

# Truth and Consequences

By Steve Zeisler

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We have come in Genesis to the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the raining down from heaven of God's judgment. During the terrible flooding of recent days people in the Bay Area have been asking questions (some facetiously, some seriously) about Noah's flood and judgment from heaven. Perhaps our weather can give us an appropriate context for our consideration of this theme.

Abraham and Lot, uncle and nephew, were two men who began life together. Probably very close in age, they grew up together in Ur of the Chaldeans. They traveled from there to Haran and on to the land of Canaan. Together they faced many of life's difficulties, heard the word of God and understood his purposes.

But there was a fateful point in their history when they made the choice to diverge from one another. At that time, Lot chose to move to the cities of the plain the ruins of which are now buried under the southern tip of the Dead Sea. When he moved to Sodom, he sought to benefit from the excitement and indulgent lifestyle offered by these worldly cities. Abraham was led by God to stay in the hill country where he continued (most of the time) to follow the word of the Lord and to live as a pilgrim on earth, building altars and living in a tent. The decision they made in parting would prove to be critical to the future of each man.

The best way to think about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the awful moral descent of Lot is to view his descent in contrast with the example of Abraham. The two men started out together; they could have ended up together. But Lot's choices led him to a different place and a different destiny.

Many years had intervened since Lot made the choice to move to Sodom and its environment in order to grow wealthy and enjoy ease among the advantages of the city. During this interim, the focus of Scripture has been on when and how God might give a son to Abraham and Sarah. This part of the story reached a high point in Genesis 18 when angelic visitors and God in human guise came to them to confirm that within one year's time Sarah would have a son. The intervening year between the promise and the actual birth of Isaac was a period when, through the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as dealing with the Philistines in Negev, Abraham was taught to be a minister. This was his seminary. He was supposed to be a blessing for the human race. Since he was the friend and co-laborer of the Lord, he had to learn in a special way what matters to God in order to gain the heart and perspective of the Lord and to learn to walk and speak with him. In this year as he waited for his son to be born, Abraham was being fitted to minister to the people of earth.

The action in Genesis 18:16-19 immediately follows the incident when Sarah listened from within the tent to the visitors and heard of the coming of Isaac:

**Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. And the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him!"**

As these two angels left and headed down into the cities, the Lord God in human form began to speak: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" This is like conversations my wife and I have had intent upon being overheard by certain interested parties. I say, "Do you think we have time for a picnic today if the kids finish their chores?" And she replies loudly, "Yes, perhaps we do!" We fully intend for the children to hear the message, not because we have any doubt about going on the picnic but because we want to instruct them as to what should happen beforehand.

In a sense, God was condescending to Abraham's level. This is why we read that the Lord wondered, "Is the outcry that has come up to me from Sodom sufficient to warrant its destruction?" And this is why the angels were sent to investigate. There was no real question in God's mind as to what he was going to do. He was not waiting to find out what the situation was like. Rather he was trying to draw Abraham into the process as a co-laborer so that as Abraham prayed for Sodom he would learn more about the heart of God. The Lord condescended to stand with Abraham on the hillside in order that Abraham could learn more about his Heavenly Father and thus become fit for ministry. Abraham enters the conversation in Genesis 18:20-33:

**And the Lord said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know."**

**Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord. And Abraham came near and said, "Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" So the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account!" And Abraham answered and said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, wilt Thou destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there!" And he spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose forty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty!" Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there!" And he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty!" Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten!" And as soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the Lord departed; and Abraham returned to his place.**

This is a profound section of Scripture. In it, we are taught about the nature of prayer. When we pray God willingly teaches us about what matters to him. I would like to make some comments in order to highlight some of the aspects of this interchange.

