

## Chapter 12: The Covenant Remembrance of Abraham

*Genesis 19:1–29*

In Genesis 19, the rubber hits the road. No longer can anyone look at God's word to Abraham as though it were pie-in-the-sky, wishful thinking. Instead, God's word now rains down from the sky in the form of burning, sulfuric judgment on the wicked. If anyone has been tempted to keep God's word at arm's length, toying with the options of belief and unbelief, that time of leisurely consideration has come to an end. Now, only two questions remain: 1) On which side of God's word will you fall, whether saved by God's promises of grace, or swept away according to God's sentence of judgment? and 2) How will you live today in light of this impending judgment?

The wrath of God against the ungodliness of Sodom and Gomorrah, then, is more than an event in history. What happened against the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is a pattern that tells us something of the judgment that will come on the day of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus states twice that the judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah will be more bearable than the judgment that *he* will bring upon his return (Matt. 10:15; 11:24). Therefore, the urgent question of Genesis 19:1–29 is not ultimately about what happened to those cities, but about what will happen to us. Against the backdrop of God's righteous wrath, what hope do we have that God will save us? Furthermore, what value is our ministry if God wipes it all away on the day of his wrath? Genesis 19:1–29 gives us this answer: *God remembers the prayers of the righteous when he judges the wicked.*

### **The Grief: God Tests the Righteous (Gen. 19:1–11)**

Just as God promised, he visits Sodom to investigate the outcry that he heard against it (Gen. 18:21). In a very similar manner to the way that the three men approached Abraham at his tent, two angels now approach Lot at the gate of Sodom:

[1] 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 [2] 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." [3] 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. (Gen. 19:1–3)

Right away, we should recognize that this scene takes place "in the evening" (Gen. 19:1), while the encounter with Abraham took place "in the heat of the day" (Gen. 18:1). This is a stark "contrast of light and darkness," and, unlike the bright hopefulness of Abraham's hosting of the three men, this scene with Lot "is all confusion and ruin, moral and physical, ending in a loveless squalor which is

even uglier than the great overthrow of the cities.”<sup>1</sup> While we understood why Abraham alone rose to meet his visitors in his private tent, the narrative sets up an eerie feeling as Lot alone meets these men in the public gate of the city.<sup>2</sup> Where are the other men of the city? Sadly, the other men will arrive all too soon.

The fact that Lot is “sitting in the gate of Sodom” suggests to us that he is an influential “man of standing in Sodom.”<sup>3</sup> The gates were an important of the civil life of the city: “The gateway was the public square of the city where the elders sat, public meetings were held, and legal disputes were adjudicated.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that there are no other elders to greet the men with Lot, Lot goes out of his way to greet the men in nearly the same way that Abraham did: Lot bows down before them (Gen. 19:1) and encourages them to come to his house to wash their feet and to spend the night before rising up early the next morning to go their way (Gen. 19:2). Then, while Lot does not verbally offer the men a feast as Abraham did, Lot nevertheless prepares them a feast of unleavened bread, which the men eat (Gen. 19:3). In all these details, the author means for us to read these two narratives of Abraham’s hospitality and Lot’s hospitality as largely similar.

### Lot vs. Abraham

Nevertheless, there are at least four important differences between these two stories. These differences transform the many similarities between the two stories into a harsh dissonance. First, Abraham recognized the three men as an appearance of Yahweh himself, and when they arrived, he addressed Yahweh as “Lord” (*’adōnāy*; Gen. 18:3)—that is, as God. Here, Lot does not recognize that these men represent the presence of Yahweh, and so he addresses them using a slightly different form of the word: “My lords” or “sirs” (*’adōnay*; Gen. 19:2).<sup>5</sup> Second, the men immediately consented to Abraham’s offer, saying, “Do as you have said” (Gen. 18:5). Here, however, the angels initially decline Lot’s offer: “Now; we will spend the night in the town square” (Gen. 19:2). Even if this did not stand in contrast with Abraham’s encounter, the refusal would be odd on its own, since if “oriental convention dictated that one should offer strangers a bed for the night, it just as firmly dictated the acceptance of such offers (cf. 24:23, 54; Judg 18:2; 19:4–20).”<sup>6</sup>

Third, when the angels decline Lot’s invitation, Lot “presses them strongly” (Gen. 19:3). The same verb will appear when the men of Sodom “*press hard* against the man Lot” (Gen. 19:9).<sup>7</sup> In this context, however, the addition of the word “very” or “exceedingly” leads Gordon Wenham to suggest a translation of “manhandle.”<sup>8</sup> In part, Lot’s insistence begins a series of contrasts between his own behavior and the behavior of the angels.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Lot’s urging seems to reveal his concern for what might happen to these visitors if they remain in the town square.<sup>10</sup> Along the same lines, we come to the fourth difference in the two narratives: namely, the two feasts convey a very different tone. Abraham prepared the finest feast (Gen. 18:6–8) and had the leisure to wait while his visitors finished their meal (Gen. 18:8). Lot, on the other hand, provides his guests unleavened bread, which can be made quickly so that its presence suggests haste (cf. Ex. 12:39) that will carry through the rest of this story.<sup>11</sup> Something is rotten in the city of Sodom, and Lot’s nervous insistence betrays that he has a good idea of what may happen later that night.

