

“FIRE AND BRIMSTONE” (Genesis 19:12-29)

One of the benefits of preaching verse-by-verse through the Bible is that I don't have to guess what I'm preaching on each week. The challenge of preaching verse-by-verse is that each week the passage of scripture I preach on is different – some are comforting and inspiring, and some are unpleasant and convicting. There is a trend in some churches to preach topical sermons on selected themes from the Bible – and there's nothing wrong with that – but the temptation is to pick safe and pleasant subjects and avoid harder, more controversial subjects – and one of those is God's wrath and judgment.

I spoke with someone just a few weeks ago at Walt Schroeder's service who told me he grew up in a church where the pastor was a “fire and brimstone” preacher – the kind of preacher that speaks loudly and passionately, persuading people to repent of their sins by using the threat of hell. You don't hear a lot of fire and brimstone preaching anymore, but it was very popular in the mid-to-late 1800s, and one of the preachers most associated with this kind of preaching was Charles Finney.

Charles Finney preached mostly in western New York, going from town to town holding revival meetings and giving very emotional appeals for people to walk forward at the end of the meeting and convert to Christ – and they did by the thousands. But he preached so often and so fervently on hell that over time people began to tune him out – and the western region of New York came to be known as the “burned out district.” What's interesting is that three major religious movements – Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists – all started in western New York during the burned-out era – and what they all had in common was the rejection of hell.

Many people who grow up around fire and brimstone preaching, like the gentleman I talked to recently, learn to view God as harsh and punitive. As a result, the pendulum in recent years has swung the other way to where preaching focuses mainly on the love and grace of God. What's desperately needed in preaching today is a balanced emphasis on both God's love and God's judgment. Preaching one without the other leads to an incomplete gospel and a distorted view of God.

Preaching verse-by-verse helps achieve this balance in that it forces us to focus on the verses in front on us and let them speak for themselves – and the verses before us today in Genesis 19 are about fire and brimstone – literally – it's the story of Sodom and Gomorrah – and in this story we find both judgment and grace.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is used throughout the Bible as a warning – we are to remember what happened to these cities so that the same thing doesn't happen to us. Jesus also used the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of what the world will look like just before He returns, making it extremely relevant for the times in which we live.

Last week we looked at the first 11 verses of chapter 19 which described the prelude to God's judgment. Lot – Abraham's nephew – is visited by two angels who have come to warn him that Sodom is about to be destroyed. The men of Sodom demand that Lot bring his guests out so they can rape them, but the angels strike the men with blindness so that they cannot follow through with their wicked plan.

Today we will look at verses 12-29 which describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in these verses, we see four warnings given by the angels and the responses to those warnings.

The first warning is “**get out.**” In verses 12-13 we read... “The two men said to Lot, ‘Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.’” It’s D-Day. God is longsuffering and gives people ample opportunity to repent, but there comes a point where God says, “Enough.” The people of Sodom had become so wicked and so vile and so hardened in their sin, that no matter how much more time God gave them, they would not change.

You’ll remember in chapter 18 that Abraham prayed on behalf of his nephew Lot, and God honors Abraham’s intercession by sending the two angels to rescue him. They say, “Gather everyone in your family and household and get out because God is going to destroy this place.” Lot doesn’t really deserve a warning – he’s the one who chose to pitch his tent in Sodom – but God graciously gives him time to evacuate.

Living along the coast we are told repeatedly that a tsunami can hit at any time, and when the siren goes off there is only a short window of time to get to high ground. Not long after we moved to Gold Beach the tsunami siren went off at 2:00 in the morning and we quickly jumped in our car and headed up third street, following a long caravan of cars. In natural disasters such as fires or floods or tsunamis, there is usually some advance warning, but there is also an urgency to get out because when it comes, it comes quickly.

Jesus said, “So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man.” When He comes, He will come quickly. For 2000 years we’ve known He is coming, but when He does, it will happen, Paul says, in the twinkling of an eye – He will come as a thief in the night – so be ready.

The response to the angel’s command to evacuate is **mockery**. Verse 14 says, “So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, ‘Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!’ But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.” “Our city be destroyed? No way.” They scoff... it will never happen.

Their attitude is the same attitude we have about tsunamis – we’ve never experienced a major tsunami and so we’re not really concerned about one happening. Lot’s sons-in-law are so absorbed in their daily life that the idea of Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed sounds crazy to them. Jesus said that people will live with the same lack of awareness prior to His Second Coming. In Luke 17:26-29 He says, “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.”

