

# **life groups study guide**

## **the good, the bad and the ugly**



*"One should judge a man mainly from his depravities. Virtues can be faked. Depravities are real."*

**Klaus Kinski**

*"Now I say that with cruelty and oppression it is everybody's business to interfere when they see it."*

**Anna Sewell**

*In Life Groups, kids, youth and adults study God's Word together and discuss the issues and challenges of life.*

### **What a Mess**

I gotta tell ya - Genesis 19 is just depressing stuff. "The good, the bad and the ugly" (the title of this morning's sermon) doesn't even begin to cover it. Yet, in the midst of the train wreck I think there are several lessons we can learn; a cautionary tale or two we can heed and take to heart; and some errors and misconceptions that have been long held by many, many folks in the church that it will be worth casting aside in favor of a more accurate - and biblical - understanding of God's heart and the focus of His judgement.

Honestly I struggle with where to start. Just the stuff in the first 29 verses of Genesis 19 turns my stomach (and the train wreck keeps rolling, full steam ahead in .30-38). I don't know if I'm more repulsed in this story by the actions of people whose reputation for evil was well-deserved, and on full display – or by the actions of the one whom the apostle Peter called a "righteous man" with a "righteous soul." I guess we'll tackle him first.

Read Genesis 19:1-29

### **Lot: One Bad Idea After Another**

When we first see Lot in this story, he is sitting at the city gate. The gate was the most important part of the city, where dignitaries would take their seat and where disputes were settled. We have to remember that Lot came to Sodom as a wealthy man. This would have given him a position of influence in the city. The men of Sodom may even have endured some of his criticism of their immoral behavior. It is obvious that although Lot may not have participated in the sins of Sodom, he had compromised himself considerably by living there and accepting the position he had. The rest of the chapter shows the influence of Sodom upon his entire family. This point has important applications. We should always consider what the influence of the surrounding in which we choose to live and work will have upon our family. The atmosphere of a place will affect our children. Some people have no choice where they live and work – Lot choose the valley of Siddim and his move into the city (It is also obvious that Lot had moved within the city walls at this point as well) was no doubt his free choice.

Q :: Why do you think Lot chose to put down roots in such a place as Sodom?

Q :: Clearly, we are called in Scripture to be salt and light in the world so that lost folks can see Jesus in us – but are there ways to accomplish the same thing without planting ourselves right in midst of sinful influences? Give examples.

Q :: 1 Corinthians 15:33 states "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" I think we can certainly see how the environment of evil Lot had planted himself in had seeped into his life. Where have you seen this Scripture played out?

We see that in moving to Sodom that Lot was really tearing at his own spiritual foundations in two different ways: 1) He had left Abraham, his family and their godly influence on his life. 2) He settled his own family in a place that he knew very well would surround them with an influence of the exact opposite sort.

Then, in verse 8, the unthinkable happens. When the men of Sodom arrive and start demanding that Lot hand over the men who had come to stay with them, Lot's reaction strikes me as just as detestable as the actions of the Sodomites. Commentaries state that oriental hospitality requires that the host defend his guests with his own life. But Lot does not offer his own life. He is not willing to die himself, but rather to sacrifice his daughters instead. Imagine the effect upon the girls to hear their father say such a thing. Whatever respect they may have had for him was certainly lost at this point. Lot's proposal shows how much he had come under the influence of the spirit of Sodom himself. Ethical boundaries have almost been wiped out in his mind. It makes one wonder how much righteousness was truly left in Lot.

Q :: This begs the question: That Lot, in the New testament, is called a righteous man with a righteous soul, despite this sickening offering up of his daughters to gang rape...what bearing does that have on us today? In other words, what is Lot's righteousness a by-product of – and what is ours?

Q :: While I hope that none of us so willingly would sacrifice family members in such a heinous manner, in what other ways can we neglect the welfare and needs of our family or those close to us because we're blinded by a greater perceived need?