### A Wicked Proposal

Word of these visitors spreads quickly around the city, drawing all the men of Sodom to gather around Lot’s house:

[4] 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. [5] And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” (Gen. 19:4–5)

The narrative is redundantly descriptive that this group includes all men, for we read that men of all ages (“both young and old”) and every single man (“all the people to the last man”) come on this night (Gen. 19:4).<sup>12</sup> When they arrive, they call to Lot, proposing their wicked plan: “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them?” (Gen. 19:5). What exactly are these men asking for, and why does the Bible condemn their request?

### God’s Word regarding Homosexuality

Without question, the Sodomites are asking for sexual relations with the visitors who have come to the city. While some have tried to make the case that the men of Sodom are simply asking to become acquainted (non-sexually) with these men, their case is entirely unpersuasive. The only explanation for why Lot commits his unimaginable crime of offering his own daughters for sex (Gen. 19:8) is that he is desperate to do anything to prevent his guests from being subjected to the depravity of the Sodomites. There is simply no way to sidestep the clear condemnation of homosexual behavior in this passage.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, we should also notice that the original request is almost certainly not for sexual assault, but for an orgy.<sup>14</sup> This is clear by the way that the men use the word “know” to describe their desires. The Hebrew word “know” describes sexual relations (e.g., Gen. 4:1, 25), but it never describes sexual assault. Instead, the Old Testament narratives and laws dealing with sexual assault use very specific words that we do not find here: “seized,” “lay with her,” and “humiliated her” (Gen. 34:2); “seizes” and “lies with her” (Deut. 22:25); “violated her” and “lay with her” (2 Sam. 13:14). In the later parallel passage in Judges 19, where *Israelites* commit the unspeakable crimes of the Sodomites, the man who corresponds to Lot by offering his daughter and another man’s concubine up explicitly for rape: “Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. *Violate them* and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing” (Judg. 19:24). The Benjaminite citizens of Gibeah focus from the start on sexual violence in a way that the men of Sodom do not. Therefore, Genesis 19 does not merely condemn homosexual rape, but homosexual relations in general.

Even if this general prohibition against same-sex sexual relations were not so clear here in Genesis 19, both the Old Testament (cf. Lev. 18:22; 20:13) and the New Testament (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) prohibit homosexual behavior.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, our culture largely defines what it means to be human along the lines of sexual expression. Therefore, where God draws boundaries in his word about where, when, and with whom human beings should enter into sexual intimacy, the world rejects that message as oppressive and bigoted. On the contrary, God both affirms and encourages sexual intimacy as a wonderful and powerful gift; indeed, he is the one who created sex as a *blessing* by which he calls us to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion” over all creation (Gen. 1:28). God does not try to keep us from sex, but only to warn us about ways that sex can be misused in astonishingly destructive ways. Any sexual activity that takes

place outside of a lifelong, covenant marriage union of one man and one woman is contrary to God’s design. Not even by redefining marriage to allow for same-sex unions can we change God’s will and his word on the subject. Instead, all such sexual behavior represents sinful rebellion against the Creator. Furthermore, all such sexual behavior harms us in a deeper way than other sins: “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). It is neither loving nor kind to encourage people to violate their own bodies in the pursuit of sexual gratification that clashes with God’s design and God’s will.

The gospel, however, promises both forgiveness and freedom from sins—including sexual sins. Neither pornography, nor fornication, nor adultery, nor homosexual behavior constitute unforgivable sins. God calls all of us to repent from our sins, whether those sins are large or small. God’s promise is twofold: (1) that the Lord Jesus Christ has already borne the curse for our sins on the cross, conquering them forever by his resurrection from the dead; and (2) that the Holy Spirit will do the work of transforming our hearts and desires to turn from sin and to love God more and more. Sanctification from sexual sins is notoriously difficult, but the gospel offers hope, forgiveness, and healing. If you are struggling in these areas, please bring your sins into the light by talking with the elders (1 John 1:5–7). We have resources to help you, and we want to walk with you in grace and accountability as you seek to mortify your sin and to present the members of your body as instruments of righteousness.<sup>16</sup>

### Lot vs. Sodom

We observed earlier that the narratives of Genesis 18 and Genesis 19 draw a contrast between Abraham and Lot. Here, we see another contrast between Lot and the men of Sodom:

[6] Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, [7] and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. [8] 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.” [9] 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. (Gen. 19:6–9)

Lot alone goes out to face the men, shutting the door after him (Gen. 19:6): “By shutting the door, he cut off his own escape and hoped to protect those inside.”<sup>17</sup> Lot clearly understands the intentions of the men of Sodom, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to protect his guests. To begin, he begs the men of Sodom not to act wickedly (Gen. 19:7). So far, so good.

