

Following the Biblical Stream:

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Part LXXXV

Last time, we covered how God, along with two angels, came by Abraham's tent on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah and how much Abraham desired them to stop and stay for awhile. This went into the story of God telling Sarah more directly how she would have a son with Abraham and her response to that news. All this led us up to God and the angels going on to the mission that brought them by in the first place, which would take the angels to the cities. We ended with the conversation Abraham had with God concerning what it would take to spare the cities. This brought us to the end of Genesis chapter 18, but there is a little more we want to talk about before we fully move on into chapter 19.

As chapter 18 ends we are told Abraham returned to his home, but we are not told anything specific about exactly where God went after His conversation with Abraham concluded. We are simply told, "And the LORD went his way,..." However, we should feel confident that this was not to say God followed and certainly not that He joined the two angels, because the first verse of chapter 19 clearly tells us only the two angels came to Sodom. We might want to interpret this as saying God went back to what we often call heaven, but we should keep in mind that "heaven," when not speaking in the terms of the place Jesus said He was going to prepare for all those who believe upon Him, is a very general term. We should take this opportunity to not overlook what we've been talking about in how God bothered to come down to the Tower of Babel, and in this incident to see the cities He was passing judgment on. Thus, saying God went on His way is to say He went on doing whatever business God had to do. Whether that was to return to some "place" like that of more permanent residence, which we might generically call heaven, or whether it was to go on to another place on this earth, universe, or for lack of a word, "domain" of any sort is not only something really not for us to know the specifics of, but possibly something outside our comprehension.

At the same time, we really should consider how God bothered to come down to see the city and tower man was building after the flood, and again here at Sodom and Gomorrah. This isn't just for the reasons we have already touched on, but also for the fact that in this situation of Sodom and Gomorrah these were not the only people on the planet. This story is preserved for

us because it affects the specific plan God was working, to develop a chosen nation through Abraham, and more specifically the land God was going to, one day, give to that nation. However, in general, it serves as a great study into the very nature of The God Who created us, and that has a lot to do with why it is preserved for us as well. In reading about it, we must consider that we do not know at what other times and places God might have taken actions we are not told about. To be clear on this point, I'm speaking to the idea that God took actions on this earth among other people which may or may not have so directly affected the development of the chosen nation. Just as today we do not know exactly how and when God is intervening in the lives of individuals and larger groups as well; so too, we do not know what all actions God may have taken in the past. As I mentioned, it may not be any of our business, to be blunt, but this fact speaks to why God created a chosen nation. In many ways, they became a witness, whether good or bad, and for that reason we are told of many items that concern the nation which among other people might have been kept more out of the view of the larger world and certainly not preserved for future generations to know.

Now, I don't bring up any of this to start some conspiracy about God working among other people all over the world to do the same things He did with the chosen nation, and it's just the chosen nation we are shown! What I'm trying to speak to is the simple fact God did not limit Himself to only deal with the chosen nation on items that have to do with mankind's general development. For that reason I want to be clear I'm talking about the generality of God making the judgment that the end of Sodom and Gomorrah had come before Him in the same way the end of all flesh had come before God at the time of the flood. Of course, we do not know if God ever took such drastic actions against any other group, city, or the like, and this is all speculation. However, it is good speculation on the basis that it is part of meditating on the Word of God. We should understand that while God wanted to deal with these specific cities because they affected the chosen nation and its land, the story itself shows us the working of God among men, which when we see it at the Tower of Babel it was very universal to mankind. The flood before it and, of course, the actions taken by God at the time of Adam and Eve's sin in the garden also fit into this universal category. However, just because we are talking now about a time when God was laying out His plan for salvation in putting together a chosen nation, to

whom He would eventually give the Law and send The Messiah through, does not mean God's efforts and judgments all of a sudden became exclusive to them.

Quite the opposite is actually what we should take from the overall story we see here, because God's purpose in setting a plan in action for establishing a chosen nation was to save all of humanity! It did not just become God's will that none perish and all come to repentance after Jesus came to this earth. That has always been the will of God! (II Pet. 3:9) Many times in reading the Old Testament we forget this. Maybe we don't forget it on a level of ever saying it is part of our doctrine, but it becomes part of how we generally interpret what we are reading. When we do this, we end up thinking in terms of God picking a certain people to be His chosen nation as a way of hand picking who are His people and who are not. That's a mistake! God forming a chosen nation was a way for us to be sure we were/are seeing The God Who created us all working the plan of salvation people such as Abraham, Job, and the like, knew God would provide long before the nation was formed and the Law was given. Having chosen people has always been about the rule of whosoever will come to God, and the fact that we do not choose God, He chooses us. (John 15:16, Rev. 22:17) Is there exclusion in who will ultimately make it to heaven and who will not? Of course there will be, but we must quantify this in our heads and get it correct as to why.