First of all, the Lord said, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great indeed, and their sin is exceedingly great.” A crying out, an agony, arose from these cities, ascending to heaven. Their wickedness had become so great that a call to God arose about their sin. Similarly, after Cain slew his brother Abel, the Lord said, “The voice of your brother’s blood is calling to me from the ground.” James spoke of wages withheld from laborers crying out to heaven at the injustice done by some who were wealthy. In Romans 8, we read that there is a peculiar sense in which the creation is groaning, waiting for the revelation of the sons of God. There is an account being kept in creation of the wickedness of man. Remember the Lord said he would not cause the conquest of Canaan until the wickedness of the Amorites was complete. There is a way in which human rebellion weighs down the creation until there is finally an outcry to heaven. When God acts in justice, it is appropriate to the amount of injustice. Thus, the Lord heard the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We need to be honest about what is recorded in Genesis 19. These angelic visitors, as we will see in a moment, had a presence about them that brought enough concern to Lot that he desperately begged them to enter his house. Subsequently, they were sought by the men of the city for a homosexual gang rape. Evidently, this was how they usually treated strangers. You cannot find a more powerful contrast than between this reception and that found in the beginning of Genesis 18. When Abraham received these same visitors, he hurried to bring them hospitality, to feed and care for them.

Ezekiel 16:49-50 tells us more about Sodom: “Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it.” It was not just sexual violence that characterized these people. Add arrogance, unconcern for the needy, ease and love of things. There is a car on our street with a bumper sticker that reads, “DECADENCE...a way of life.” This aptly describes the city of Sodom. It was a place given over to the love of ease, wealth and self-indulgence resulting in violence to outsiders, callousness and public perversion. The outcry of Sodom had finally become so great that the Lord was moved to action against it.

The second thing I would like to suggest that we find in this prayer is the difficult problem of separating the righteous from the wicked. Abraham wanted to believe that his Heavenly Father differentiated between the righteous and the wicked, that he did not overlook the people who loved and served him in the midst of others who rejected him. The gods of the Near East, the Canaanite gods, were capricious and were as likely to mistreat a righteous man as a wicked one. The Lord God was not like this. Abraham prayed, “Isn’t there a difference?” The answer: yes! God does not treat the righteous the same as the wicked. Difficulty arises from the fact that cities and cultures are usually a mixture of righteous and unrighteous people. Abraham’s concern was the same one believers in every age have faced, when considering the judgment of God.

A number of alternatives are alluded to in this passage. Sometimes when God judges a culture that has become wicked, the righteous are martyred along with those judged for their sin. And there are martyrs in Scripture who are given a great place of honor because they stood firm even under persecution. Sometimes God removes the righteous, as he will in this case. He saves some people out of judgment. And sometimes there are enough men and women who love the Lord that they can ultimately save a whole nation. Their influence is strong enough and widespread enough that like salt they can prevent decay. When Abraham wrestled with God over what would happen in Sodom, his

answer was that the Lord was indeed just and merciful. I think Abraham came away from his prayer reassured that God did care for the righteous even when he was committed to judging the wicked.

The last thing I want to discuss regarding this section is the way it particularly convicted me. It is difficult to talk about Sodom and Gomorrah without considering the homosexual community today, especially in the Bay Area and especially with regard to the AIDS crisis. It is hard not to raise these issues when we face this passage of judgment. The very word “sodomy:” the fearful means by which AIDS is most often spread, is taken from the sin of Sodom.

What convicted me about Abraham’s prayer was his desire that people not die. At times, I have found myself callously thinking of the AIDS crisis and saying, “Well, most of those folks deserve it. They ought to die!” But Abraham in his concern for justice asked God to spare human life.

In the AIDS crisis, we ought to distinguish between the victims and the perpetrators or activists regarding sin. There are many gay men who were abused as children, seduced as adolescents, used by everybody, and abandoned by their families. They have little, if any, knowledge of how to live differently and are now being further victimized by a horrible disease. If the righteous ones that Abraham hoped would be rescued from Sodom were Lot and his family, they were barely righteous. They were not shining examples of godly Christian living by any stretch of the imagination. If they were considered righteous, then maybe there are many now facing death from AIDS for whom we should be praying, asking God to spare them. Clearly, there are many others, such as babies, who catch AIDS in utero, who are in no sense directly responsible for their condition. I think the ones in our society who deserve the most censure are the seducers of the young, the politicians who are using gay people to gain political power and the owners of bath houses and bars who are profiting from others’ weaknesses. They are the advocates, the sellers, the philosophers, and the pushers. These are the ones who bring the outcry to heaven. I was convicted when I saw how Abraham did not want people to die, as I sometimes do. I have had to transform my prayers to ask the Lord to be merciful, recognizing “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Look at Genesis 19:1-11:

**Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. And he said, “Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant’s house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way!” They said however, “No, but we shall spend the night in the square!” Yet he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them!” But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, “Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof!” But they said, “Stand aside!” Furthermore, they said, “This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them!” So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway.”**

The angels who had come to discover the nature of what was happening in Sodom and Gomorrah presented a tremendous problem for Lot. He had tried to serve two masters for many years. He wanted the respect of Abraham and the people of God, the memories of the promises of God and the fine, sweet air of real spirituality. Therefore, he also wanted the respect of these visitors whom he must have seen as somehow representative of God. But at the same time, he addressed the men of Sodom as “my brothers.” He wanted to fit into their society and be just like them, having all the accompanying advantages, such as the pleasure, the delicacies, and the fast life. Although he wanted to serve the two masters simultaneously, both sides now insisted that it could not be done. Each master was demanding allegiance. The angels had come to ask him to cast his vote with them. However, the men of the city said, “No, Lot, we will have you for ourselves.” Thus, each side was forcing him to take a stand, to make the choice.

I have two friends who were leaders in this church in the past. But for a long time they also lived double lives. Although they had families and were active in church, they also each had a mistress and party world on the side. Yet, just as Lot could not have both, one day a choice was required of each of these men. The mistress would not put up with the double life any more. Neither would the Lord. Suddenly, they were forced into the fateful decision of whom they would be and how they would live. Sadly, both of them made the wrong choice. Lot had come to the same place of decision. Now that the issue was forced upon him, he was going to discover who he was. Amazingly, even though God went through extraordinary lengths to save him, he still longed for the very kind of life the Lord was determined to destroy.

The angelic visitors force Lot to make his decision, recorded in verses 12 through 29:

**Then the men said to Lot, “Whom else have you here? A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the Lord that the Lord has sent us to destroy it!” And Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, and said, “Up, get out of this place, for the Lord will destroy the city!” But he appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting. And when 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!” But he hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his daughters, for the compassion of the Lord was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city. And it came about when they had brought them outside, that one said, “Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, lest you be swept away!” But Lot said to them, “Oh no, my lords! Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your loving kindness, which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, lest the disaster overtake me and I die; now behold, this town is near enough to flee to, and it is small. Please, let me escape there (is it not small?) that my life may be saved!” And he said to him, “Behold, I grant you this request also, not to overthrow the town of which you have spoken. Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there!” Therefore the name of the town was called Zoar.**

**The sun had risen over the earth when Lot came to Zoar. Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone 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 his wife, from behind him, looked back; and she became a pillar of salt.**

**Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the Lord; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace. Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived.**

Lot made the choice some years before to sojourn near the city of Sodom. By this time, after years of living there, he had become addicted to all the city had to offer—just as some people with severe emphysema or lung disease continue to smoke even though each cigarette is further destroying them—or just as chronic gamblers trash their families, reputations and careers in pursuit of their habit. Lot was addicted to the life of ease and pleasure. So addicted, in fact, that the situation would have been comical if it were not so desperate. When he called for his future sons-in-law to flee with him, they thought he was joking. They could not take anything he said about God’s judgment seriously for he had never shown them regard for God previously.

Even as Lot faced the impending judgment, the angels had to seize him by the hand and drag him from the city. Although Sodom was going to be destroyed, he and his family still could not bear to leave. Outside of the city, he cried, “No, I can’t go to the mountains! I don’t like the mountains. I am not the backpacking sort. Let me go to the little city over there.” He pleaded with the angels to have at least a remnant of the city to live in—so much did he love the things of this world! Lot’s addiction is clear to us. It ought to also be frightening when we realize that the choices we make with freedom at the beginning may bring us to the point where we require what this world has to offer—its delicacies and its pleasures.