After this point, however, Lot’s noble desire to protect his guests goes horrifically awry as he offers his two virgin daughters to the crowd (Gen. 19:8).<sup>18</sup> The rest of the testimony of Scripture stands against this proposal, just as we have observed that Scripture stands against homosexual behavior: “forcing a daughter into prostitution is specifically forbidden in Mosaic law (Lev 19:29).”<sup>19</sup> Even so, Lot here demonstrates yet one more similarity with his uncle Abraham, but this time the similarity is not positive. In this scene, we should see a reminder of how Abraham threatened the safety of a woman for the sake of a man back in Genesis 12:10–20: “There Abraham placed Sarah at

the mercy of Pharaoh in the hopes of saving his own skin. Just as Sarah was not solicited either for approval or disapproval for her part in her husband's proposed ruse, so the daughters of Lot are not consulted by their father about their willingness to be substitutes for the messengers in Lot's house."<sup>20</sup> For Lot, however, this proposal will go much further than in Abraham's case. In a grotesque irony, Lot himself will follow through with his own proposal later in Genesis 19:30–38 when Lot's daughters get him drunk in order to become pregnant by him.<sup>21</sup>

More shocking than the fact that Lot offers his daughters to these men is the fact that the men of Sodom reject his offer. Allen Ross writes, "Ironically, Lot offered them his daughters to do whatever seemed "good" (*tób*) in their eyes, but even this perverted good was rejected by those bent on evil."<sup>22</sup> To start, the Sodomites say, "Stand back!" using a word that means "to approach" or "to draw near"—in other words, they are telling Lot to get out of their way. This word is important, however, because it is the same root word used to describe the way in which Abraham "drew near" to Yahweh to intercede for the city of Sodom (Gen. 18:23). While Abraham drew near to Yahweh to pray for Sodom, the men of Sodom draw near to the messengers of Yahweh's presence to harm them.

Next, the Sodomites turn on Lot himself: "This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them" (Gen. 19:9). Note the special offense they take to the fact that Lot is only a *sojourner*: "A sojourner is one who lives, either permanently or briefly, among people to whom he or she is not related by blood."<sup>23</sup> In biblical law, God laid out special provisions for the protection of sojourners, so that to mistreat a sojourner was understood to be a terrible crime.<sup>24</sup> Instead of treating Lot, the sojourner well, the men of Sodom threaten to treat him even worse than what they had planned for the visitors: "They will take Lot himself as a substitute sex partner rather than his daughters."<sup>25</sup> Still, they have not lost interest in the visitors, so they "press hard" (cf. Gen. 19:3) against Lot, drawing near to break the door down (Gen. 19:9).

### Righteous Lot

In comparison with Abraham, Lot is an unrighteous fool. He does not recognize the angels as an appearance of Yahweh (Gen. 19:2; cf. Gen. 18:3), and he offers his own daughters to satisfy the lust of the crowd. All of this comes as the fruit of Lot's foolishness when he "moved his tent as far as Sodom" (Gen. 13:12).<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Lot did not only pitch his tents impermanently "as far as Sodom," but he more permanently began to establish his "dwelling in Sodom" (Gen. 14:12). After Yahweh destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, the towns will be described as "the cities in which Lot had lived" (Gen. 19:29).<sup>27</sup> Lot foolishly moved himself into a sinful city, and now he is entangled with its sin in a way that Abraham, who remains in Canaan, is not.

Nevertheless, in comparison with Sodom, Lot is one of the "righteous" for whom Abraham interceded in the last chapter. Peter explicitly says three times that Lot was righteous: "[7] ...and if he [God] rescued *righteous* Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked [8] (for as that *righteous* man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his *righteous* soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)..." (2 Pet. 2:7–8). These narratives portray the great pain for a righteous man to remain entangled in a wicked city—he stands in stark contrast with his fellow citizens of Sodom, and he stands in stark contrast with Abraham, who obediently follows the Lord wherever the Lord takes him.<sup>28</sup> Lot is simultaneously unrighteous *and* righteous.

From Lot's example, we learn God's grace toward the weakest believers, and we also hear a stern warning to keep ourselves from the depravity of the world. No matter how discouraged we may feel

by the difficulty of our uphill battle and by both the frequency and severity of our missteps along the way, the Lord encourages us to keep going. Fighting for holiness in an unholy world is worth it. Remember righteous Lot, who survived judgment by God’s grace in spite of his unrighteousness!

