

Sin City

Genesis 18:16-19:29

Today, we remember the darkness that truly exists in this world, and the price that people have paid to fight it. And in our reading, God's Word narrates the reality of the darkness there is in people and in this world.

In Genesis 18:16-33, God reveals to Abraham more of His saving intentions to and through Abraham; and God also tells His friend about His destructive judging intentions upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God's messengers go on ahead to inspect the city of Sodom, whilst The Lord God remains there as Abraham stands before Him, standing between God and the city in bold, interceding prayer.

Abraham takes on God. Though he is respectful and humble, he is also downright bold - He candidly questions God's justice and appeals to God to save the city, negotiating down to saving it on account of 10 righteous people. There is a reminder here for us about something we saw in our series on prayer earlier in the year - we are to be nothing but honest with God in prayer, and let our honest questions and feelings be expressed to Him, with the knee always bent.

God promises that He will not destroy the city for the sake of ten righteous people. As we read on now into Genesis 19, we discover that the city *is* destroyed. What do we conclude? That there were not ten righteous people in that place. Let's read on. We're heading into a dark chapter, and it will not be comfortable. But we must nevertheless hear God's Word and be confronted by it.

Read Genesis 19:1-29

Here's what Genesis 18-19 have to tell us starkly. God judges human sin, destructively and definitively. God saves those whom *He* calls righteous. And *those* people are called to be saving, transforming influences in their journey through this life.

First of all, God judges sin. This tends to come as an unpalatable shock to 21st century Western culture, but it is the clear teaching of God's Word. People get offended by a God who snaps just like that and destroys completely with an ill temper.

But they are offended at a different god to the One of the Bible. Our passage tells us today that God's judgement was considered, thought through and announced ahead of time (18:20-21). It tells us that God would hear out Abraham's case for thinking again (18:23-33). It tells us that God took time to inspect and document the evidence of the sin He was judging, to be able to demonstrate to us His fairness in the matter (18:20-22).

Our passage also tells us that there was a good reason for God's destructive judgement. God talks about the 'outcry' that has reached Him concerning Sodom and Gomorrah. He mentions it twice in 18:20-21, and His messengers cite it as the reason for the coming destruction in 19:13.

Usually in the Old Testament, this 'outcry' described the suffering of the oppressed, the screaming out of victims - just as we find God hearing the Israelites 'crying out' in Exodus 3:7 about their cruel slavery at the hands of the Egyptians.

The sin of Sodom was sexual - homosexual activity, whenever it is mentioned in the Bible, is always condemned. But the sin here is at least as much social immorality as sexual immorality. In vv.4-9 we find *all* the men of the city gathering as a mob to gang rape Lot's guests. When Lot refuses and fails himself by offering his virgin daughters in their place, the mob try to grab Lot to do it to him instead.

This is the darkness in humanity that comes out when it has the chance. This is the reality of human corruption that has caused wars and seen lives lost both trying to perpetrate sin like this and trying to defend against it.

The deep, dark, saturated sin of this city and its people, was to treat others exactly how they wanted to, violently exerting a bullying power and control in marauding groups who might say, 'This is what we want to do and there's nothing you can do to stop us.'

That's the sin of Islamic extremist groups in the Middle East and in Africa. That's the sin of multinational corporations who exploit the resources of communities without regard for the wellbeing of local people. That's the sin of the nation which tries to invade another one. That's a sin which all of us will recognise in ourselves in the way we have treated others at times in our lives if we have our eyes open.

In this judgement, God is patient, God hears humans out, God inspects the evidence, and God hears the outcry of the victims of oppression and injustice

at the hands of the people of this city. This is a righteous judgement that is coming. And yes, it is fearful; it is a totally destructive judgement, and it will end these people. We've seen this before in Genesis 6-9 with the judgement of the flood.

Anyone here been thinking, 'I don't much like all this Old Testament stuff about judgement that Scott's been doing this year, I want to go back to the New Testament'? Okay, let's see what Jesus says about these things.

In Luke 17:20-37, Jesus is asked about the coming of the Kingdom of God. And Jesus tells people that the day of His return to this world will bring judgement *just like* what we read about here in Genesis.

In Luke 17:26-29, Jesus says that in the days of Noah and in the days of Lot, people were going about their everyday business - eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, building - then suddenly, the destruction of God's judgement came upon them. And He says the same thing is coming again when He returns to this world.

