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The Failed Witness of Compromise

Genesis 19:1-38

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Fire and brimstone! That's what comes to our minds when we think about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. We think of the evil men of Sodom and God raining down fire from heaven in punishment. And if we're honest I think we'd all admit that when we hear this story our first gut response is probably to feel a little bit of satisfaction at the destruction of such evil people, but once that settles down, we might start contemplating our own sins and questioning whether or not we might just deserve a little bit of that fire and brimstone ourselves. Other people might read this story and become indignant, thinking that a just God wouldn't dare do such a horrible thing. The men and women of Sodom may have been sinners, but who isn't? No one deserves that kind of destruction! So the thinking goes.

As we saw last week in Chapter 18, as Abraham interceded for the people of Sodom, God's judgement was just. The sins of these evil cities cried out to God from the earth for justice. We saw that there was no one left in them who was righteous. And as Abraham interceded for Sodom, we were reminded that for those whom God has chosen, called, and redeemed, our mission is to pray for and to share God's gracious message of hope with the fallen world around us. God has judged sin and sin will be punished, but Jesus Christ came that by faith men and women might be spared God's just judgement and be counted righteous on his behalf—through his cross and through his blood. And it's precisely because of his death and resurrection and because of the faith we have in Jesus' power to wash away our guilt that we have no reason to fear God's judgement. For unrepentant sinners, Genesis 19 is the story of

Sodom and Gomorrah and just judgement; it's a wakeup call. But, brothers and sisters, for those of us in Christ Jesus, Genesis 19 is the story of Lot; it's the story of a righteous man who, despite his righteousness, ultimately failed to do great things for God's kingdom.

Our lesson today is a long one, so let's get right to the text. Look at Genesis 19:1-3:

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth and said, "My lords, please turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the town square." But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

These are the two men who were with God when he visited Abraham. These are the two sent down to confirm the wickedness of the five cities of the plain—the two sent to fulfil God's later instruction that punishment in all capital cases required *two* witnesses. And they arrive at the gate. This was the place where the prominent men of the city would gather to do business. It tells us something about Lot's status in Sodom: he was a prosperous and respected man of the town.

And it says something that it's Lot who offers these men hospitality. Hospitality was sacrosanct in a world where there were no hotels or rooms to rent. Travellers relied on the hospitality of strangers for their own safety. And yet when these two men arrive at the city gate, amongst the prosperous leaders of the city, only Lot—a resident alien—approaches them and offers to wash their feet, feed them, and give them a bed for the night. They turn him down, saying that they'll simply sleep in the street. But Lot knew the wicked men of Sodom and knew sleeping outdoors wasn't safe, so he presses his hospitality on them more strongly. In

response, Lot "pressed them strongly". Eventually he persuades them to spend the night in his home. And like Abraham, he prepares a generous feast for them. At bedtime the trouble starts.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them." Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door down. But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the entrance of the house, both small and great, so that they wore themselves out groping for the door. (Genesis 19:4-11)

Here's the indictment of the city. We already know that God's judgement is inevitable because we know that there is no one righteous left amongst the men of Sodom. Here we have the proof: the men of Sodom, the young and the old, down to the last man gathered around Lot's house with the intent to gang rape the two visitors. Between what Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel tell us about Sodom we know that these men were also known for their adultery, their dishonesty, their arrogance, and their oppression of the poor and needy, but what we see here is the worst of the worst. In Romans St. Paul presents homosexuality as the last step on the human path away from God:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their

thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator....

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:21, 24-27)

God sent his witnesses to confirm the depravity of Sodom and what they find there proves that these men aren't simply casual sinners, they aren't people who generally do good, but sometimes miss the mark. No, they've run the course of rejecting God—to the last man—and have become practised and studied in their pursuit of evil.

Lot, still the good host and showing himself a man of courage, goes outside himself to confront these men. He even closes the door behind him. He puts himself in very real danger. And as he goes out to speak to these men I he brings to mind the proverb that a soft answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1). He greets these men as his brothers and he reminds them that he's taken on the responsibility of caring for the two visitors. And yet as much as Lot does the right thing, we wonder: How can he call these evil men his "brothers"? What's he got himself into here in Sodom? And as much as he understands the sanctity of his hospitality, what about his family? In desperation he offers his virgin daughters to the gang that his guests might be spared. What we see is that by having thrown his lot in with the men of Sodom, Lot's now put himself in a position in which every one of his options is wrong. It isn't right to hand over his guests, but it isn't right to hand over his daughters either. It highlights

the point that all this is happening because he associated himself with these wicked people. Had he never moved to Sodom he wouldn't be stuck with these evil choices.