### The Rescue of Lot

Before the men of Sodom can harm Lot, the angels intervene to rescue Lot:

[10] But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door. [11] 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. (Gen. 19:10–11)

The line about how the men reach out their hands to bring Lot into the house is very similar to a story about another judgment of God against the wicked: “So [Noah] put out his hand and took [the dove] and brought her into the ark with him” (Gen. 8:9).<sup>29</sup> Noah sent the dove as an emissary to search for land after the judgment of the flood, and then Noah brought the dove back in after her unsuccessful attempt. In the same way, Lot went out to plead for righteousness in the midst of wickedness, and the men bring Lot back inside after his unsuccessful attempt. Then, just as Lot shut the door behind him to protect the men (Gen. 19:6), so now the men shut the door to protect Lot (Gen. 19:10). Again, this act of shutting in Lot for his protection echoes the story of Noah, since the same word describes how Yahweh “shut in” Noah with all the animals to protect them from the Flood (Gen. 7:16).<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Lot was unable to persuade the men of Sodom not to “act so wickedly” (Gen. 19:7), but the men effectively stop their evil intentions by striking all the men of Sodom with blindness (Gen. 19:11).<sup>31</sup> There is only one other place in the Old Testament where God strikes someone with this word for “blindness.” In 2 Kings 6:18, Elisha asks Yahweh to strike the Syrians with blindness, and then Elisha leads the Syrians directly into Samaria, where they are surrounded by the army of Israel. In that story, the blindness of the Syrians is not a total blindness, but something different: “The problem is not that they are blind, but that their vision is faulty—it does not correspond to reality.”<sup>32</sup> In the same way, it may be that the men of Sodom are still able to see, but that their vision is altered so that they are not able to get to the door (Gen. 19:11). Regardless, it is true that, as “elsewhere in Scripture (Isa 6:10; John 9), this physical blindness is probably symbolic of intellectual or spiritual blindness. The men of Sodom cannot see physically or spiritually where they are going.”<sup>33</sup> The judgment on Sodom has begun.

### The Grace: God Acquits the Righteous (Gen. 19:12–22)

Immediately, the angels work to extract any righteous (those for whom Abraham interceded) from the city:

[12] 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. [13] 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.” (Gen. 19:12–13)

The summons that the angels give is broad in its scope. Not only may relatives come with Lot, but also “anyone you have in the city” at all. The only requirement is that they come with Lot out of the city. As we will see, very few will respond to Lot’s call to flee the wrath to come (cf. Matt. 3:7). The consequences are real, for to stay in the city will mean death, but to flee the city will mean life. As John Calvin observes, “This place teaches us, that the angels are the ministers of God’s wrath, as well as of his grace.”<sup>34</sup> After witnessing the great wickedness of Sodom, the men are able to confirm the truth of the “outcry” (Gen. 19:13; cf. Gen. 18:20–21) of Sodom, so that they “pronounce sentence on behalf of the judge of all the earth.”<sup>35</sup>

### Lot’s Fruitless Evangelism

Lot does as he is told, urging his family to come with him out of the city: “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” (Gen. 19:14). Since Lot has told us that his daughters are still virgins (Gen. 19:8), the word for “sons-in-law” most likely refers to a formal, contractual betrothal, where “the marriages have not yet been consummated.”<sup>36</sup> While the sons-in-law of Noah do come onto the ark, Lot cannot similarly convince his own sons-in-law to come with him out of the city of Sodom.<sup>37</sup> We are only told that the sons-in-law believe that Lot is joking, although there are a variety of reasons that may have contributed to that belief.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the word for “jesting” is important, since this is the same Hebrew root word for “laughter,” the word that stands behind Isaac’s name.<sup>39</sup> The narrative connects the laughter of Abraham, Sarah, and Lot’s sons-in-law as all falling under the heading of astonishment and unbelief (to varying degrees). The Lord reaffirms his promises to Abraham and rebukes Sarah for their laughter, but the consequences for the laughter of Lot’s sons-in-law will be much more severe. While the angels explicitly say that the promises of salvation are *for* Lot’s sons-in-law, those family members fail to claim those promises by faith. As Derek Kidner observes, “The family’s solidarity in God’s eyes (cf. 7:1; 9:1; 17:9; 18:19) and the members’ freedom to defy it are both vivid realities here.”<sup>40</sup>

### Lot’s Cold Feet

Through all this, Lot himself does not sense the urgency of the matter:

[15] 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.” [16] 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. [17] 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.” [18] And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords. [19] 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. [20] 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!” [21] He said to him, “Behold, I grant

you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. [22] Escape there quickly, for I can do nothing till you arrive there.” Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar. (Gen. 19:15–22)

The next morning at dawn, time has expired. Great wickedness took place in the darkness of night, and now God’s righteous wrath will flood Sodom just as the light of the sun begins to flood the earth at daybreak.<sup>41</sup> Only Lot, his wife, and his two daughters “are here” (Gen. 19:15) and they will be the only ones able to be saved. The verb for “are here” is literally “found here,” which is the same verb Abraham used in his intercession for Sodom regarding the righteous “found” in the city” (Gen. 18:29–32).<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the warning of the angels (“lest you *be swept away* in the punishment of the city”; Gen. 19:15) uses the same language of Abraham in his initial complaint: “Will you indeed *sweep away* the righteous with the wicked?” (Gen. 18:23).<sup>43</sup> Without question, the salvation of Lot and his family takes place in direct response to the intercession of Abraham.