Both judgments – in Noah’s day and Lot’s day – caught people completely off guard. They were going about their everyday business – they got up, they went to work, they ate, they drank, they got married, they had kids – they bought things and sold things – they went on trips, they held parties – and all the while, they lived as though God did not exist. The idea that a final reckoning for their sin was about to take place was nowhere on their radar.

The Apostle Peter talked about this kind of skepticism prior to the Lord's return. He said, "Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'" (2 Peter 3:3-4). Scoffers say, "The sun rises, the sun sets. Days go by, weeks go by, months and years go by, decades and centuries roll on and Jesus still hasn't come back," and they tune out any idea of accountability to God. Peter says, "Don't forget the flood, and don't forget Sodom and Gomorrah – they thought the same thing. Jesus will come back, but He delays His coming to give people the chance to repent. Don't be a scoffer – Jesus is coming back and now is the time to get ready for His coming."

In verse 15 we see a second warning by the angels to not just get out, but a warning to "**hurry**"... "With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.'" Abraham prayed for God to spare the city for ten righteous people, and in the end only four make it out of the city – Lot, his wife, and their two daughters. His sons-in-law foolishly stay behind.

Lot's response, incredibly, is **hesitation**. Verse 16 says, "When he hesitated." You kind of want to slap Lot and say, "What are you thinking? Fire and brimstone are about to rain down on your head and you're hesitating." Jack Benny used to do a comedy routine where he is being robbed at gunpoint and the robber says to him, "Your money or your life." There's a long pause with no answer. The robber says, "Well, what's it gonna be?" And Jack Benny says, "Don't rush me, I'm thinking about it." Lot says, "Let me think about it."

Verse 16, "When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them." Did you catch the word "merciful?" Mercy is not getting what we deserve, and Lot had done nothing to deserve God's mercy. It is only for Abraham's sake that he is being saved, and the angels have to drag him out of the city.

Lot is a perfect example of 1 Corinthians 3:15 where it talks about someone being saved "so as by fire." This means that there are some people that barely escape the flames of hell – they get into heaven by the "skin of their teeth." This describes a carnal Christian who remains a spiritual infant and never grows up in their faith. They waste the short time given to them in this life on worldly pursuits and pleasures. Instead of laying up treasures on earth, their treasures are piled up here on earth – and when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ, all their squandered opportunities to serve Christ will be piled as wood, hay, and stubble and burned. Lot is the poster child of a carnal Christian, and even as judgment is about to reign down on Sodom, he hesitates to separate himself from the world.

In verse 17 the angels issue yet another warning... "**don't stop**." Verses 17-20... "As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, 'Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!'" Lot is told to not just get out of Sodom, but get out of the valley and flee to the mountains. It's the same thing Jesus tells believers living in tribulational period to come. In Matthew 24 Jesus says when the antichrist rises to power... "Flee to the mountains – don't even stop to grab your coat – just flee and don't stop."

Lot's response is to **compromise**. Verses 18-20... "But Lot said to them, 'No, my lords, please! Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can't flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I'll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it—it is very small, isn't it? Then my life will be spared.'"

Lot is a hard guy to understand. The Lord is trying to save him, but he can't let go of the world. He says, "At least let me stay in the valley. There's a small town named Zoar – which means small – how about if I go there?" Lot has grown so comfortable and so cozy in the Jordan River Valley, that he wants to cling to the fringes of what's left.

He suggests a compromise... "There's this little down just down the road, let me flee there and live." He emphasizes that Zoar is "small." Zoar is a smaller version of Sodom. He wants to hang on to his life in Sodom. Jesus said, "If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it" (Luke 9:24). If you try to hang on to Sodom and live for only for the comforts and pleasures of this present world, you'll lose everything. But if you lose your life now – if you surrender your life to Christ – you will gain everything in eternity.

God once again shows mercy to Lot. Verses 21-22... "He said to him, 'Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it.' (That is why the town was called Zoar.)" Later in the chapter, Lot eventually leaves Zoar and goes to the mountains, but only because he is afraid that God may soon judge that town as well.

Verses 23-25... "By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land (darkness defined the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, and now these cities are exposed to the light of God's judgment). Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land."