In the end it's the two men—the two messengers or angels—who come to Lot's rescue. As the crowd gets ready to have their way with Lot, these two men open the door, pull him into the house, and strike the crowd with blindness.

Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up! Get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city." But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting. (Genesis 19:12-14)

Again, the storyteller underscores the point that there wasn't a single righteous man left in Sodom. Lot goes to his sons-in-law—probably betrothed, since his daughters were still virgins living in his own home—but they take his warnings to be a joke in bad taste. This also underscores Lot's compromises. He may be "righteous", but he hasn't simply connected his business with the evil men of Sodom, he's preparing to yoke his own family to this evil. He recognises God's warning and he's willing to follow God's leading, but we'll see that his compromises in life have led to the loss and corruption of his own family. In contrast, think of Abraham, who was called to circumcise his sons on the eighth day and to teach them the faith by raising them as full members of God's covenant community. Lot has not only abandoned the blessing that came through association with his uncle, Abraham, but now he's ready to marry his own daughter to ravaging wolves!

You might think that having heard the warning, Lot would be running for the hills to escape God's wrath. But that's

not what happened. Apparently after all this he goes off to bed for the night. The storyteller next shows us the messengers rousing Lot from his sleep.

As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city." (Genesis 19:15)

You would think this would be enough to get Lot moving, but it's not.

But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city. And as they brought them out, one said, "Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away." And Lot said to them, "Oh, no, my lords. Behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Behold, this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!" He said to him, "Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. Escape there quickly, for I can do nothing till you arrive there." Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar. (Genesis 19:16-22)

Destruction is coming and Lot "lingers". The two men literally have to manhandle Lot out of the city and when he refuses to make a run for it they have to plead with him: "Escape for your life! Escape to the hills or you'll be swept away!" And instead of running—in the face of his own impending doom—Lot stands there and whines that the hills are too far away. He looks to the little town of Zoar in the distance and asks God to compromise his justice and spare that little city—another city just like Sodom and just as deserving of destruction—so that he can find safety there rather than the hills. The fact is that the hills were

closer than Zoar. It wasn't that Lot couldn't make it to the hills, it's that he didn't want to give up his city life. And so he asks God to spare Zoar for his sake—to spare Zoar from a just destruction so that he can keep living the good life, once again throwing his lot in with a bunch of evil people.

What's amazing is that God is gracious. For the sake of this one righteous man, God promises not to destroy Zoar, but he warns Lot: Flee for your life, don't return, and don't stop! And so finally Lot and his family run for the safety of Zoar.

The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. (Genesis 19:23-26)

As the men had promised, as soon as Lot reached Zoar the destruction began. And yet in the flight Lot's wife was lost. What happened to her? The Hebrew says that she "looked back", but the point isn't that she was condemned for looking back over her shoulder, but that she directed her attention away from following Lot. She stopped running and went back to Sodom. Jesus explains it this way in Luke 17:

Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. *On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife.* (Luke 17:28-32)

I can picture Lot and his family running toward Zoar, escaping with nothing but

the clothes on their backs, but as she starts to wheeze from the effort and thinking about everything she's left in Sodom, Lot's wife stops. She calls out after Lot: "You're a fool, Lot! I'm not running all the way to Zoar. I'm not taking one more step. I'm going home. I'll see you in a couple of days when you come to your senses!" She didn't break God's command simply by looking at something that wasn't supposed to be seen—the destruction hadn't started, after all, and if they were running toward Zoar, they would have seen at least one or two of the other cities anyway. No, she was destroyed because she returned and threw her lot in with the wicked.

This might explain the statement that she turned into a pillar of salt. We can only speculate as to exactly what happened in the destruction of these cities. There were tar pits throughout the region and thanks to the sea itself, the mineral salts there were full of sodium, potash, magnesium, calcium chloride, and bromide. Had God caused an earthquake these chemicals might have ignited in huge explosions, leaving fire, burning tar, and noxious chemicals to rain down on the cities. The people who weren't burned, but instead engulfed by the falling destruction just might be described as being something like pillars of salt.¹ Again, this shows us another of the consequences of Lot's having associated himself and his family with the wickedness of Sodom. His wife had become enamoured of its evil and even when given a gracious avenue of escape, she rejected God. She turned her back on him and ran back to her sin. She gave a clear witness to her true loyalties and was destroyed along with the wicked.