Even so, Lot *lingers* in Sodom (Gen. 19:16). He hypocritically urges his sons-in-law to leave the city, but he himself struggles to leave when the time comes.<sup>44</sup> Like Frodo’s inability to cast the despised ring of power into fires of Mount Doom in *Lord of the Rings*, Lot cannot to abandon Sodom wholeheartedly even to save himself. Sin has a way of entangling and gripping us, even when we are “greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked” and when this world is “tormenting [our] righteous soul over their lawless deeds that” we see and hear” (2 Pet. 2:7–8).<sup>45</sup> It is foolish and dangerous to underestimate the chokehold of sin in our hearts. What begins in disgust we will eventually cling to, regardless of the pain and danger it may bring. Thankfully, the two angels ignore Lot’s lingering, take him by the hand, and drag him and his family out of the city. The narrator gives us an explicit reason for doing this: “the LORD being merciful to him” (Gen. 19:16). God is merciful to Lot, even when Lot is not righteous to obey.

At this point, the angels repeat and intensify their instructions, urging them to escape for their lives, and explicitly instructing them not to look back or stop anywhere in the valley. There only hope is to escape to the hills, lest they be swept away (Gen. 19:17). At this point, Lot apparently realizes whom he is dealing with. Although the ESV translates Lot’s plea as directed toward “my lords” (Gen. 19:18; cf. Gen. 19:2, *’adōnay*), Lot actually uses the spelling of this word that refers specifically to *God*: “Lord” (*’adōnāy*; cf. Gen. 18:3).<sup>46</sup> In the midst of the impending judgment, Lot finally recognizes that these men represent the presence of Yahweh.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, while the angels urge Lot onward, Lot pleads with them to go only to the small city of Zoar. Genesis 19:20 is the intercession of Lot for one of the cities that may be swept away by judgment; however, Lot’s intercession differs from Abraham’s intercession in significant ways: “Whereas Abraham pleads divine justice, Lot rests his case on his own weakness and convenience.”<sup>48</sup> The Lord grants Lot this favor, but urges him to hurry forward so that he may pour forth his wrath.

### Why God Acquits the Unrighteous

After offering his own daughters for prostitution, Lot’s acquittal from the judgment of Sodom was shocking. After that, Lot’s salvation becomes all the more remarkable: Lot cannot persuade his family to depart from the city, and he himself does not really want to leave. Why, then, does God save Lot? For that matter, why does God acquit any unrighteous people at all? The narrator expects this story to scandalize us, for nothing of what happens to Lot makes sense in light of *Lot’s*



righteousness. As we will see, the ending of this story demonstrates that the narrator feels the need to give some explanation and accounting for Lot's salvation. Indeed, a satisfactory answer is coming; however, it will not be what we expect.

### **The Grounds: God Remembers the Righteous (Gen. 19:23–29)**

When Lot arrives at Zoar, the judgment of Yahweh begins:

[23] The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. [24] Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. [25] And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. [26] But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. (Gen. 19:23–26)

Notice the repetition of the name *Yahweh* ("LORD") and the phrase "out of heaven" in Genesis 19:24. Victor Hamilton helpfully observes the significance of this language:

The repetition [of *Yahweh*]...reinforces the fact that the disaster that struck Sodom and its environs was not a freak of nature. Rather, it was sent deliberately by *Yahweh* himself. The verse adds further that the disaster was sent from *Yahweh* in heaven. Throughout chs. 18–19 *Yahweh* has been pictured as moving to and fro on the earth. He rests under a tree near Mamre and has a meal. He engages in conversation with Abraham. His angelic entourage are overnight guests of Lot. Now suddenly *Yahweh*, from his heavenly position, unleashes a catastrophe on Sodom.<sup>49</sup>

The investigation is over. The sentence has been pronounced. Judgment is now executed. The judgment not only blots out the cities, the valley, and the inhabitants of the cities, but even "what grew on the ground" (Gen. 19:25). Earlier, this area was so fertile and lush that it resembled the garden of Eden and the Nile-watered land of Egypt (Gen. 13:10), and now *Yahweh* reduces it to sulfuric ruins.<sup>50</sup>

### **Lot's Wife Looks Back**

Tragically, the judgment even extends to Lot's own wife. Despite all the warnings and the special treatment of the angels, Lot's wife nevertheless looks back and becomes a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). While Lot himself struggles to leave Sodom (Gen. 19:16), the text suggests that Lot's wife takes a step beyond mere lingering. Jesus offers commentary on this story, explaining that the judgment of Sodom will be like the judgment that will come when Jesus himself returns to judge the world:

[28] "Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, [29] but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—[30] so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. [31] 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. [32] Remember Lot's wife." (Luke 17:28–32)

