

Prayers

Opening prayer

All praise be to You Living Lord, for from my darkest depths You have lifted my soul, and from my deepest despair You have raised me up. Remind me daily of Your power to save, Lord God, so that I never forget the wonder of Your grace and the provision You have made for my life. I thank You, Lord Jesus; I thank you from the very depths of my heart, and I praise You: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

1. For yourself

Pray for peace in your own life, and freedom from the stress of strife

2. For your friends and family

Pray for peace in your relationships, especially those with whom you are close

3. For the church and its work

Pray for peace within the life of the church, based on the presence of Christ in His 'body'

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for peace in the world, giving thanks for peace where it exists and battling against the forces of evil that prevent it

Meditation

The freshness of each new day reveals the blessings of the Lord
And the gifts He gives to those who receive them and use them:

The offer of precious moments spent in reading the Word;
The challenge of sustaining the work He has given us to do;
The chance to be creative in the path of discipleship and faith;
The excitement of knowing the Lord has more for us each day;
The valuable moments of quiet peace which refresh the soul;
The freedom of praying, to bless other people and the world;
The honour of living the life of Christ, and helping the poor;
The opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;

How can we show gratitude for the privileges we have been given,
Except to love the Lord our God and do what He has called us to do.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 19: 15-29

¹⁵ As dawn drew near, the angels urged Lot,

‘Get up, take your wife and these two daughters of yours, or else you will be caught up in the destruction of the city.’

¹⁶ But he hesitated, so in the Lord’s mercy, the men seized him, his wife and his two daughters by the hand, and they led them out to safety, outside the city, ¹⁷ and when they had got them out, they pleaded,

‘Run for your life, and don’t look back or stop anywhere in the Plain. Escape to the hills, or else you will be killed.’

¹⁸ But Lot said to them,

'Please, my lords. No. ¹⁹ You have done me a great favour and kindness by saving my life but I cannot get as far as the hills, so I will die in this disaster ²⁰ unless you let me escape to that little city over there; look, it is near enough and it is small, and it could save my life!'

²¹ The angel replied,

'Very well, I will let you do this, and I will not destroy the city you speak of. ²² But get moving and escape there, for I can do nothing until you get there.'

Because it was small, this city was called "Zoar", ²³ and the sun had risen over the land by the time Lot came to Zoar.

²⁴ Then the LORD himself rained down sulphur and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah out of the heavens; ²⁵ He overturned those cities, and the whole Plain; along with all the inhabitants, and everything that grew there. ²⁶ But Lot's wife glanced behind, and she became a pillar of salt.

²⁷ Now early in the morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the LORD. ²⁸ He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and the whole region of the Plain, and saw the smoke rising up from the ground as from a furnace.

²⁹ This is what happened when God destroyed the cities of the Plain. He remembered Abraham, and allowed Lot to escape the disaster which came on the cities in which he had settled.

Review

This description of the utter destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has become so ingrained in worldwide Christian tradition that the very names of these towns are a synonym for the disastrous consequences of sinful and amoral living. However, the full tragedy of what happened there and then lay not in God's destruction of sinful humanity, but in the story of Lot and his family as they escaped. God had destroyed sinful people before at the time of the Flood, when they had utterly rebelled against the Lord and the natural morality found in the Created world; and they had ignored the duties of stewardship God had given them. God's judgement and its wrath upon those who rejected Him was not new to Genesis; what was new was the survival of a man named Lot, who was a sinner, but saved not because of his own righteousness but because of Abraham's prayers for him (18:22f.)

When we read Genesis 18 and 19 together, the picture begins to fall into place, and the contrast between Lot and Abraham becomes more obvious. Abraham entertained strangers in the comfort of his home and the Lord blessed him with a promise that would seal his name in history for ever as the father of a nation and an example of faith. He went on to take advantage of his blessing by bargaining with the Lord. God had said that He would destroy Sodom, and yet Abraham argued with Him both as a way of interceding for his nephew Lot, and to see whether the righteousness of a few in the city might save others. Abraham however was looking too far ahead, though his prayers were indeed sufficient to save Lot and the remnants of his once large family, as we have read.

If we now compare Abraham and Lot, then we learn a great deal not about faith and righteousness as we do with Abraham, but we learn from the story of Lot about the human failing of rejecting these things. Lot began with all the advantages that came from being a part of God's chosen extended families, and yet he chose to embrace the things of the world that spiritually drew him towards sin.

