



August 13, 2016

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2. After listening to the sermon and/or reading Chapters 13 through 19 of Genesis, what new thoughts do you have about God?
3. Is there a difference between Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of today? Explain why.
4. It seems as though God's involvement with Sodom and Gomorrah is more direct than any other city in history. Why might that be?
5. How does this story affect how you relate to God today?



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We go back today to the first book of the Bible.

Last week Andy shared with us a story from Judges, one of those stories that, at first glance, you say, "So why did I just read that?" But he shared that, if God can use Samson, he can use any of us.

Genesis is a book about beginnings: the beginning of what we know of as our world, the beginning of man and, yes, the beginning of sin. The stories of Genesis were passed on from mothers and fathers to children and then on to their children and so on. You can just imagine the children of those earlier years of earth's history asking, "Can you tell the story of earth's beginning, again?" We call this process of passing on truths down through the generations, "Verbal Tradition."

We still enjoy seeing how things used to be:

1. [Picture of – First Microphone](#)
2. [Picture of – First Apple Computer](#)
3. [Picture of – First Digital Camera](#)

As innovative as these devices were in their day, none of us would think they were even close to being useful now. But because others built on top of their ideas and the inventors were willing to listen, we now enjoy devices that hardly even resemble what was.

Genesis is the beginning of sin, but it is also the beginning of God's plan of redemption – This is where we find the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

### Prayer

A number of years ago, a good friend of mine, Dick Deurkson, led a photography trip to Yellowstone National Park in the middle of winter. He arranged a week of snowmobiling around the park with frequent photo stops while staying at different lodges each night. He asked if I'd like to come along and take video as well. It was a no brainer. I love the mountains, I love to snowmobile, videography was a bit of a hobby, and I had never been to Yellowstone.

So a friend of mine and I decided to fly in a day early and scope out the area for good video locations. However, as soon as we started driving into the park, we both realized that there was no need to search; the entire park was an unending video paradise. As we drove further into the park, we found ourselves on an incline looking down on a frozen riverbed, now mostly covered with snow. And then we saw it. A beautiful large elk with a huge set of antlers.

We stopped our car and walked around to see if there would be any place that we could set up a tripod and catch it quick before it ran away. But as we looked down, we realized that the elk was not moving. As a matter of fact, the elk was stuck. Its hooves had fallen through the ice, and now the snow, which was almost up to its back, rendered it incapable of moving. Both of us had the same idea, "Let's save the elk!"

We looked through our suitcases and camera equipment and even the trunk of the rental car, but we just didn't bring any elk saving equipment. Soon, however, more people began to show up, all noticing the plight of the elk. And though we were all strangers, we were all in agreement that the elk needed our help. As we began to discuss strategies as to how we could accomplish this task with

very few resources and absolutely no training with wild elks, we soon decided that we would be better off going to the ranger station and offer our assistance in whatever they do in these types of situations.

We got in our cars and hurried as fast as we could to the station, knowing that time was not on the elk's side. When we got there, I looked around as we walked up to the office, trying to eye any equipment they might have for elk lifting, but there was nothing more than a small brown pickup.

One young woman, who was one of the more vocal in our group, made it first to the office counter. "Sir, as we drove into the park, we all noticed that you have an elk stuck in the ice who needs to be rescued immediately, and we would certainly be willing to help in any way we can!"

Her statement was polite yet urgent. I nodded along with everyone else to show my support. "I'm in!"

But the Ranger was unmoved. And then in a slow but deliberate voice he said, "Yeah, we really don't do that"

I thought to myself, "Well tell us what to do, and we'll do it!" But before I could say anything he said, "We stay out of all that – we don't play favorites. Winter is a hard season for all the animals, and all the animals are important to the balance of this eco-system."

None of us knew what to say. There was nothing we could do except try to understand the wisdom of what the ranger just said. It was such a different picture. The "balance of nature?" But wasn't the elk the "good guy" and the wolf the "villain?" Isn't that how we should view this scenario?

My wife hates this story. She told me that she was going to leave the Worship Center when I told it, but what if I would have told it from another viewpoint? What if I would have shared the plight of a young mother mountain lion and her hungry cubs that needed food to survive the winter, or the same for a mother wolf, or fox or bear? Would that change how you look at it?

I want us to be this conflicted when we read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, because yes, it's very disturbing to think of entire cities being destroyed. However, it's just as unsettling to think about what many of the people of those cities were capable of.

We first read about Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 13. This is that epic scene where Abraham and his brother's son, Lot, decide that they need to part ways. Both of their families had gotten too large to comfortably co-inhabit.