Luke 17:31 suggests that the "looking back" is something more than a forlorn look over the shoulder, but rather a return to what must be left behind. Reflecting on both passages, John Walton plausibly suggests that Lot's wife may have attempted to return to Sodom while saying something like, "You're a fool, Lot, and I refuse to go one step further. I'm going home. I'll see you in a day or two or whenever you come to your senses."<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Mathews also points out that "Lot's wife may have been a Sodomite; there is no mention of her prior to chap. 19, unless we are to assume she was among the "women" (14:16) rescued by Abram."<sup>52</sup> If so, then the conflicted desires of Lot's wife become more understandable. What Lot struggled to leave as a sojourner, Lot's wife was *unable* to leave as a citizen. In any case, Lot's wife ignored God's clear instructions not to turn back, and, by "disobeying a God-given instruction, she forfeited her God-offered salvation."<sup>53</sup>

### Abraham Looks Back

At this point, the narrator suddenly cuts to Abraham's gaze over the destruction of the cities:

[27] And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. [28] 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. (Gen. 19:27–28)

Like Lot's wife, Abraham looks back toward Sodom and Gomorrah; however, unlike Lot's wife, Abraham's gaze is not motivated by any desire to return to the city.<sup>54</sup> He has come back to the place where he "stood before the LORD" (Gen. 19:27) to intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah. By the time he arrives to survey the result of his prayers, the judgment is final: "the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace" (Gen. 19:28). At this point, Abraham does not know that the Lord personally extracted Lot and his family from danger, so Abraham may be wondering whether his prayers have had any effect at all.<sup>55</sup>

Here, Abraham experiences the grief of unsuccessful ministry brings. God calls us to pour ourselves out in pursuit of the salvation of others, and yet, we cannot save a single soul. The effectiveness of our ministry rests in the sovereign grace of God himself. Therefore, personal ministry often leads to grief as we see our siblings, children, parents, spouses, friends, and neighbors go to their destruction in spite of our intercession. Paul also speaks often of his great grief for the lost (Rom. 9:1–5; 2 Cor. 2:4; Phil. 3:18), and even Jesus weeps over unrepentant Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44). Ministry is agonizingly sorrowful.

And yet, this entire passage teaches us that God *has* answered Abraham's prayers, even though Abraham does not yet know it. His intercession was not in vain, for God himself personally entered Sodom not only to investigate the outcry of the city, but also to drag Lot to safety. God has remembered the prayers of the righteous when he judged wicked Sodom. We too may sometimes see what looks like the wreckage of God's wrath and justice, not knowing that God has answered our prayers. God brings fruit from our ministries of prayer, word, and deed in ways that we will not comprehend until he reveals all things in the age to come.

## God Looks Back

To this, the narrator goes one step further by telling us *why* Abraham’s prayers have had their desired effect: “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” (Gen. 19:29). This is the explanation of Lot’s salvation for which we have been searching. God does not rescue Lot because of Lot, but because of Abraham. Lot prays at one point by acknowledging that he has “found favor” (Gen. 19:19) in the Lord’s sight by escaping the judgment on Sodom, using the same expression to describe how *Noah* found favor in the sight of the Lord to escape the judgment of the flood (Gen. 6:8).<sup>56</sup> Now, however, we learn that the favor Lot found was not on his own account, but on the account of another: Abraham.

God rescued Lot because he “remembered” Abraham. The word “remember” is covenant language.<sup>57</sup> Once again, we see a parallel with the story of Noah, since God also “remembered” Noah after the Flood (Gen. 8:1).<sup>58</sup> The word *remember* does not suggest that God temporarily *forgot* Abraham, but that God acted on the *basis* of what he promised to Abraham. In that sense, God also “looked back,” just as Lot’s wife and Abraham looked back on the destruction of Sodom. God, on the other hand, looked back beyond the judgment itself to the covenant promises he made to Abraham years earlier, and on the basis of those promises, God listened to Abraham’s intercession and spared Lot for the sake of Abraham. The Judge of all the earth has surely done what is just, even as he extends mercy to Lot by remembering Abraham in the midst of his judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>59</sup>

We, too, are saved not on the basis of our own righteousness, but because of the intercession and righteousness of Another: “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). When Jesus returns to judge this wicked world, God will remember us for salvation because of the prayers of our Righteous Advocate. Christ has perfectly kept the covenant on our behalf. More than that, Jesus Christ our High Priest lives to intercede for us, pleading that God would save us to the uttermost because of his sacrifice (Heb. 7:25). Unrighteous Lot, because of his relative righteousness, merely stumbled out of Sodom to escape the judgment on that city in Zoar. In our case, however, Jesus both cleanses our unrighteousness by his blood and clothes us in his righteousness, so that he may lead us all the way into the holy places to dwell with him forever (Heb. 10:19–25). He is not merely taking us *out* of judgment, but he is leading us into the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, with all the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven—his righteous whom he has made perfect—for Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant by his blood (Heb. 12:22–24). God will remember the prayers of the righteous when he judges the wicked.

## Discussion Questions

1. How can we be counted simultaneously as unrighteous *and* righteous? If we are actually righteous, then why do we continue struggling with sin? If we are actually unrighteous, then how can a holy God admit us into his sight? Why must we be wary of our indwelling sin? Why must we remind ourselves of God’s declaration that we are righteous in Christ?