Whatever it was that happened, we know it was utterly devastating as we look at verses 27 to 29, which give us the view from Abraham's perspective:

And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had

¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000), p. 51.

stood before the LORD. And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.

So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived. (Genesis 19:27-29)

But Lot's story doesn't end with him escaping to Zoar. The text doesn't say why, but Lot eventually leaves Zoar behind. We have no reason to think that Zoar was any less sinful than Sodom. Maybe he finally learned his lesson about associating with evil. Maybe as he saw Zoar's evil he became afraid that God would eventually destroy it, just as he had Sodom.

Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose.

The next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-ammi. He is the father of the

Ammonites to this day. (Genesis 19:30-38)

Lot's daughters became desperate. There they were, the daughters of a wealthy and prosperous man who had made it big in Sodom, but now he's a pauper living in a cave in the middle of a post-apocalyptic nightmare. They probably thought they were the last people on earth. They had no sons and therefore they had no future. And in their desperation they do the unthinkable: they get their father falling-down-drunk and then incestuously use him to impregnate themselves. The storyteller absolves Lot. They plied him with wine and he had no idea what he was doing. And yet he's not fully absolved. He lost his wife because he had compromised his righteousness by associating with the wickedness of Sodom. Now he loses his dignity thanks to the corruption of his daughters by that same wickedness. This is as low as it gets. I know many Christian parents who worry that their teenage daughters might get pregnant before they're married. But no father ever dreams that his unmarried daughters might do to him what Lot's daughters did. It just doesn't get worse than where Lot finds himself.

And yet in the end, we have to remember that Lot was credited as being righteous. St. Peter refers to him as "righteous Lot" (2 Peter 2:7). He walked before God. We see him hesitating at times. We see God's messengers have to manhandle him onto God's path. But despite his stumbles and his failure, Lot maintained his faith in the God whose business it is to graciously redeem sinners. But, brothers and sisters, Lot serves as a warning: Don't make it your goal to get into heaven by the skin of your teeth. None of us can ever deserve heaven on our own merit. It's only through Jesus and his righteousness that we can ever stand before God. Nevertheless, make it your goal to walk as closely with God as you can.

Lot shows us the dangers of compromising our walk of faith. First, he compromised his witness. God speaks to the world through his people.

The world listens to us when it sees God at work in our lives. And yet when Lot warned his sons-in-law, they took his warning as a bad joke. They didn't see God in Lot. They saw someone just like themselves. Because of Lot's compromises, he lost his wife, who refused to follow God's warning, and returned to what she thought of as the "good life" in Sodom. And finally, Lot lost his own dignity because his daughters were so steeped in the worldliness of Sodom that they thought it would be a good idea to get pregnant through incest with their father.

Friends, compromise is easy. It so often looks good—sometimes it even looks necessary. As Lot looked out over that valley, he saw lush pasturelands, he saw prosperous cities—he saw the good life. And yet if you were to look over that valley today, you'd see a desert and a sea that they call "dead" for good reason. Evil often looks good, but in the end it leads only to destruction. Evil may not lead a Christian to eternal destruction, but it can still destroy our earthly lives, our earthly families, and our earthly witness. It is because of our compromises with evil that we are so often ineffective in doing the work of God's kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, we need to examine our own lives and ask where we're being like Lot. Where are hesitating to follow God? In what areas have we come to look so like the world that the people around us no longer see God in us. In our culture it's often in our insecurity, in our materialism, and in our consumerism. And consider how compromise influences our families, especially our children. We baptise our children that, like Abraham raising his sons, they might grow up in the faith of God's covenant community, but how often do confuse our message? Do we teach them the materialism and insecurity that so often infects our own lives? Do we teach them compromise with the world's sins? Do we undermine their seedling faith by demonstrating to them that God is a lesser priority in our lives? Maybe we're slack in teaching them the faith or maybe we're too frequently straying

from the gatherings of the Church because of worldly activities.

Dear friends, let us not compromise our faith as Lot did. Let us not squeak into heaven. Instead, let us live in this world as the people of God, strong in faith, strong in witness, strong in love and good works, that everyone who sees us might ask: How do you live so differently? And that our families, and especially our children, might grow up living strong in the legacy of faith we have left for them.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, keep us always mindful that it is by faith in your grace, not by our works that we are saved from our sins, but remind us too that we are called to love and good works as evidence of our faith. Strengthen our faith that we might never hesitate to follow where you lead us and that our love and good works might always shine as a beacon, drawing men and women to your kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.