Read what it says:

Lot (Abram's nephew), who was traveling with Abram, was also rich in sheep and cattle and tents. But the land couldn't support both of them; they had too many possessions. They couldn't both live in one place—quarrels broke out between Abram's shepherds and Lot's shepherds. Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have fighting between us, between your shepherds and my shepherds. After all, we're family. Look around. Isn't there plenty of land out there? Let's separate. If you go left, I'll go right; if you go right, I'll go left."

This was pretty much unheard of. Up until then, it was the lord of the tribe who would always take the best for himself, and the leftovers would go to the underlings. But that's not how Abraham does it. He lets Lot decide, so of course, Lot chooses the best area for his tribe and herds. They go down to the valley, which is very fertile, but it's also where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are located. It says in Chapter 13 that they are also very wicked. Which really isn't very surprising actually.

If you read the first part of Genesis, ever since that day when Adam and Eve decided that they wanted to trust their way instead of God's, sin had taken God's creation on a perilous downward spiral. Genesis 3 to 11 is just one tragic story after another, from Cain to Lamech, all the way to the tower that came to be known as Babel.

Each story that we read in the first part of Genesis just keeps setting the stage for someone to step in that actually wants to follow God. And that's when we meet this man, Abraham. Now just for the record, his name was originally Abram. God changed his name to Abraham when they entered into a covenant together that God was going to make him the father of his chosen people, and Abraham was going to follow God no matter what. However, for our purposes this morning, I'll just use his convent name – Abraham.

We see a few problems developing. On one hand, we have the complete and utter selfishness of man becoming so rampant that entire cities are falling prey to their wickedness. God knows that, if this evil continues, it will soon destroy itself and all the others with it. When men in power oppress others and lead with selfishness as their only focus, soon there will be no one able to even suggest another way to live.

On the other hand, we have Abraham, who has this budding new relationship with God. There are all these promises of how Abraham is going to father this wonderful lineage of God's people and how they will flourish, and even kings will come from his line. Yet so far, not only does it seem quite unlikely by the way the people seem to be turning more and more away from God, but Abraham doesn't even have a son yet.

So here is where we pick up this story now.

Genesis 18:1-2

**God appeared to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. It was the hottest part of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing. He ran from his tent to greet them and bowed before them.**

These three men were on a journey down to the valley, but they stopped by Abraham's place first. Take some time to notice what Abraham does.

He bows and bids them to come in and eat with him. He rallies his wife, Sarah, to bake some bread. He gets some cheese and has his servants roast a calf. Abraham eats with them under his large shade tree.

We sometimes pass this off as an Eastern custom or a nomadic protocol. But it was more than just good 'ole Eastern hospitality. Providing shelter, food, and honor to your guests was also a means by which these remote families and tribes survived. Sometimes a visiting traveler meant vital news or trade. We have to remember this was before the days of modern communication or actually any real organized communication. These travelers represented the only viable form of networking known to man at that time. If you were in a strange land and remotely isolated from anyone else, a traveler to

your tent would have been a blessing and a celebrated break from the daily routine. They were considered to be every bit a gift to you as you were to them.

So while lunch is going on, they have this conversation with Abraham, and they let him know that when they come back the following year, Sarah is going to have a baby. Though it was hard to understand how Abraham, who was now 100 years old, and Sarah, 90, could actually become pregnant, God reminded both of them. Is anything too hard for God?

We have to realize, you and I look at this story, we read these words, and we just say, “Yeah, that’s a great line God; you’re right – you are so awesome!” But we have the luxury of seeing him all down through history and then in the human form of Jesus Christ. Abraham had none of those memories, or stories, or Scriptures to memorize. When God said that to Abraham, it was the first time anyone had ever heard it. It says that Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

As the men were leaving, the Bible says that they were heading toward Sodom, and this is where the story turns serious. God talks what seems to be under his breath to the two other angels.

“Should I really keep what’s going to happen from my friend Abraham?”

You get this feeling that Abraham is now becoming more than just an “earthly faithful.” In this next conversation, you almost get the impression that God is elevating Abraham to a position of confidant. He shares with him not only his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but also about these deafening cries for help from those who are victims in those cities.

Remember, Abraham’s nephew is now living in one of those cities. He and his family are residents of Sodom. This puts Abraham in a difficult position.

God has just shared with him the plan where Abraham would have a child, and he would father the first family of “faith.” And now God also confides in him his plan to start solving the wickedness problem by wiping out these two cities.

So the next thing Abraham does is to start bargaining with God, as if maybe he hadn’t thought it out well enough. Not only does he insist that God is not thinking clearly, he even blocks him from leaving his property. So much so, that the two other men go on without him. God stays and has this little banter back and forth with Abraham.