God's Word - including the very words of Jesus during His ministry - spell out that for everyone under God's judgement, there will be a destruction which will *end* you. Death, Hell, separation from God forever. You might as well know what God has said about it, because He is quite serious, and He's no more messing about with you than He was with Sodom.

Alongside that warning, God's Word holds out a promise - as it does again in our passage today: That God saves those whom *He* calls righteous. And this is something which, if you are not yet following Jesus, God especially wants *you* to hear today.

Abraham pleaded with God that He would spare the city on account of ten righteous people. I wonder what Abraham had in mind? What was Abraham's idea of what a 'righteous' person was? What about you - what's your idea of what a 'righteous' person is?

Question - What is a 'righteous' person?

There were not ten righteous people in Sodom. The New Testament is even more comprehensive - Romans 3:10 says, 'There is *no-one* righteous, not even one.' Whatever standards of righteousness we dream up, God's view is the one that counts, since He's in the Judge's seat - and He says in Romans 3:21, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'

That means that in and of yourself, you are not righteous. You are due for judgement. There is sin and corruption and guilt in your life, and punishment will come for it. *Except...*

There *are* some people that *God* calls righteous. Romans 3:22 tells us the very good news that God wants you to hear, know and trust - 'This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.'

All those who take God at His Word when He says that Jesus can take your punishment for you in His death - they are righteous. All those who trust God when He says He'd prefer the fire and brimstone and flood to fall upon His own Son in your place, than to fall upon you - they are righteous. All those who take God at His Word that Jesus rose to life and prepares a place for them to join Him in eternity - they are righteous.

Going back to Genesis, we see the same thing happening. In Genesis 15:6, 'Abram *believed* the Lord, and He credited it to Him as righteousness.' Taking God at His Word is what makes you 'righteous' - right with God - and what gets you saved.

God did not spare Sodom. But He did spare Lot, and the family who would choose to come with him. God sent messengers to Lot to declare to him in vv.12-13 something similar to what I'm telling you today: 'God's destructive judgement upon sinful human society is coming. Here's the way out. Take the offer of salvation seriously, and take it quickly. Bring your family with you.'

In v.14, Lot tried to share the saving message with some of his family, but they thought the message sounded ridiculous and they sealed their own fate. Sometimes that happens with the families we try to bring along in saving faith in Jesus - but for our part, we need to know that we've made the saving message clear to them.

In vv.15-16, we see Lot himself hesitate when it came to actually making his escape from judgement. Sometimes it's easier to tell other people how to be saved than to drop everything yourself to be rescued. U2 singer Bono puts it like this on the song 'Every Breaking Wave' from their latest album - 'Every shipwrecked soul knows what it is, to live without intimacy. I thought I heard the captain's voice - but it's hard to listen while you preach.'

In the verses that follow though, God's messengers stretch and grab and wait and change their plan of attack - they do everything in their power to see Lot to safety. God does everything in His power to rescue the ones He calls righteous - and that included giving His own Son to take the punishment we deserved on a cross.

You mustn't doubt the urgency or the potency of God's saving rescue plan offered to you. Judgement is coming upon a human race that has spawned two world wars, terrorist atrocities, social oppressions and greed, pride, selfishness and idolatry in every individual human being. But there *is* a way to be saved from that; there *is* a way to be considered 'righteous' by God; and it *is* to trust that Jesus Christ did everything to take that judgement upon Himself in your place.

Was Lot righteous? It's hard to be sure about that from this passage. We're told in 19:29 that God spared Lot, not because of his righteousness (which is what Abraham had appealed to in chapter 18); but because God remembered Lot's uncle Abe, someone whom God *had* counted righteous.

We shouldn't take this passage to mean that anyone in the family or household of a Christian spouse or parent will be saved. God did especially extend His offer of rescuing mercy to Lot on account of Abraham, and ultimately, Lot made the choice to take it (although perhaps with some wrestling).

In turn, God did especially extend the offer of rescuing mercy to Lot's family in 19:12. But whereas Lot chose to take the offer, we read of his sons-in-law deliberately turning their backs on it in v.14, and Lot's wife probably not just 'looking back' in v.26, but actually 'turning back' from the saving way and heading back to where destruction was coming, where she met a sulphuric, salty end.

God does especially extend the offer of saving mercy to the families of His people, but it is still up to each person in that family how they will respond to the message their loved one is bringing them.

Question - How have you made the message of God's coming judgement and God's offered rescue known to your family?