At the end of this account (Genesis 19:30-38) interestingly enough, Lot winds up in the mountains, the very place he was trying to avoid. With his wife already gone, he and his daughters moved into a cave in the mountains where his story ended with an account of drunkenness and incest. The two daughters whom he would have thrown to the men of Sodom so that the angels would not be raped learned from their father how to misuse family members. Thus, they used him as a sperm bank to have children and perpetuate their line. They had to get him drunk to do it, but this was Lot’s story throughout his life. He didn’t sin with a high hand, but he was always willing to be persuaded, to have his defenses lowered in order to do whatever was required to indulge the flesh. In the end, we hear the announcement: “He is the father of the Moabites to this day...he is the father of the sons of Ammon to this day.” The two sons born to his daughters and their nations became part of the rebellion against the people of God, which continued throughout the Old Testament period. This was his epitaph: Father of the Moabites and the Ammonites.

The best way to understand Lot’s story is to contrast it with Abraham’s because the two stood shoulder to shoulder at one point in their lives. Even though he failed at times, Abraham essentially set himself to follow the Lord and to become “the father of all who believe.” Instead of giving the Lord first place in his life, Lot chose to try to serve two masters, to try to have a spiritual side and a fleshly side. When we see what became of him and what became of Abraham, we should be exhorted to willingly trust God rather than the flesh and should fear our vulnerability to all kinds of addictions.

Because Abraham talked to God and learned from him, he was given a heart like God and became a minister, a blessing to all peoples. In contrast, when Lot spoke to his sons-in-law about God, they thought he was kidding. They could not take what he said seriously. But Abraham, a man who knew

the thoughts of God, could readily minister to people. He became what Paul would later call a “steward of the mysteries of God.” You and I can be the same. When we pray, when we read and when we think the thoughts of God, we can be a blessing to people. We can give answers to the problems of family breakdowns and the pressures of life. We can be a light rather than be compromised like Lot and have nothing to say. In the year before Isaac’s birth, Abraham was taught how to be someone who could offer life to his world. Meanwhile, over the years, Lot had become an addict and had nothing to offer.

Jude says in verses 22-23, “Have mercy on some who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.” In 1 Corinthians 3:15 we are told, “If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet as through fire.” In each case, we have the picture of someone in a relationship with God being snatched from the destruction even though his clothes are polluted and all but his life is lost. When every thing is burned, he has nothing left to offer. His life amounts to nothing even though he himself may be saved. These words of Jude and Paul fit no one better than they fit Lot.

It is interesting that in Genesis 19 the final description of both of these men, Abraham and Lot, finds them in the hills, the place where Lot did not want to go. Abraham was standing in the high country looking down at the smoke rising from the cities. Abraham, who spoke with God and learned from him, was becoming a mightier man of God. Lot was drunk in a cave. Although both were in the same hills with the cities destroyed at their feet, they were by now two completely different men.

Many have wondered why Abraham prayed for God to stay his hand on account of fifty righteous, then forty-five, thirty, and twenty but stopped at ten. I conjecture that the Lord prevented Abraham from finding out about the nephew he loved, that if he had continued and asked finally about one righteous man the answer would still have been no. There really was none righteous in the whole city of Sodom. We are told in Genesis 19:16 that Lot was saved because of the compassion of the Lord and in Genesis 19:29 because God remembered Abraham. Lot was one of the people who did have a relationship with the Lord, but never grew. At the end of his life, he had nothing whatever to offer of service to God (“saved, yet as through fire”).

We are told in Hebrews 11:8-10 that Abraham, like Lot, was looking forward to living in a city. He too looked for the advantages of fellowship, life and security, but he wanted a city built by God. We must be people who want to receive life from the Lord and who are willing to look at the temptations and the siren song of this world and reject them. I would like to close with the Hebrews passage to contrast the desire of Abraham once again with that of Lot:

**By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

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