“But God, surely you will be able to find enough people in this city that are righteous that would give you reason not to destroy it, right?”

You get the impression that God had not only visited to share information, but that now he was truly engaged with Abraham in a real relationship—so much so that there was actually true listening and understanding.

“Abraham, I want to go down there and see if for myself,” God says.

You and I know that God doesn’t need to physically go anywhere; he already is everywhere. But this story helps us understand how involved God wants to be in our lives. He wants us to let him in; he wants to come and join us. Even here in the beginning of civilization, God wants to be Emanuel, “God With Us.”

It says that the other two men make it down to Sodom around late afternoon, and who should be at the gate? No other than Lot himself, and he says to them, "Come and stay with me." No doubt he had learned a few things from his uncle. They say, "No, don't worry about us; we'll stay in the city square." But Lot insists and they go with him. Lot's probably thinking, "These guys have no idea the danger they're in if they think that can sleep out in middle of the city!" When they arrive at his home, Lot tries to be as hospitable as possible, but it really makes no mention of anything that anyone did except the fact that Lot himself made them a hot meal for supper.

And then the pounding began. No doubt, Lot tried to get these men inside his house quickly before anyone else saw them, but apparently he wasn't quick enough. They started shouting at Lot saying that they wanted him to send them out.

Genesis 19:5

They yelled to Lot, "Where are the men who are staying with you for the night? Bring them out so we can have our sport with them!"

What a huge contrast to the way Abraham had treated these men, and the way this town was now treating them. They had just confirmed what God had said to Abraham. The wickedness and selfishness was so blatant and so strong that they would block out any attempt of redemption before it even got to those victims who were crying out.

There's a connection here, listen to the words of Jesus to the disciples:

"When you enter a town and are not received, go out in the street and say, 'The only thing we got from you is the dirt on our feet, and we're giving it back. Did you have any idea that God's kingdom was right on your doorstep?' Sodom will have it better on Judgment Day than the town that rejects you.

God was desperately trying to provide a way for all of his children to come to trust him again. Yet, it was as if Satan had created a force field around these innocent cries so that they could not even see God to accept him.

Now some want to make this story into an example of how God hates gays. However, that way of thinking is not only a manipulative handling of Scripture, it is also a misrepresentation of God as he is revealed in the entirety of Scripture.

Were these men doing evil? And was there a sexual element to their aggression? By all means. But there doesn't seem to be any anti-woman bias in the context, and for us to make a link between the heartless, violent and obsessive behavior of these men and that of gay individuals is more than poor exegesis; it's shallow.

If God were in the business of destroying people because of their behaviors, we would not be here today. However, what God is in the business of is revealing his character to mankind. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet writes that Sodom and Gomorrah, along with their sister cities, had an abundance of everything. But nothing was shared with the poor. People were crying out for justice and mercy, but only hatred and selfishness could be found. And what made matters totally hopeless was that no one could come to their rescue. The outside world was literally cut off, and travelers were met with dishonor and ruin.

Yet, even with the destruction of their city looming like a giant wrecking ball making its final swing, the two angels literally had to grab a hold of Lot and drag him out of the city. His wife and daughters only followed him because that was what they had to do. No one really wanted to leave. No one really wanted to take the warning seriously. But it happened, and both Sodom and Gomorrah were gone by the next morning.

So maybe we should ask again, “Why is this story relevant?”

I'd like to go back to the original digital camera again. This was presented by a young engineer named of Steven Sasson. In 1975 he presented his technology to the CEO and other VPs of the company he worked for, Kodak. They looked at it and said, “Okay thanks, but we're really not interested in it.” You see, at that time Kodak had a monopoly on everything from photo film to photo paper and every process in between. To them, this had no future. They laughed and said, “Who is going to want to look at pictures on their TVs?” So Steven's invention was never really promoted or supported by Kodak. Fast forward 30 years, and now Kodak is shutting down almost all of its film plants and realizing that, even though they invented the digital camera, they were too far behind the rest of the completion now to ever make a profit in the digital camera world.

All of us, for one reason or another, harbor a little bit of Sodom and Gomorrah in us. We can't help it; it's a daily struggle. Whether it's our pride, our apathy, or just the fact that we want it our own way. God says to us that his thoughts are not ours, and his ways are not our ways. So as he stands at our church's doorstep, will he truly see a church without walls where our hearts and minds are focused on others and not just on ourselves?

Though we will never fully comprehend the mind of God, though our efforts many times will fail and though our humanness will no doubt show through – if we decide to let God in, our church will make a difference in the life of our community, and you will see your life coming closer and closer to God's thoughts and God's ways.