

When God saves you, don't fight it!

Genesis 19:1-29

What. A. Passage! What we've just heard from Genesis is a pretty wild part of the Bible, and there is so much we could talk about here—so much that is just begging for commentary and explanation—and so I'm ditching my introduction and just getting straight into it. To help us get a grip on what's happening here I'm going to follow three thematic threads that weave throughout the story: *Sin*, *Salvation*, and *Sanctification*. Thinking about these three themes will help us understand what's going on and will help us see why this story is still relevant for us today

We'll begin at ch19 where two angels of God arrive in Sodom to take stock of the city. Lot is sitting at the city gate and he's quick to offer hospitality. The angels initially refuse this offer, but notice that Lot doesn't want to take *No* for an answer, verse 3 he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Why was Lot so insistent? Was he a man who just really enjoyed entertaining others? Was he a man who was very mindful on ancient expectations of hospitality? I think perhaps it was also because he knew what would happen if these men slept out in the open. Sodom was a town where a particular way-of-life had established itself, and we see this culture in all it's horrifying ugliness in vs 4-5. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house.⁵ They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."

What was the *sin* of Sodom? This is a question that many scholars have argued over, but maybe it's more accurate to speak of the *sins* of Sodom – there's more than just one! The angels have arrived to take a look, let's have a read of the report card that they would have issued.

First of all, there's a lack of hospitality. You'll remember how hospitable Abraham was towards his three visitors in ch 18. Lot seems to have learnt a thing or two from his uncle and he shows the same kind of hospitality. In contrast, the men of Sodom see these visitors not as guests to be honored but as victims to be abused. That's the first area of sin that we see. What else do we have?

Well, earlier on in the story, in chapter 18:20, one of Abraham's visitors says to him The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know. Notice that word: *outcry*. These cities were leaving behind a trail of victims. Elsewhere in the Bible, in Ezekiel 16, Sodom is described as being arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and the needy. Whatever they were doing, they were taking advantage of people; the strong were taking advantage of the weak. So that's a second black mark against their name.

And finally we arrive at the sin that is most striking in this passage, the sexual sin that is described there in the verses we've just read. The men of Sodom were so depraved that the sexual assault of these two visitors was not attempted in secret, but rather it was carried out—can you believe it—as a community activity. And yes, the sinfulness of this action was not only due to it being an assault, but also because it was between members of the same sex.

It's a pretty bad report card that this city receives. Modern commentators will often pick on just one sinful aspect: some might say the issue was simply one of a lack of hospitality, on the other hand, some people see the gay sex and can't see anything else. The truth is that if the people of Sodom could find a way to sin then they'd take it. If you wanted to reduce Sodom's wickedness to a single concept then perhaps you could say that they were guilty of excessive self-interest. Looking to fill their own desires no matter the cost to others.

God's response is pretty decisive. The men warn Lot in verse 12 Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, ¹³ because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it. The message is clear: God hates Sodom's sin, and so he's going to wipe it from the map.

Heeding the warning of the Angels, Lot pleads with his Sons-in-law in verse 14, but they thought all this talk of judgment was a big joke! We get a similar response today don't we? *God isn't going to judge sin! How ridiculous!* But as the story unfolds we see that the judgment of God is no laughing matter, v24 Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. ²⁵ Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. In verse 27 Abraham returns to the place where he had stood before the LORD. ²⁸ He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.

It's a frightening image, the picture of a land being swallowed up by fire. It's an image that some of us here in Australia have seen up close. When a bushfire gets hold there is no way you can outrun it. People who have been close to that force of nature and who've survived describe the deafening roar and the lightning speed with which a fire moves and the Bible uses this imagery to bring home just how inescapable and just how destructive God's judgment will be.

But whenever you find God's judgment, you also find his salvation. God never judges without pairing it with some form of salvation. If Sodom embodies sin at its worst and judgment at its most frightening, then what happens to Lot embodies salvation at its most remarkable.

I wonder what you think of Lot? Is Lot a good man or is he a disappointing man? Let's have a vote: Put your hand up if you think he's a good man? A disappointing man? There are moments where it could go either way. On one hand he's a hospitable man who is obviously concerned about the welfare of his guests.

And he clearly tells the men of the city that their intentions are evil No my friends, don't do this wicked thing! he pleads in verse 7. Our NT passage picks this distress that Lot exhibits over the sin of his city, In 2 Peter 2:8 Lot's described as being tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard. So, on one hand, Lot seems like a good man!

But then on the other hand, we do end up asking ourselves why Lot is living in this place. From the beginning of the Abraham story Lot has caused us to be nervous. In chapter 13 we were told that he pitched his tent *near* Sodom, a city that was sinning grievously against God. Now he is living *in* Sodom, and not only that but he appears to be in a position of eldership within the town; sitting at the city gate where elders would sit. Like a moth to a flame Lot as allowed himself to be drawn nearer and nearer to a city that's not much better than a festering sore on the landscape. Not a great life decision.

And then there's the matter of Lot offering up his daughters to the men of the town. What on earth is all that about? There are many interpretations and explanations of verse 8; I've read plenty! I'll give you two of the best. First of all, it's possibly a sign that Lot had stooped to a point where he was no better than the townsfolk around him; as he drew near and nearer to this city he finally arrived at a point where he was indistinguishable from his neighbors. We are meant to be repulsed by what we read because Lot himself has become repulsive. That's the first interpretation.