In the story of our passage today, Lot gives us an example of the awful power of prevarication, the rule of human ambition and desire, and of covetousness and regret. Having endured a torrid night of commotion and verbal abuse at the hands of the very people he sought to befriend, Lot was reluctant to leave the city he loved even at the last, and had to be dragged away (19:16), arguing with his visitors. Later, he delayed when he needed to 'run for his life' (19:17) and spoke at length to try and persuade the angelic messengers who had just saved him, hoping to avoid going to the hills and gain permission to go with his small family to yet another city, the small city of Zoar (19:20-22). He was quite unwilling to follow instructions, even in peril, driven by the desire to get back to the sinful city life he loved and avoid the hills he feared. He even had to be told to hurry in doing this (19:21) and his delays cost him dear, for his wife glanced back to the destruction behind and was herself overcome by its power. It is well known that she consequently became a 'pillar of salt', and the result of Lot's encounter with God's messengers was a brush with death.

After the terror of the fateful day, Abraham rose the next morning and surveyed the scene (19:27-29). We are struck not so much the visual impact of destruction, but the unique nature of the very last verse of this text. After all the bargaining, God destroyed Sodom because there were no righteous people left in it.

However, Abraham's intercession had been sufficient for the salvation of one sinner, his nephew Lot and his two daughters.

Going Deeper

- Escape from Sodom
- Lot's prevarication and manoeuvring
- Judgement

Looking further into the text, we will need to assess Lot's actions and why he said what he did. He was certainly in a perilous position. Whereas Abraham had bargained with God (18:22f) for the citizens of Sodom and for Lot himself, now Lot bargained with the Lord's messengers for his own life and future, reluctant to follow their advice to the letter. It is a fascinating story.

Escape from Sodom

On the morning of the catastrophe, the angels implored Lot to take his wife and two daughters away from the city 'as dawn drew near' (19:15), in other words, before the sun came up. Escape is always easier under the cover of darkness! From this point in the story, Lot showed an amazing ability to fly in the face of reality, blinded by his overwhelming desire to hold on to his own choice and not be told what to do. When Abraham gave him the choice of where to go, back in the days when he had copious flocks and abundant wealth (Genesis 13) he chose according to his own perceived benefit, selecting for his own flocks the prime land and leaving Abraham with the barren hillside. There was a fundamental difference between his choosing to 'have it easy' and Abraham's acceptance of the harsher life of the hills, which was symbolic of the spiritual growth of both of them. Abraham was still on a journey of faith with a considerable future, but the self-satisfied ease of Lot's life had so separated him from God that he was unable to follow the simplest of directions properly when his life and that of his family were at stake.

Lot's prevarication and manoeuvring

Lot had accepted the angelic strangers as honoured guests into his house the night before. He had also been prepared to sacrifice his daughters to the mob in order to defend them (19:8ff), but he was not prepared to listen to them or do what they told him to do, even though he must have known they came from God, given the signs they performed (the blindness of the mob – 19:11). This kind of irrational unbelief characterises the whole story of Lot's removal from Sodom; the strangers having to pull them from their house before dawn (19:16), and his doubts that he could reach the safety of the hills (19:20), for example. Why would he doubt the word of those who had just saved him who told him to go straight there? It is a complete exposé of Lot's motives that he delayed, giving a falsely humble speech with a request to do what he wanted (19:18,19,20), when he should have wasted no time in fleeing to the hills as he was told, and the only reason Lot spoke was because he did not want to leave behind the city life. He pleaded to go to a small city near Sodom called Zoar (also called Bela – see 14:2; also, in Hebrew there is a word-play on the name of this city, for Zoar simply means 'small'). Lot's words ridiculously suggest that a little city would not be as bad as a big city! (v20).

The strangers exhibited the patient mercy of God who, having decided to save Lot after the intercession of Abraham, would not go back on His own word, and continued to both accept Lot and save him even after this utterly incredulous display of self-centredness (19:21). This great mercy was met by the completely ungrateful behaviour of Lot in requesting Zoar. Would he ever take the commands of God seriously once he had negotiated his own way in the midst of a crisis? In all this, we can see a slippery slope of unrighteous behaviour that would come to its fruition when Lot and his small family unit lost all sense of morality in the final story of Genesis 19 (30-38).