God's will is that none perish, meaning He has chosen every last one of us to be His people. However, God gave us a free will, meaning He will not force us to be His people, and that is why we say it's not God's will that any perish instead of saying God won't allow anyone to perish! That is an important distinction to make and one to keep firmly in mind as we look at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. These facts are where we get the back and forth about whether God chose us or we chose Him. It might seem complicated but it really is not. God does not want us to be without Him, and that is why Paul tells us he is convinced nothing can separate us from the love of God. (Rom. 8:38-39) God so loved not just a specific people but the world as a whole that He gave His only begotten Son to die for us! (John 3:16) However, in the end result it is still up to what we want in life and out of life that dictates what we are going to be and where we will end up for eternity. Because judging each individual's life and intentions on the basis of what each one knows, understands, and has desired to know and understand, is a complex thing only God can do. However, this is why we are told that on Judgment

Day the books will be opened and each of us will be judged according to the things in the books. (Rev. 20:11-15) How real these books will be and how metaphorical this is, is not important. The point is, God knows everything we've done and only He sees our heart. (I Sam. 16:7)

No matter what people say or do in their life, only God knows the real reasons behind each individual's actions. Thus, motivation is a big part of what we will be judged on. Now, God does give us a list of things in I Corinthians 6:9-10 and Revelation 21:7-8 which points out the kind of people who all have a place - shall we say - reserved in the lake of fire, but this is not so we may judge the lives of others. It is there for three specific reasons. First, it is there so we may judge ourselves. If we want to make it to heaven we cannot be the kind of people, doing the kind of actions that are listed there. Does this mean one mistake and you're done? No, it means this can't be the lifestyle you take on and/or a pattern in your behavior if you want to have any hope of making it in the end. You also need to understand that when we find these things in our life, we need to ask for forgiveness and move forward not continuing in these actions or ignoring them with the excuse that, God gives us all grace.

The second specific point for which this list exists is to help us instruct others. Now, this is where we often get into that accusation of being judgmental, but understand there is a difference between informing people about what God has made clear and passing the final judgment on their life. The verses that say we are not to judge are there to tell us not to think we have the power to judge anyone but ourselves, and in turn this means it should be clear no one else's judgment of us is a reason to give up or change something we feel God has told us to do or not do. Only God can and will judge us in the end! This last point is what really helped Job through his trial as he was told of how he must have done something to displease God in order to bring on such bad fortune. His wife told him to just curse God and die. His friends continued to push for him to repent of things he was not guilty of as if God was some pagan god that could be appeased by simple groveling. Job had to hold strong to the point that no matter what they all had to say, this issue was between him and God alone. (Job 13:13-18) Job turned out to be right in that God was allowing Him to go through this not because Job had done something specific to displease God, but because none of us are perfect and this was an opportunity to take Job even further down the path of righteousness

than he had already made it.

As for the list of the kind of people we cannot be and make it into heaven, not only is our second point about warning and informing others not about passing judgment, but, in truth, it is our responsibility. After we have told others what God's Word tells us, it then becomes the responsibility of those who have been told. Just as was the case with Job, it is up to the individual to do with the information what they choose to in spite of what others think. People choosing for themselves, and only for themselves, brings us to the third specific reason this list exists, and that is to comfort those who do choose to serve God. This point is a delicate one and one I hope to convey in a way that brings understanding. This is because I do not want anyone to believe this has to do with being arrogant or self-righteous, and if we are not we should easily see what I'm about to say. We live in a world of sin, and as we go into the story of the two angels' journey into Sodom and Gomorrah, we see clearly how bad that can be for those who attempt to live righteously! Even later in II Peter 2:6-8 we are told that Lot living there caused him to be vexed day in and day out. The simple truth is that as those who strive to live for God are vexed, persecuted, and even killed for their beliefs and lifestyles, it is comforting to know that the kind of people who cause true believers these troubles will not be something we have to deal with for eternity. When God takes us to that place He is preparing, it will not be just a repeat or reset of anything we have here. It will be a new beginning guaranteed to be devoid of these troubles.

This brings us to the God choosing us part versus us choosing Him. He chose us before He ever created humanity; that's the point we already covered about God's will. However, not everyone chooses God. For those who clearly reject God in their words and refusal to listen to anything God tries to tell them, this is an obvious thing. However, there is no shortage of people who claim to serve God, and in this group the range and extent to which this shows any truth in their lives is vast, to say the least. As I said before, only God can judge who out of all these are truly attempting to serve Him with their whole heart and who is just claiming to be. However, this also has to do with exactly why we say God chooses us. We can go around telling everyone how much we love, serve, and want God, but that does not mean we really care. There are those who say big things with their mouths that they know very good and well are not really true feelings of their heart. These people will often be very guarded in the actions

they take in the sight of other people so as to appear to be what they claim, but God knows the truth no matter what!