The second possibility is that Lot is lying; that he doesn't intend to hand his virgin daughters over because he doesn't have any! This interpretation is dependent on a particular reading of verse 14. Have a look at it there, do you notice the footnote? The main text says that his sons-in-law were *pledged to be married*, but the verse could just as easily be read as *were married*. And if they were already married, then they weren't virgins, and they weren't even in the house! If verse 14 is meant to be taken in this second way, and at least one scholar I read is convinced that it is, then it seems that Lot is trying to buy some time as he works out what's next.

So this horrendous offer is either evidence of Lot's deplorable sinfulness or evidence of a desperate measure to deal with the sinfulness of the city he has chosen to live in. Either way, Lot doesn't come across as a man who is perfect. And that tells us a lot about the nature of God's salvation. Why does God bother with Lot? He just seems like lost cause. The answer is in verse 16 When Lot hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them. When God chooses to save someone, it isn't because they've managed to prove themselves worthy of his attention, it's not because they've earned the right to be offered something special like we might earn the right to a job promotion. Salvation comes when God decides to be merciful despite our hopelessness. And that's good news, because everyone is a little bit attracted to life in Sodom. You may not be surrounding the houses of your neighbors demanding to have sex with their house-guests, but we all make decisions that are fuelled by self-interest.

But the Bible says that we worship a God who is rich in mercy, and just like these two angels came to save Lot from the wrath of God, so too Jesus has come to save us from that very same judgment. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 describes Jesus as the one who saves us from the coming wrath. Has he come to save you? I think if you're hearing this message and you are not laughing like Lot's sons-in-law were laughing, then perhaps the answer is that God is trying to pull you out of harm's way. Will you accept his offer? Will you accept the death of Jesus as a death that receives God's judgment in your place, because that's how Jesus saves us from this judgment, he receives it in our place.

Some of you have already accepted this. We've just finished running our latest Christianity Explored course and one of the aims of that course is to get people to the point where they receive this salvation. At the end of our last course there was a feeling of "What next?" Well, after Lot receives his salvation, he gives us a good example of what *not* to do next.

A tsunami of judgment is about to wash through the whole valley at dawn and so during the night Lot has to move quickly; grabbing those family members who'll listen and the running to the hills. *Hurry* he says to his sons-in-law, *Hurry* say the angels to him. Things are moving quickly, but then in v16 Lot hesitates! "Do I really want to go? Do I really want to give up Sodom?" We think "What are you doing Lot!" Which is what the angels would have said as they pulled his arm. And then, as they are trying to make the hills before the great disaster, Lot starts whining that the hills are too far. Can't I stay in this little town here? It's not very big, is it? It's a bit of a pathetic request, as if size has anything to do with anything. We're left with the impression that Lot is still feeling an attraction to his old city; the love of Sodom is a love that he's finding pretty hard to overcome. Yes, God has saved him, but it's as if he is trying to fight that salvation.

This story illustrates the struggle of sanctification. Sin, Salvation, and now our third thread, Sanctification. Sanctification is simply the act of being set apart. When God saves us he wants us to start standing out from the world, his desire is for us to be sanctified, to be different from the world around us. We find this theme is all the way through the Bible. The apostle Peter describes Christian believers as aliens and foreigners; we stand out from the people around us. The Apostle Paul says in Colossians 3:2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. Sometimes that involves taking the advice in the angels in v17 when they start begging Lot's family Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away! Paul has the same advice in 1 Cor 6:18 Flee from sexual immorality.

What is it that we might need to flee from? Well, as we've just heard in these NT verses and as we see in Genesis 19, it's clear that the misuse of sex is something that a saved person should resist. We live in a world that celebrates the misuse of our sexuality, and so it's not easy to stand out as people who understand sex as something for men and women who are married. It's not easy to live that way when our own desires are so strong. God does promise to be with us though, temptations

are never so strong that we can't resist them. Remember the lesson from last week, Nothing is impossible for God, he can even strengthen us to maintain purity when desire is strong.

And remember again that sex wasn't the only problem for Sodom; they had other sins that Lot needed to resist. When I was thinking through this sermon I was struck by Sodom's description in Ezekiel 16, how they were unconcerned with the poor and needy. And I thought, "yeah that could be a danger for me too" And I thought about Toys and Tucker, and how it's very easy for me to not participate. Australians have a very poor record when it comes to charitable giving, and so again, if we have accepted God's offer of salvation, then each one of us, me included, will be standing out from the rest by acting generously.

What the flight from Sodom teaches us is that you can't have a foot in both camps; you can't say to God, "Sure, I'll accept Jesus, but I'm going to hold on to my sin". There is no salvation when our hearts remain divided, when we say we accept Jesus but are willing to deny him with our actions. This is not saying you need to be perfect. Lot isn't perfect, but he makes a decision that he doesn't want to die, and so he does choose salvation over sin. His wife makes a different decision, she has the offer of salvation but turns back to Sodom, and so she too is caught up in the disaster that falls upon that city. Saved people must learn to let go of sin.

When I was in preaching school we were told that a good sermon will boil down a passage of Scripture to single big idea. I've found it really hard to reduce this story down into one idea because there's so much in it. But here's what I think the big idea is: *Like Lot, we must respond to God's offer of salvation.* Not only should we *accept* the offer in the first place, but we should continue to *respect* that offer by rejecting those sins that we've been saved from. Genesis 19 is a classic gospel story, the same story that we find repeated all the way through the Bible, a story that's told in three stages: sin, salvation, sanctification. In his own imperfect way, we see Lot moving through each stage. Which stage are you at? What's your next step going to be?