2. What does your war against sin, unrighteousness, and wickedness look like? What sin in your own life are you fighting? What sin are you fighting in the lives of others? If you are honest, how severely are you tempted to give up? Why shouldn't you give up? Does your struggle against sin really matter? What is the point when you cannot see the fruit of your fight?

3. What does Lot lose because he dwells in Sodom? How does it affect his witness to his family and friends? How does it affect his own love for the Lord? Should we try to escape the wickedness of the world altogether (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9–10)? How, then, do we live *in* the world without becoming *of* it? What changes might you make in your life along those lines?

4. In what ways are you tempted to “look back” like Lot's wife toward apostasy? How do you *look back* like Abraham, grieving over seemingly unfruitful ministry? How does God *look back* on his covenant promises to us? On what grounds does God acquit unrighteous people like us? How does God's *remembering* keep us faithful through temptation and suffering?

## Notes

1. Kidner, *Genesis*, 142.

2. “It is characteristic of Bible storytelling to focus on the main actors and to omit references to other figures of less consequence who are present but passive. Nevertheless one would have expected others to have greeted the angels, but nothing is said. Does this indicate a lack of hospitality among the Sodomites: only Lot the immigrant welcomes the visitors? Or does Lot's sitting by himself suggest his estrangement from the men of Sodom? The gap in the narrative here will soon be filled.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 54.)

3. Kidner, *Genesis*, 144.

4. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 54.

5. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 171.

6. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 54.

7. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 359–60.

8. “The verb ‘press’ (פָּצַר) means ‘to urge, to insist’ (cf. 33:1; Judg 19:7; 2 Kgs 5:16). Here and in 19:9 it is intensified by the addition of מְאֹד ‘very,’ so that I have translated it ‘manhandle.’ Perhaps here ‘he twisted their arm’ would be an equivalent English idiom.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 54.)

9. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 357.

10. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 54.

11. “Lot's alarm in 3a reveals that he knew his Sodom; the events of that night were a true sample. *Unleavened bread*, which is quickly made, shows that this was no leisurely feast like that of chapter 18 (cf. Exod. 12:39); there is already a suggestion of haste, which increases towards the climax.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 144–45.)

12. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 55.

13. Kidner, *Genesis*, 146–48.

14. The rest of this paragraph draws extensively from Victor Hamilton's commentary, which is quoted here in full: “Among those who agree that the issue is sexual, the question arises whether the issue is homosexual relations per se or homosexual rape. The answer depends on how one chooses to translate *yāda'*. For instance, compare Speiser's ‘being them out to us that we may get familiar with them’ with JB's ‘hand them over to use so that we may abuse them.’”

We see at least four problems with the view that the prohibition here is only on homosexual rape. First, nowhere in the OT does the verb *yāda'* have the nuance of 'abuse' or 'violate.' Second, the OT uses unmistakable language to relate rape incidents. Thus the Shechemites 'seized' and 'lay with' and 'humbled' Dinah (Gen. 34:2). Amnon 'forced' and 'lay with' his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:14). Similarly, the biblical laws about rape also use these terms: 'seize,' 'lie with' (Deut. 22:25–27). Third, this interpretation forces one meaning on 'know' in v. 5 (i.e., 'abuse') but a different meaning on 'know' three verses later (i.e., 'have intercourse with'), for it is unlikely that Lot is saying: 'I have two daughters who have never been abused.' Fourth, such an interpretation forces these incredible words in Lot's mouth: 'Do not rape my visitors. Here are my daughters, both virgins—rape them!' Clearly, then, the incident frowns on homosexual relations for whatever reason. Note that in the often-cited parallel to Gen. 19, viz., Judg. 19, the host offers both his own virgin daughter and his guest's concubine to Gibeah's city dwellers with the statement 'and sexually mistreat them' (... , v. 24). By contrast, Lot avoids using any verb that has clear-cut indications of sexual aggression. Still, the reader of this narrative cannot avoid puzzlement over Lot's willingness to make his daughters available to the people of Sodom for their sexual pleasure, even if he acts out a desire for hospitality for his guests. In any case, his action is unsuccessful, unheroic, and it 'may even make the audience of the story relieved not to be among the daughters of Lot.'" (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 34–35.)

15. Kidner, *Genesis*, 145.

16. To start, we would recommend the resources from Harvest USA (<https://www.harvestusa.org/>). Additionally, the works of Rosaria Butterfield (especially *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*; Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2012) have been helpful to many who have struggled with same-sex attraction, as well as to many who want to *understand* the unique challenges of those who struggle with same-sex attraction.

17. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 55.

18. John Walton proposes an interesting, alternative interpretation to Lot's counter-proposal: "Lot's response to the demand of the men in verse 8 is startling. Is Lot really offering his daughters to be gang-raped and probably murdered? An alternative is that this suggestion implies a more subtle, 'I would as soon have you violate my family members as violate those whom I have taken in and offered hospitality!' It would be like sarcastically saying to your mortgage company, 'Why don't you just take the clothes off my children's backs and the food off their plates?' Such a comment is not suggesting that they will really do that. If this is the correct way to read verse 8, Lot's offer of his daughters is intended to prick the conscience of the mob. Just as they would (hopefully) not consider treating a citizen's daughters in this way, so the same inhibitions should protect his guests."

