness to practice such vile lust that even strangers would be sacrificed to wholesale abuse.

Such shocking depravity. No shame. No restraints. Open, out in the public square. The open sinfulness of Jerusalem would later be compared to Sodom by Isaiah, in,

Isa. 3:9 “The look on their countenance witnesses against them, And they declare their sin as Sodom; They do not hide it. Woe to their soul! For they have brought evil upon themselves.”

God makes his will clearly known in the Bible. God created man and woman to live together in the mutually faithful, monogamous and lifelong relationship of a husband and a wife. Can it possibly be any clearer than this:

Lev. 18:22 “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination. 23 Nor shall you mate with any animal, to defile yourself with it. Nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it. It is perversion.”

The apostle Paul writes, describing the heinous sins of his day,

Rom. 1:24 “Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. 27 Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.”

So how did Lot respond? He had a problem. He lived in this city. He was found at the city gates, a respected participant and leader in the towns affairs. Hospitality was a great virtue, and so he was bound to protect his visitors. So with over-extended zeal for both the wishes of the townspeople and the protection of his guests, he did something absolutely incomprehensible. He offered his own daughters to the vile men of Sodom. Evidently, for Lot, the thought of a homosexual rape was far more horrifying than the violation of his own daughters. As unspeakable as that suggestion is, that is what we read.

v.6-8

I would die protecting my daughters before I would do what Lot did. But Lot acts in fear, and acts badly. Yet, thankfully, for the sake of his daughters, his compromise was unacceptable even to the decadent men of Sodom, men whose vile appetites for this horrible atrocity would not be satisfied even by the opportunity to abuse Lot's daughters.

v.9

Still we see that,

B. Fearful compromise is an inadequate resistance to wickedness.

Fear brings compromise. It gives in to wickedness. The fear of men brings about a compromise in values. The fear of men will eliminate the courage of conviction. And that fear caused Lot to offer a horribly sinful suggestion.

In broad terms, you cannot avoid sin, or evil, by resorting to sin yourself. You cannot pit one of God's laws against the other. You cannot give in to what might appear to be the lesser of two evils. The lesser of two evils is still evil! The lesser of two sins is still sin. You cannot avoid sin by suggesting another sin.

But what was Lot's obligation to hospitality and protection? Surely he shouldn't have just thrown the men out to the crowd? Humanly speaking, he had no options. And that's just the point. He should have looked to the Lord for help, for that is where his help and his strength would lie.

In fact, in the desperation of the moment, God did protect Lot and his two visitors and his two daughters! God protected them all. Supernaturally. And that shouldn't surprise us! Remember, these two visitors were angels, messengers of Almighty God. Agents bearing his power.

v.10-11

That is phenomenal! That is supernatural. They were blinded. They couldn't find the door! So, when the wickedness of man is particularly abundant, do not lean upon your own wisdom and do not depend upon your own ideas. Lot failed miserably, but the Lord still protected him.

From this example among many others, you can also be assured that when the wickedness of man abounds,

II. A WARNING FROM GOD SOUNDS.

This chapter issues a great warning. And the obvious purpose of that warning is to give a personal invitation to Lot for protection. Get out of Sodom!

A. God protects his people by warning them of impending judgment.

Judgment upon the wicked. Again, the protection first,
v.10-11

And then the warning,
v.12-13

The angels announce the purpose of their visitation. They had come from God for one very specific purpose. They had come to destroy the city, so great had the outcry against it come to the Lord. The warning was unmistakably clear. And in issuing this warning, we learn a great deal about God's compassion. God's compassion and his justice do not contradict each other. They are not in conflict whatsoever. They are both attributes of God, both aspects of his glory.

God sent the angels to destroy the city, and a horrible destruction it would be. And he sent the angels to show his compassion upon his people.

B. God rescues his people from impending judgment with compassion.

Look at,
v.14-16

"The Lord being merciful to them." The Lord was compassionate to them. Don't miss that. The Lord was compassionate with them. And it was a good thing, because Lot's sons-in-law considered the whole thing a huge joke, according to

verse 14.

Evidently these were men pledged to be married to his daughters, betrothed but not yet consummated, though the English translation has the translation "married." The more accurate idea is engaged but not yet married, for remember that these daughters "have not known a man." So the men to whom they were betrothed, called sons-in-law, laughed at Lot.

The angels didn't give up their warning, however,
v.15

Now even Lot hesitated. I really don't understand that, for he knew what the wickedness of the men of Sodom was like. He knew they were now turned against him, ready to break down the door to his own house. Still, he hesitated leaving. Perhaps it was an unwillingness to give up his home and material possessions. Perhaps it was a fear that he wouldn't be able to escape alive, that the power of the angels wouldn't be sufficient protection against the men of the city.

I don't know exactly what caused his hesitation, but in the context of that foolish hesitation, God was merciful! The angels grasped his hands and took him away, along with his wife and daughters.

v.16

Their guidance was plain.
v.17

Then what did Lot do? In an even more amazing display of presumption and fear, he asks for another favor! He does not seem to realize the extremity of his situation, nor does he value sufficiently the undeserved favor and grace showered upon him. He bargains for further consideration.

v.18-20

You could almost expect the angels to give him an impatient and sharp refusal. But they don't. Instead, they granted his request.

v.21-22

Realize what Lot is doing. He bases his plea upon the grace that has already been bestowed upon him. Lot had little or no appreciation for what the Lord had done for him. With incredible ingratitude, he figures that since God has been gracious to him, he should ask for more grace. He considers his own physical weakness and the possible inability to reach the mountains. He doubts the effectiveness of God's rescuing him, thinking the evil will overtake him anyway.

