

Genesis 18:20–33 — Abraham Standing Before the Lord: Intercession, Sodom, and the Contrast with Lot

Bible Study · Genesis 18

I Will Go Down and See — God's Patience and the Ripening of Iniquity

Genesis 18:20–21 must not be read as if God were expressing ignorance. He had just said in verse 19, For I know him. A God who knows Abraham so intimately is not ignorant of what the men of Sodom are doing. In Genesis 13:13, when Lot first moved there, the text already noted: the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly. God knew then. He knows now. The expression I will go down and see communicates something else: the patience of God, and the carefulness of divine justice. God does not judge prematurely. The iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full in chapter 15; it would not be full for another four hundred years. Sodom's iniquity is now full. The cry has reached its height. And God, who knows everything, will still go down to see — so that in all eternity no one in hell will be able to say that God condemned without looking carefully. As at the great white throne in Revelation, where the book of life is opened even though no lost soul's name is in it, God will look one more time. So here.

The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin very grievous. The cry speaks of the nature of sin as something that rises before God, like the blood of Abel crying from the ground. Sin always leaves victims — hurt, sadness, loss — and the cry of that goes up. Wherever there is a crime, there is one who has suffered. Even men who do not know God invoke His name when they have been

wronged. God hears all of it. Sin cannot be hidden from God, and the accumulated cry of Sodom had reached the point at which judgment was due.

Abraham Stood Yet Before the Lord — the Posture of Intercession

Verse 22: the men turned their faces from thence and went toward Sodom, but Abraham stood yet before the Lord. That little word yet carries moral weight. Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. Eli was sitting when the news came that the ark had been taken. But Abraham stood yet before the Lord. In that standing posture, maintained in the Lord's presence, he was able to intercede for others with no concern for himself. Ephesians 6 speaks of having done all to stand — and it is from that standing position that the prayer of intercession goes out.

Abraham had understood what this was about. The question he raised in verse 23 — wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? — shows he knew the intention was to destroy Sodom. This was not a question about whether Sodom would be destroyed. He understood that judgment was coming; the question was about any righteous who might be within the scope of it. He was not interceding for the city; he was interceding for the righteous. That is the character of proper intercession. We do not pray that the Lord would not come and judge; we know that is His purpose and we enter into it. But we do pray for His interests, for the righteous, for souls that are His in a world under judgment.

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? — Genesis 18:25

The Six Intercessions — and the Question of Stopping at Ten

Abraham interceded six times, working from fifty down to ten, each time with greater hesitation and self-deprecation: let not the Lord be angry, I have taken upon me to speak, I who am but dust and ashes. He stopped at ten. There are those who note that six is one short of seven, the number of perfection, and ask whether this was a failure on his part — whether he should have gone one more

time and come down to one.

There is a thought that addresses this. Had he gone further and asked God to spare the city for one righteous man, and had God done so, the city would have gone on exactly as it had been. And then the judgment of Sodom — used repeatedly through the Old Testament, through Jude, through 2 Peter, through the New Testament, as the supreme example of divine judgment on the wicked — would never have served that purpose. God had determined to destroy Sodom, and it appears that Abraham, as the friend of God, had entered into that determination enough to know when to stop. He did not stop at five. He stopped at ten — the number connected with responsibility in scripture, the number of the Ten Commandments, the number of the law's requirement upon man. Sodom had utterly failed to answer to any responsibility before God. The ten were not there. And Abraham stopped.

The answer to Abraham's question — wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? — comes out in chapter 19. The Lord sent the two angels to Sodom to bring Lot out. The righteous were not destroyed with the wicked. The judge of all the earth did right.

The Contrast Between Abraham and Lot — Separation and the World

The contrast that unfolds across Genesis 18 and 19 between Abraham and Lot is drawn in bold relief for our instruction. Abraham is outside Sodom entirely, maintaining his pilgrim character in the heat of the day, sitting at the tent door. Lot is sitting in the gate — the place of judges and civic authority, embedded in the world's order. Abraham recognized the Lord in his three visitors and ran to meet them. Lot had to be pressured to take in the two angels, and even then he did not recognize them as angels. Abraham had a rich spiritual feast set before his divine guests — the fatted calf, the three measures of meal. Lot made a feast and

baked unleavened bread: a token of Christ was there, but only a token. The separated man has the fullness; the worldly man has a very little of Christ.

Abraham was so far from Sodom's influence that when the Lord revealed His purpose to him, he could stand before the Lord and intercede. Lot, when the angels told him to take his family and flee, lingered. They finally had to take him by the hand and pull him out. His heart was still there. His wife turned back and looked, and became a pillar of salt. His daughters had learned enough of Sodom to do what they did in the cave afterward. The world had gotten into Lot's family in ways that endured beyond Sodom's destruction.

There is an interesting note about when Lot first came into Abraham's company. It says he went with Abraham, and he went with Abraham — always as an attachment, a tag-along. When they separated, the secret of his heart came out immediately in the choice he made. We cannot just go along with someone; we have to make things our own. What is divine must be individually appropriated. And then there was Egypt: Abraham failed and went down to Egypt, but got out of Egypt. Egypt may never have gotten out of Lot's heart, because when he looked at the well-watered plain, he compared it to Egypt. Egypt — scripture's symbol for the world — had lodged itself in him.

The Sin of Sodom — and Greater Responsibility

The character of Sodom's sin is not hidden in Genesis 19. It is described plainly, and the word sodomite has entered every language as a consequence, being understood from ancient times to the present. Ezekiel 16 adds that pride and fullness of bread were also characteristic sins — self-sufficient luxury, independence from God, unthankfulness. These things go together: when men have full barns and no sense of need, moral corruption follows. But the primary sin for which Sodom was destroyed, and which the apostles cite in Jude and 2 Peter, is clear in the text.

The Lord Jesus warned in Matthew 11 that it will be more tolerable for Sodom in the day of judgment than for cities that rejected Him — for if His mighty works had been done in Sodom, it would have remained. Greater light brings greater responsibility. The Western world has had the gospel. The rejection of Christ in the very places where that gospel has gone out most fully will answer to a severer judgment than Sodom's. And the conditions that characterized Sodom are being openly promoted and institutionalized now, not merely tolerated — the word toleration is not sufficient, sanctioning is what is demanded. These things signal the nearness of God's judgment on the scene. Jude says that Sodom and Gomorrah lie there as an example, undergoing the judgment of eternal fire. The destruction of Sodom points forward to the judgment that the coming one will bring in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who obey not God and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. So much the more as we see the day approaching.