The part that should cause all of us to be working on our salvation in fear and trembling is the truth that even if we fully believe we are not one of the people I just spoke of, this also does not make it true! Far too often no matter if people start off in the right direction or not, they come to some place where they feel comfortable living and allow their growth in God to stagnate. In reality, there is no stagnation when it comes to our walk with The Lord. Our growth can be very slow, and at times we can feel we are not growing at all, even if we actually are. However, faith is a relationship and a relationship must be maintained. Unlike human family and friends who may be a great distance from one another or get very busy with no real time to spend with one another, this is not the case with God. With human relationships we can say that true love keeps the relationship strong no matter how little or much we can actually see one another, and I'm not saying this is not possible, but the point with God is that He is never far from us unless we push Him away!

It can be bad enough for us to stop taking the time we once did, or maybe never did, in seeking God without distraction, but it is very easy to go from that state to the one where we do not even listen to God as we go about our daily lives no matter how busy we are or are not. This is why I say there is no real stagnation when it comes to true faith. We either make God a priority in our daily lives, which is something we have no excuse not to do on the basis He is just not available to us, or we choose not to. Friends can be very busy, but that does not mean they do not directly maintain their relationship when they have an opportunity to work side by side day after day. This is why it is so much easier to carry on a relationship with someone you go to school with, work with, or see for some reason on a daily or close to daily basis than it is to maintain a long distance relationship. We can love someone very much, but if we can not be with them regularly it is just a fact we do not know what is going on with them, and when we do see them time has to be spent "catching up." Yet even doing this still means we have not experienced their lives by being there with them through the events they go through. Again, we never have to do this with God. He sees us on a daily basis, it's just up to us whether we pay any attention to Him and what He's trying to tell us, show us, lead us to, etc.

Because this is all true, we can claim that we have chosen God and know full well we don't really care, we can claim we choose God and believe some simple formula is what will get us into heaven, we can claim we choose God and believe our definition of being a good person is good enough, or we can claim to choose God and really believe we are doing what we should. However, in the end only God can choose those who truly walked with Him in faith because that is the life they really desire, and yes, I mean desire as in present tense not the past tense of desired. Why? Because God is looking for those who find the path of righteousness and are attracted to it not just because of the reward they believe it holds at the end of their life, but because they see it as the most desirable way to live! These are the people God will populate heaven with, and God's mercy in giving us the opportunity to find this path and figure out this is what we want is shown in this story about Sodom and Gomorrah. In the first place, God comes down to see the situation close up. God then allows Abraham to plead for the cities on the basis there might be a few righteous in them. To this point it is important that we see, Abraham was not asking for the cities to be spared on the basis there might be a few righteous people in them who did not deserve to die! How do we know this? Because to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Phili. 1:20-26)

As we covered above, it is vexing to the soul of the righteous to have to live in a world of sin. It is even more vexing to live in as sinful a place and/or with sinful people directly as Lot did in living in these cities. It was foolish for Lot to live there, and discussing why he and his family were given the opportunity to be spared is something I'm sure we will get into as this study goes along. That aside for now, the point is that if there had been even the lowest number of ten men in these cities which Abraham asked God if He would spare the cities for, these ten, if not rescued from the place as Lot was, probably would have welcomed being destroyed along with the place so they might go on into eternity with God instead of living in this sinful world. If we grasp this understanding of what the truth in life is about, which is that "heaven" is not just a reset or continuance of the same pitfalls and suffering we experience here nor about the consequences of bad actions simply being removed in some magical way, but a place of life lived among only others who all desire only righteousness, then we see Abraham's question in a better way.

What we see is that Abraham was asking God if it would be worth sparing the cities if there were just this

many or that many, all the way down to only ten for whom there was - hope of salvation. It is to this inquiry that God answers yes it would be worth sparing all the cities with all the destructive influence they had on the entire land. God would have spared them if there was hope for even just ten to find and desire the path of righteousness. This is an astonishing thought in regard to how much God wants us to choose our own way without major interference on His part, and it should both comfort us and terrify us at the same time! If we think again about how God is The One Who chooses us, we can be terrified by the feeling of insecurity in having no assurance we are saved, but that's the point - we are not! Until we have passed from this life and found ourselves called unto Jesus' side, we are not saved. We still live in this world which vexes us. This means we are also still in a world full of temptation to step off of the path of righteousness and/or lose sight of how much righteousness is what we understand to be the best way to live. Does that sound like salvation?