Judgement

Lot made his request in the nick of time. The rising of the sun was considered the time for judgement in many ancient civilisations, some of which believed that the sun was a god of justice. In the Bible, the dawn of the day meant that light came into the darkness to dispel it (see Gen 1:2ff) and there was plenty of the darkness of evil in the events that had happened the night before in Sodom. So, with the sunrise, judgement came in the form of a heavenly firestorm, perhaps together with an earthquake. It is quite reasonable to imagine earthquakes in that region of the lower 'rift valley', but whatever the scientific reality of such events, God was the one who commanded the earth He had made to bring this judgement at this time. Certainly, the fire following any such would have been extensive given the bitumen pits known to be in the area (14:10).

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and no discoveries or excavation have found their site to this day. The word used in Hebrew for this work of God is 'overthrow' or 'overturn', which is a stronger form of the word we might use for 'repentance'. God 'turned things around' by a radical destruction of the cities and their

evil; cities whose reputation continued to influence writers through the Old Testament period for years (see Deut 29:23; 32:32; Isaiah 1:9,10; Jer 23:14; Ez16:46 etc.) In this way, God returned the land to its original state, so that what Lot had seen earlier as a lush green pasture land sufficient for his cattle (13:10) and 'like Egypt', was now scorched earth (19:25) with all the vegetation and crops destroyed.

Once the sun had risen and the sulphur and fire was destroying the cities, who could resist the sight of such a catastrophe? Certainly, Abraham came to have a look from the hills (19:28). However, Lot and his family received strict instructions by the strangers not to 'look back'. This simple command was a test, of course, of Lot and his family. Would he be obedient now the evidence of the destruction was raining down around him? Lot survived but only just in time, for when his wife, traditionally assumed to be a citizen of Sodom, turned to see what was happening to her city, she was consumed by the destruction (19:26). Tour guides to this day around the Dead Sea show people salted rock formations and tell them that this is 'Lot's wife', but do they just substitute a lie for a spiritual reality? Lot's wife, whatever happened to her, and however she is described, turned back towards her past life at a critical moment when the future was essential, not the past. She has fixed in human memory the failure not of learning from the past (which is the study of history, of course), but of hankering for it when the evidence of our eyes demands that we must deal with the present and the future. It is a powerful image.

Discipleship

Application

When Abraham looked down on the scene later that day (19:29) and saw the smoke rising from the ground, his thoughts must have been complex. He had pleaded with the Lord to save the city and its sinners, and his prayers had not been enough, yet he realised that God had been at work through what had been done. It is probable that Abraham did not know what had happened to Lot that morning, and he would have discovered this later and reflected on this once he knew what had happened. Certainly Abraham had saved Lot not once (14:13-16) but twice; firstly through military intervention and secondly through prayer (18:23-33). For us, this raises a question about how often we try to help someone who keeps 'falling' in their faith, and whether some people, like Lot, do not stay true to God's will because their hearts are always attentive to their own desires or elsewhere.

This text seems to indicate that from earliest times, God attempts to save such people, and surely, this ministry is extended in Christ (e.g. Matt 9:13). This passage is one scriptural reason why I, personally, find that the mainstream church's rigid position on the unrepeatable nature of baptism is totally devoid of pastoral sense and human reality, and is an unsustainable 'counsel of perfection'. The repeated grace of God to Lot is surely available today in Christ, whether a sinner responds or not. We must accept that people come to church, know something of God and even receive some of His blessings, but sometimes like Lot, go their own way. The Grace of God demands that we help save such people through our prayers as well as our actions; and the Lord alone will judge them, as He does us.

Another strong hint from today's passage is that when God sends his visitors to us as strangers, then we need to pay attention to what they say. It is all very well 'entertaining angels unawares' (Heb 13:2), but we must do what they tell us, for it is one important way that God uses to bring us His Word. If we prevaricate, or fail to listen then we behave like Lot; more interested in our own life choices than what the Lord has for us.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss why God should save Lot, given that he demonstrated a desire to return to the city life that tempted him away from God?
2. Does the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah itself hold any particular message for today, or is the spiritual significance of it locked in the past?
3. Discuss what you imagine Abraham may have thought as he surveyed the scene of destruction.

Discipleship challenges

- *Think back through your life and consider whether the story of Lot makes you think of anyone in particular? Or does Lot remind you of yourself? Spend a period of time praising God for the greatness of His power and majesty in saving people like Lot, and for saving you!*

- *What great catastrophes are happening in the world around us now and why does God allow such things to take place? What do they mean? If God's judgement is not expressed in events like this today, then how are His judgements made known to us?*
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Final Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus, for Your grace has proved gloriously sufficient for all our spiritual needs. You have stayed with us on difficult paths; ministered to our broken hearts; received our worship when we lifted You in praise; and guided us through troubled times. We praise You, Lord Jesus. AMEN