Just like the flood of Noah's day, God pours out judgment on those who spurn Him despite repeated warnings and opportunities to repent. This judgment is with fire and brimstone. Brimstone is an older term for sulfur, a flammable mineral associated with volcanos – and the term "fire and brimstone" has become symbolic of God's wrath on sin, and a warning to not take God's mercy for granted. The entire valley that Lot once so coveted was destroyed – burned beyond recognition.

Today when you visit this region, just south of the Dead Sea, it is an absolute barren wasteland – there is no vegetation or pastureland. You can also see formations of what appeared to be a city encrusted with several layers of ash. One of the more fascinating discoveries, still there today, are golf-sized sulfur balls, some of which have burn marks around them.

The book of 2 Peter tells us that another fire and brimstone judgment will come in the future... "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10). Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away," and one day it will as God purges the earth of sin by fire and creates and new heavens and a new earth for us to live in.

The book of Revelation, in chapter 20, says that the devil will lead the nations of the world in one final revolt against God. Verses 9-10 says, "They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."

After this, unbelievers from every era of time will be resurrected to face God at the Great White Throne Judgment. They will be judged according to their works and whether or not their name is written down in the book of life. Verse 15 says, “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

This is why God wants us to remember Sodom and Gomorrah so that what happened to them in the past will not happen to anyone in the future. God makes it clear in the Bible that He takes no pleasure in people going to hell – He wishes no one to perish in their sins, but for everyone to come to repentance. Hell is a choice – God does not send anyone to hell, but people send themselves there by rejecting God’s offer of salvation. C. S. Lewis said that in the end there are just two kinds of people: Those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and enter into the joy of the Lord, and those to whom God says with tears, “Thy will be done,” and lets them walk into the dark. The decision to enter heaven or hell is up to each person.

The final warning given by the angels is “don’t look back.” They say, “Get out, hurry, don’t stop,” and finally, “Don’t look back.” But there was someone who did. Verse 26, “But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” She did not look back in curiosity to watch the destruction of the city – she looked back in desire to return to the city. Her heart was still in Sodom. And because she looked back, she became part of the judgment, as fire and brimstone fell on her and she became a statue.

Near the Dead Sea today there is a sign that says, “Lot’s wife,” and it points to a rock formation that looks like a woman frozen in time. It’s not Lot’s wife, unless she was a really huge person, but it does stand as an eerie monument of her fateful decision to look back. In Luke 17:32-33 Jesus says, “Remember Lot’s wife! Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.”

Mrs. Lot could not let go of her life in Sodom. She was so captivated by the status and pleasures and trappings of the world that she lost sight of how temporary it all was. She couldn’t let go and so she looked back. What a lesson. I was thinking this week of all the verses in the Bible that talk about not looking back...

When Children of Israel ran into difficulty in the desert after leaving Egypt, they said, “We want to go back to Egypt.” They would rather return to the familiarity of bondage in Egypt than march forward in faith to the Promised Land.

Jesus said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Once you decide to follow Christ, you must surrender completely to Him and never look back.

Paul said in Philippians 3:13b-14, “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul says, “Don’t look back – leave your old life behind and keep your eyes focused on heaven.” As the song says, “The cross before me, the world behind me, no turning back, no turning back.”

The story concludes in verses 27-29... “Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.”

Here we're reminded why the Lord rescued Lot – it wasn't because he was righteous – it was because of Abraham – Abraham interceded on Lot's behalf and God saved him. Abraham is a picture of Christ – the direct descendant of Abraham – who intervened on our behalf. Like Lot, we are doomed to die in our sins and spend eternity in hell – everyone of us. That's the bad news – that's the fire and brimstone part of the gospel that we dare not leave out.

The good news of the gospel is that through the grace and mercy of God, every person can be saved from eternal judgment through the intervention of Christ. 1 Timothy 2:5-6a says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people."

The only way we can be saved from fire and brimstone is through the mediation of Jesus – He is the one mediator between a holy God and sinful mankind – and He made it possible for us by giving Himself as a ransom on the cross to free us from the penalty of sin.

God's judgment and God's grace are both revealed in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and both are vital to the gospel message. Another judgment by fire is on the horizon – all indications are that we are living in the last days – and now is the time to prepare yourself spiritually by trusting Christ as your Savior. I want to impress upon you a sense of urgency – when He comes, He will come quickly. Now is the time to flee Sodom – to repent of your sins and run to God.