Although Genesis 19 doesn't describe Lot as righteous, he wasn't killed with everyone else who was unrighteous. And elsewhere in God's Word, in 2 Peter 2:7-8, Lot is repeatedly described as a righteous man amidst an

unrighteous city. So we're going to look at both Lot and Abraham as we close with a word to those of us who have already put faith in Jesus Christ - those whom God considers 'righteous.'

It's a word about your identity - who you are - and it's a word about what God calls you to do in that identity - what your purpose and motivation is to be. In v.9, Lot is mocked by the mob for trying to exert moral restraint. He is called a *ger* - a sojourner, a resident alien, someone who does not belong to this place but who is merely travelling through.

Abraham and his family - the family through whom God promised to bless all nations again in 18:18 - were destined to be known as *gerim* - resident aliens. That is whom God's righteous people are. We do not belong to this world, but to God and His Kingdom. Jesus spoke in the same way.

Although we don't belong here, God calls us to make an impact along the way. Our purpose on the journey is to make a transformative mark in the society we are in. We're here as salt to preserve God's world and bring cleansing to it; and as light to pierce and show up the darkness there is.

It should be said first that we mess that up tragically sometimes. Both Lot and Abraham fail in terrible, unthinkable ways along the way. Here in 19:8 Lot offers his own virgin daughters to be gang raped rather than have his guests suffer this.

Now that is unpalatably awful - rather like Abraham's giving his wife away to have sex with other men to save his own skin back in Genesis 12, and again in chapter 20 which we'll see next week.

We should note that God does not condone this. We sometimes read the Bible as if God approves of everything that we're reading and thinks all the plans of the main characters are a good idea. They're often not, and Lot's plan is terrible.

In this story, the women get away from this threat because the angels of God are present to strike the mob with blindness. The woman in Judges 19 in the same situation is not so protected, and she suffers the gang abuse that was threatened in this passage.

The darkness of *that* chapter, and the scenes of retribution, war and conflict, and God's judgement that follows; reflect God's view that this is an awful

thing. Sadly, this is hardly confined to the pages of ancient history, but it has played out on our news channels in recent months and years time and again.

Humans - including those saved by Jesus Christ - mess up in enormous ways. But those who are rescued by faith in Christ are called to confess their wrong, turn from it, and get on with being transforming influences in this world. We see both Abraham and Lot trying to do this in a number of ways.

Abraham is called to bless all the families of the Earth in 18:18 - to 'be a blessing.' Would people say of you, a follower of Jesus Christ, that you are a blessing to them? Could they articulate why it is good that you're in their life? Or would they consider you an irritant that detracts from fullness of life?

Abraham intercedes in prayer for Sin City, seeking God's mercy upon it and praying that just ten righteous people might be found to save it. He stands between God and the city in prayer. Are you doing that for Inverness?

Lot and Abraham are both called to instruct their households to walk in the ways of the Lord - in 18:19 and in 19:12 - and in this passage, we see Lot meeting with little success. We looked earlier at the need to know that irrespective of the outcome, we need to know we've given God's message to our families.

Both Lot and Abraham offer hospitality, welcome and care to the strangers who cross their paths, instead of the ignorance or the brutality they experience from the world around them. Building on what we looked at last week; how's your hospitality - to fellow Christians, to those not following Christ, to those you've never met before?

Lot calls on the people he is amongst to stop acting unjustly and oppressively. He stands in the gap for the threatened and vulnerable (not knowing, in his case, that they are actually divinely powerful angels). Are you speaking out against the injustice you see in this world? How about in your workplace? Are you advocating for those who are being ill-treated, or letting it happen so you don't get any flack?

Irrespective of how successful you are as a resident alien in this world, this is what you followers of Jesus Christ, you people of God's Kingdom, are called to be in this world. Abraham saw the city he prayed for burn; Lot knew that his wife and sons-in-law were in there. But both men knew that they had been rescued, and they had done all that they were called to do, although

they'd made big mistakes along the way. Is that something you know about yourself?

This Remembrance Sunday, there are a few things that are important to remember. This world is terribly dark and broken. There are people who have stood in the gap to defend the vulnerable and paid with their lives, limbs and mental health.

God's judgement upon human sin, once and for all, is coming. But His urgent and complete rescue is available to you now - Christ lived, Christ sacrificed and died, Christ rose again. Once you've taken that rescue, you're called to set about transforming this world on your way through it. Have you remembered that?