As one commentator writes, "It almost taxes the reader's patience to bear with this long-winded plea at a moment of such extreme danger." But the Lord bears with this long-winded plea. The Lord extends his compassion. And we learn from Peter's inspired letter in the NT that Lot is actually counted among the righteous, so great is God's compassion.

As this account in Genesis 19 is explained by Peter, the great encouragement here is that the Lord does rescue his people. And the comparison is made to the final judgment, for then, most especially, God will rescue his people and spare them from eternal destruction. Such incredible compassion.

Thus we read in,

2Pet. 2:4 "For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of

righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; 6 and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; 7 and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— 9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment."

All of that is true. But something else is equally true.

C. God's warnings are not idle threats and must not be ignored.

In other words, judgment is real. And it will really come. Just as it came to Sodom.

v.23-25

This was real fire. Brimstone is a word meaning sulfur, an element that burns easily. It is joined together with the word fire to make it clear what is being referred to. In its simplest description, this judgment upon Sodom consisted of burning sulfur, fire raining down from heaven. Fire which burned the cities of the plain to the ground, killing everyone who lived there and even destroying all the vegetation in the land.

We don't need to speculate exactly how God brought this about, whether the bitumen or asphalt pits so abundant in that land were part of the fire, or whether lightening was involved. Those suggestions are entirely possible. But the point is, God was the author of this judgment.

v.24 "Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens."

Actually, there were five cities in the plain. The city of Zoar was spared. But the other four burned, including both Sodom and Gomorrah, and according to Deuteronomy 29:23, also both Admah and Zeboiim.

This warning was not an idle threat. It was a promise. The judgment would come and it did. God does not issue an idle threat. His warnings must not be ignored, for he will carry through. And the overall application of Sodom and Gomorrah is the warning of eternal judgment.

Jude 5 “But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; 7 as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

Sodom and Gomorrah teach us that there will be an eternal fire, there will be eternal punishment. And that punishment is also described by the words, fire and brimstone. Among other verses, we read in,

Rev. 21:8 “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

That seems so harsh, doesn't it? That doesn't seem to fit with the revelation of God's mercy and compassion, does it? Well, the point is obvious. God is merciful and compassionate, in issuing his warnings. But we must not ignore those warnings! We must

not reject his mercy nor despise his compassion. If we do, we have a terrible personal example to demonstrate what may happen to us. Lot's wife.

v.26

Evidently, her heart was still back in the city. She failed to appreciate the danger she was in nor the extent of what the angels had done for her. When she had almost escaped, she looked back longingly. She disobeyed the very plain injunction which the angels had given,

v.17

God wasn't kidding. What do we learn from her? She became a warning example to all who do not make a clear cut break with the life of wickedness, as Jesus himself declares.

Luke 17:26 “And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: 27 They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. 28 Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; 29 but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. 30 Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. 31 “In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. 32 Remember Lot's wife.”

Then Jesus explains exactly what he means.

Luke 17:33 “Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.”

Remember Lot's wife. Jesus teaches the meaning of that warning in,

Luke 9:57 “Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, “Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.” 58 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” 59 Then He said to another, “Follow Me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” 60 Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God. 61 And another also said, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.” 62 But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

That ought to be the call of the gospel in evangelism! It is the call of absolute, wholehearted surrender. And the warning should be given as well. “Remember Lot’s wife.” “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

May the Holy Spirit use these somber words in each of your own lives, stirring you to burn the bridges behind yourself, giving your whole life to the Lord for service in the kingdom of God, without looking back. Let this warning stir you to greater godliness. When you are tempted by the things of this world, and clinging to them too tightly, remember Lot’s wife.

Let me now touch briefly on the next few verses, for they give us the context for this whole judgment. We return to Abraham.
v.27-29

The point, as I studied it, was obvious.

III. THE SOVEREIGN PURPOSE OF GOD REMAINS.

Remember back in Genesis 13 when Abraham and Lot separated? God’s purpose was being fulfilled. God’s covenant promise was with Abraham and his line, and from Abraham, there had to be complete separation of every other line. Including Lot’s

line. They were separated. And the place where Lot chose to live was destroyed. But,

A. The chosen line of God’s covenant people is spared.

That’s the reason this passage ends by referring to Abraham in verses 27-28. Abraham could have done nothing else but to realize that he had been spared. Lot could have chosen the land he inhabited, and he would have settled in the land Lot chose. But that didn’t happen, for as he himself knew, he was the head of the chosen line of God’s covenant people. Therefore, by God’s grace, he was spared. And,

B. The covenant promises of God would all be fulfilled.

v.29

God remembered Abraham. That’s why Lot himself was spared. Because God remember what he had promised Abraham. God remembered the promise of his covenant. And in that covenant, God remembered and answered Abraham’s passionate plea which we studied last time. There were not ten righteous men in Sodom, so the Lord didn’t spare the city, but he did spare the one righteous man, Abraham’s nephew Lot.

The covenant promises of God will all be fulfilled. And those promises include both blessings and curses. The curses of the covenant will be fulfilled, ultimately in the final judgment of Jesus’ second coming. And with this example of Lot, Peter tells us with absolute certainty, that,

2Pet. 2:7 “[If God] delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— 9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment.”

Those who reject Jesus Christ are held for the day of eternal judgment, a day of fire and brimstone. And the message of the gospel really is that simple. The unbelieving wicked will be punished. But you who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation will be rescued.