Q :: We read in v. 14 that Lot warned his sons-in-law about the impending doom the angels had decreed - and they thought it was a joke. One commentary on genesis 19 makes this conclusion: "They must not have seen enough evidence of the presence of God in Lot's life to give any credibility to his announcement." While that is an obvious assumption, does this verse offer us any insights to the need to maintain spiritual credibility with others?

## The Sin of Sodom

This may come as a shocker (it did to me): Classical Jewish texts – including Scripture itself – agree that God did NOT destroy Sodom and Gemorrah because their inhabitants were homosexual. Not at all. Rather, the cities were destroyed because the inhabitants were nasty, depraved, and uncompromisingly greedy. Classical Jewish writings affirm that the primary crimes of the Sodomites were, among others, terrible and repeated economic crimes, both against each other and to outsiders. Saying "God killed them because they were gay" is, to say the least, not the Jewish teaching on the subject.

Make no mistake though, these were relentlessly evil people. But Scripture calls out what God saw as their most grievous sin in Ezekiel, and while sexual sin can be seen on the list (albeit in a less obvious choice of words), it is seen as a by-product of the other sins, and not the thing that really fueled God's anger.

In The Amplified Bible translation, Ezekiel 16:49-50 says:

*Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, overabundance of food, prosperous ease, and idleness were hers and her daughters'; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.*

In preparing for this lesson I came across a website that collects some of the classical Jewish writing about Sodom. These classical Jewish texts do not make the same jump to conclusion that most of the church has regarding the reason behind Sodom's destruction. Instead, they support the reason as stated in Ezekiel. Here are some examples:

*the Sodomites, overweeningly proud of their numbers and the extent of their wealth, showed themselves insolent to men and impious to the Divinity, insomuch that they no more remembered the benefits that they had received from him, hated foreigners and declined all intercourse with others. Indignant at this conduct, God accordingly resolved to chastise them for their arrogance...*

— Josephus, Antiquities I: 194-5

*The men of Sodom waxed haughty only on account of the good which the Holy One, blessed be He, had lavished upon them...They said: Since there cometh forth bread out of (our) earth, and it hath the dust of gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth. Come, let us abolish the practice of travelling in our land...*

*There were four judges in Sodom named Shakrai (Liar), Shakurai (Awful Liar), Zayyafi (Forger), and Mazle Dina (Perverter of Justice). Now if a man assaulted his neighbour's wife and bruised her, they would say to the husband, Give her to him, that she may become pregnant for thee.*

*If one wounded his neighbour they would say to the victim, Give him a fee for bleeding thee [bloodletting was sometimes considered medically*

*beneficial in those days; Here the Sodomite judge cruelly ruled that if one beats you until you bleed, you owe your attacker money for this “beneficial” medical service”...]*

*... they had beds upon which travellers slept. If the guest was too long they shortened him by lopping off his feet; if too short, they stretched him out...*

*If a poor man happened to come there, every resident gave him a denar [coin], upon which he wrote his name, but no bread was given [the store owners recognized such coins, and refused to accept them]. When he died, each came and took back his (denar)...*

*A certain maiden gave some bread to a poor man, hiding it in a pitcher. On the matter becoming known, they daubed her with honey and placed her on the parapet of the wall, and the bees came and consumed her.*

— Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 109a

*R Menhama in the name of R Bibi: This is what the Sodomites had stipulated among themselves. They said, As to any wayfarer who comes here, we shall have sexual relations with him and take away his money.*

— Genesis Rabbah, Parashah 50:7

*Rabbi Ze'era said: The men of Sodom were the wealthy men of prosperity, on account of the good and fruitful land whereon they dwelt... Rabbi Nathaniel said: The men of Sodom had no consideration for the honour of their Owner by not distributing food to the wayfarer and stranger, but they even fenced in all the trees on top above their fruit so that so that they should not be seized; not even by the bird of heaven... Rabbi Joshua... said: They appointed over themselves judges who were lying judges, and they oppressed every wayfarer and stranger who entered Sodom by their perverse judgment, and they sent them forth naked...*