Nevertheless, Walton himself acknowledges that the parallel passage in Judges 19:24–25, "where the daughter is actually given to the mob," stands against his proposal. (Walton, *Genesis*, 477.)

19. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 237.

20. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 35.

21. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 171.

22. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 360.

23. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 36.

24. "Before we continue with chap. 19, we must remember the special place of the alien (*gēr*) in biblical law. The alien, widow, and orphan constituted the disadvantaged in society; Israelite law provided special protections for these members by promoting generous treatment (e.g., Lev 19:10 Num 9:14; Deut 1:16). The rationale for benevolent treatment was historical and theological; at one time Israel was a stranger in Egypt (e.g., Exod 22:21[20]; Lev 19:34), and God takes special inventory of the state of the disadvantaged (e.g., Exod 22:23[22]; Deut 10:18; 24:15). Thus right treatment of the disadvantaged was a badge of righteousness (e.g., Deut 26:13; Job 31:32). Mistreatment of the alien, on the other hand, was shameful and merited the sternest rebuke by society. By showing the mistreatment of the angelic guests and also the alien Lot, the author paints a

convincing portrait of the depravity of the Sodomites.” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 231–32.)

25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 36–37.

26. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 171.

27. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 243.

28. “Lot functions as a foil for both Abraham and the men of Sodom. Abraham’s conduct is superior to Lot’s, but when viewed against the wicked Sodomites, Lot is ‘a righteous man’ (e.g., 2 Pet 2:7–8...). The thought of Lot as ‘a righteous man’ confounds the contemporary reader, for his action against his daughters says otherwise. But the author of Genesis would have us evaluate Lot in terms of his conduct toward the traveling strangers. Lot commits a grievous sin by subjecting his two daughters to sexual predators, but we miss the author’s chief point if we read Lot’s checkered character solely in terms of his mistreatment of his daughters....” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 232.)

29. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 56.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 43.

31. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 357.

32. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 37–38.

33. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 56.

34. Calvin, *Genesis*, 504. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxv.i.html>>

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 57.

36. Walton, *Genesis*, 478.

37. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 355.

38. “Lot’s sins-in-law (to be) clearly do not take him seriously. What is not clear is a reason why they do not. Do they suffer from a false sense of security, like the Jerusalemites in Jeremiah’s day: ‘Nothing can happen to us as long as we have the temple’? Or has Lot’s performance, described in vv. 1–11, deprived him of any sense of respect and believability? Should an individual who offers to surrender his daughters to a group bent on assault be taken seriously by the (future) husbands of these women? Should a father-in-law who is himself saved only because he is pulled inside his own house now be viewed as a bearer of vital information? Lot wants them to leave the house now, but he is safe only because he is inside. What about that mob outside? Or maybe the sons-in-law think that Lot is overreacting to his own rough treatment and calling down a divine judgment on Sodom for being so treated.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 40–41.)

39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 57.

40. Kidner, *Genesis*, 145.

41. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 171.

42. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 57.

43. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 171–72.

44. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 42–43.

45. Kidner, *Genesis*, 145–46.

46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 58.

47. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 170.

48. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 58.

49. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 46–47.

50. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 59.

51. Walton, *Genesis*, 480.

52. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 242.

53. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 59.

54. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 173–74.

55. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 59.

56. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 58.

57. “‘God remembered’ identifies the prior covenant obligation (12:3) as the basis for the divine intervention, not the righteousness of Lot. Although the mention of Abraham brings to mind the appeal of the patriarch (18:16–33), ‘God remembered’ directly refers to the privileged position of Abraham. The divine motivation for the initial disclosure to Abraham is his election (‘For I have chosen him,’ 18:19), which then prompted his intercession for the cities. That God’s benevolence toward Lot arose from his commitment to Abraham thus begins and ends the Sodom segment (18:17–19; 19:29).” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 243.)

58. “This concluding verse, while superficially just a résumé of the story already told in full, answers Abraham’s questions and ours. His intercession had been worthwhile, for ‘when God ruined the cities...God remembered *Abraham* and sent Lot out of the overthrow.’ As already noted, ‘God remembered Abraham’ echoes 8:1, ‘God remembered Noah.’ But a more exact parallel to 8:1 would have been “God remembered Lot,” for Noah and Lot are the men saved from disaster. The substitution of Abraham for Lot in this sentence makes an important theological point. Lot was not saved on his own merits but through Abraham’s intercession. And this makes a good parallel to the conclusion of the flood story, for there the LORD, after smelling Noah’s sacrifice, promises never to destroy the earth again with a flood (8:20–22). There Noah’s sacrifice makes atonement for the world; here Abraham’s prayer leads to the salvation of Lot.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 59–60.)

59. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 173–74.