The only thing that assures us day by day that we are going to be saved is our direct relationship with God, Who has promised He will not leave us nor forsake us. Faith is the substance of the salvation we hope for and the evidence of the salvation we have not yet experienced. (Heb. 11:1) That is our assurance, but it comes only in us walking a path we choose to walk and continue to walk through all the sinful vexing this world throws at us. This is why we must have God's help to find true righteousness, but we must find our own way without God's major interference to push us into it. A truth I have known since I was a child and have come to know in a deeper sense as I've gotten older and older is that it is when the devil stops bothering you that one should get worried. You see, unlike God, the devil cannot be everywhere at all times and neither can those angels who followed him in rebelling against God. This means they have to pick and choose when and how much effort to put forth in attacking the one who is a true believer or on the brink of finding the path of righteousness. When the devil no longer finds it worth his time and resources to attack you, it means he is not worried about losing you to the other side and/or he's certainly not worried your efforts in life are leading others to God, of which there is no activity one can do that runs more contrary to the devil's desires!

On the other hand, we go back to the truth God is always with us and this is not effected by how much or little He is with anything else He deals with. If we combine this understanding with the truth that God's

presence in our life is the substance of what salvation means to us here and the evidence that we are on the right track, it means that for God to be taking major interventive steps to lead us to salvation would, in the end, make it seem we are on the right path when we are not. It would seem He is taking us to salvation in spite of the fact we have not made the choice for ourselves. This would be misleading us, and God is not going to do this. This point is just another reason why God Himself did not follow the angels into Sodom and Gomorrah. For all the other reasons He would not, even Lot needed to know that God only sent angels to lead him out of the cities he had so foolishly chosen to live in. I believe Lot, being who he was and knowing who Abraham was, understood pretty well that even the truth that angels came to lead him out had to do with the righteousness of Abraham and not because even Lot deserved it. This is an example of what I'm saying.

None of this is to say God is not taking steps in the lives of many people, and in various ways the lives of all people, to ensure they have a chance to find the path of righteousness and choose it. This is seen in all the stories I just keep hammering on, like the confounding of the language at the tower, the sending of the flood in Noah's day, and the actions God took after Adam and Eve sinned, as well as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, as we just covered in talking about Lot, there is also the truth that when there are those who serve God, intervening on your part to God and asking for Him to work in your life, one will see God's hand and work more prevalent than when we do not have such people. Now, this does not mean you will like what you see. If your desire is to resist God and His ways, you may find this a constant bother in your life, and that should be very good evidence to you that you are not on the right track. If God intervening in your life is something that upsets you, it goes without saying you are not desiring righteousness nor on the path that leads to salvation! On the other hand, if you are someone who desires the righteous path, your walk in faith may not start out with any - to use an expression - "fireworks" at all. You may simply find yourself serving God as if it was something you were born to do, which by the way, it was/is!

Now, some might argue it is unfair that there are those who have intervention for them and those who do not, but understand God is a just God. In the end, God gives to every person the opportunity to find and follow the path of righteousness. To explain what I just did is not to talk about God being a respecter of persons,

for the Word tells us He is not. (I Pet. 1:15-21) It is simply to say that some may see more prevalent intervention while others are not as aware that God is working for their salvation. To those who desire the ways of righteousness, seeing this will, at the very least, someday be something they look back on and are very grateful for; but for those who do not ultimately choose the path, no matter if they do so for a time, they will find it to be anything from a bother to just plain useless. I think where more often than not the real difference comes in for those who have someone intervening to God for them, probably has a lot to do with at what point in your earthly existence you get the opportunity to start walking in the faith that makes you feel secure you're on the right path. This, of course, can also affect how much you might be able to work for God in your lifetime. This is why being raised in a true Christian home can be a great advantage. There can be far fewer wasted years of you looking for the path and feeling confident you're on it. In either case, none of this hinders anyone who desires true salvation from obtaining it, and having a better opportunity to find the path can in some way be just as much a disadvantage for some as it is an advantage for others. We are all unique individuals!

As we look at our study here, this is what the conversation Abraham had with God about sparing the cities had to do with. God was not sending angels to preach throughout the cities in order to give them an opportunity to repent in a like way God would later send Jonah to Nineveh when that city faced the same kind of judgment. No matter how many people there were in the cities who may have believed they were good people, there was not even ten who would have responded to the message of repentance or God would have let nature take its course in the lives of all those in these cities. God's intervention in destroying these cities would be for the sake of those outside the cities who did have hope of finding and following the path that leads to salvation, a hope which Sodom and Gomorrah's continuance would have stolen from them!

Until next time, Shalom!