*Rabbi Jehudah said: They made a proclamation in Sodom saying: Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor or the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt by fire. Peletith, daughter of Lot, was wedded to one of the magnates of Sodom. She saw a certain very poor man in the street of the city, and her soul was grieved on his account... Every day when she went out to draw water she put in her bucket all sorts of provisions from her home, and she fed that poor man. The men of Sodom said: How does this poor man live? When they ascertained the facts, they brought her forth to be burnt by fire. She said: Sovereign of all the worlds! maintain my right and my cause (at the hands of) the men of Sodom. And her cry ascended before the Throne of Glory. In that hour the Holy One, blessed be He, said: I will now descend and I will see whether the men of Sodom have done according to the cry of this young woman, I will turn her foundation upwards, and the surface thereof shall be turned downwards.*

— Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer

*Their intention was to stop people from coming among them, as our rabbis have said, for they thought that because of the excellence of their land... many will come there and they despised charity... they continued provoking and rebelling against Him with their ease and the oppression of the poor... In the opinion of our Rabbis, all evil practices were rampant among them. Yet their fate was sealed because of this sin - i.e. they did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy - since this sin represented their usual behaviour more than any other. Besides, since all peoples act righteously towards their friends and their poor, there was none among all the nations who matched Sodom in cruelty.*

— Nahmanides (Ramban) Commentary on Genesis, 13th century

Now in fairness – before two or three weeks ago, I wasn't even aware of the reference to the sin of Sodom in Ezekiel. I found it in the book *The Love Revolution* by Joyce Meyer, who, herself, says of Sodom: “I was shocked when I saw the truth behind their destruction. I discovered it while searching Scriptures about the need to feed the poor.”

And I'm not trying to advocate that Scripture does not consider homosexuality a sin – I think that's clear. I just find it amazing that we have come to believe that the primary reason that God destroyed this city was due to homosexuality, when actually God calls out his grievances against Sodom and it doesn't even make his top 4 (which would be the top 5 in the Amplified translation) ;-)

Q :: Of the sins God lists, do you see anything that the modern day church may share in as well?

Q :: In Ezekiel 16:46-48 reveals something that I find equally surprising. God says that Israel not only copied the detestable ways of Sodom, but “in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they.” What preceding passages reveal is that Israel's sin was mainly that of idolatry. How is this worse than what Sodom was destroyed for?

Q :: If Israel's sin was so much worse than Sodom, why then was she not destroyed as well?

Q :: We often hear Christian say that all sin is equal to God. Is that supported by these Scriptures? And if they're not equal, what can we learn about how God views sin that may differ from how we originally thought?

## Conclusion

In the interest of complete transparency, God has really been working on my heart over the whole homosexual debate that is raging in culture right now. And that works looks to be dovetailing right into the one word sermon I feel he's been preaching to me for about two years now: Love. The thing I hear over and over is "I just want you to love that person. Don't preach to them – just love them in my name."

Like many folks, I struggle to know how to love people that, A) are not like me; B) are combative toward me; and C) I see making choices I don't agree with. But Scripture tells me that where love is concerned, A, B and C don't matter. I'm called to love my enemies. Jesus prayed for the very people who nailed him to a Roman cross.

1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that *love never fails*.

The problem is: MY love fails. I am not proud of that - but I totally own it.

I need God to stretch me to have a greater capacity to love others – especially those that many (including myself) might call "unlovable". Agreeing with me is not a prerequisite for me loving someone.

I recently posed a question to someone who identifies themselves as a gay Christian. It's a question I don't hear anyone asking.

"How can I, as your brother in Christ, come alongside and love and serve you – in a way that does not require me to agree with you on the topic of marriage?"

THAT is the conversation I feel we should be having. It's the conversation I want to be a part of.