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Here's what hit me 1 – The God of Sodom and Gomorrah – 1.10.10 - Genesis 18:16 – 19:29

The legend is that Isaac Newton sat under a tree and was hit on the head by a falling apple, and thereby discovered gravity. In reality, he got hit by a fig and discovered the fig Newton. But in either case, it hit me recently to preach a series on the things that hit me as I listen through the Bible. I trust that what hits me isn't accidental but the teaching of the Holy Spirit. And as I listened through Genesis early this week, here's what hit me: To talk about the God of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The text is **Genesis 18:16 – 19:29**, and when I heard it, here's what hit me:

1. Much of what happens in this passage is for our benefit – for ours as the reader, for Abraham as the participant, for the first Hebrews who heard this text read aloud in their meetings. There is a little drama acted out and a little negotiation that takes place that would be unnecessary if the all-knowing God were simply to act. But he honors Abraham, his chosen man, by making him part of the process.

This is just after the Lord and two divine beings came and told Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son in their old age. Abraham, after all, was 99 years old when he got this visit.

In **Genesis 18:16** it says that ¹⁶ **When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.** ¹⁷ **Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"** ¹⁸ **Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.** ¹⁹ **For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."** There is God's reason right there. How will Abraham direct his children and pass along the lesson of what is about to happen to future generations if he is left in the dark about why God does what he does?

This next line is what hit me first: ²⁰ **Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."**

We were talking this Wednesday after our small group about RFID tags. When runners line up for a marathon these days, they each have a radio-frequency identification chip strapped to their shoe. When the gun goes off, thousands or tens of thousands of runners cross a mat which reads the tag at the start line in a few minutes and the computer that keeps the time records each one of them via the RFID. The same thing happens at the finish line. We were talking about how industry is beginning to apply this technology. Soon it will be common for a semi-trailer to pull up to Wal-Mart, drive across a mat, and every item in the truck is recorded instantly in inventory. And at the front of the store, you'll push your fully-loaded

cart across a mat and your entire order will be rung up in an instant without unloading the cart. Some folks like to say that if you got a swine flu shot, the government injected you with an RFID so they now know that you got here 6 minutes late today!

If we, with our limited minds and technology, can track that much activity, the all-knowing God, creator of heaven and earth, doesn't really need to go down to Sodom in person to figure out if these people are as bad as he heard. I think this is acted out for our benefit, scripted to teach us the vital lesson in accordance with the way our minds work. "I heard the report", God says. "There is a terrible outcry against this place. Let me go down and see for myself if it could possibly be as bad as I have heard". That shows us something about God, which I'll say more about in a moment.

Then a little bargaining takes place which again shows for our benefit something special about God. (Listen to it from *The Bible Experience*).

22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

26 The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

29 Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?"

He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

30 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?"

He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

31 Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?"

He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

32 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?"

He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

33 When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

It would be odd indeed if the Judge of the earth was less merciful than the man he had chosen to bear his name, and if the all-knowing Lord of all had failed to consider all the options, and you might get that idea about this negotiation if it was between two people. But this negotiation, which was an honored feature of the culture in that place and time, is here to teach us something.

I'm currently reading a book called *Three Cups of Tea* (lent to me by Laura Weigle) in which a young man, having failed to climb one of the world's tallest mountains, wanders into a small village in Pakistan. It has been days since he has bathed, shaved, eaten properly, or slept well. If he wandered up to your front porch and knocked on your door, what would you do? Ask him what he wants. Call the police. Give him an apple you have lying on the counter. Call a neighbor so that you feel safe. Call the shelter in Knoxville to see if he can spend the night. Call the church to see if we can get him a bus ticket somewhere.

When he walked into this high-altitude village, the children surrounded him, took him to the chief elder who then pulled him into his own tiny hut, sat him down at the stove, covered him with a blanket, and prepared him some tea and porridge and waited in silence while he ate and drank. And only then did he draw up close and ask: "What are you DOING here?"

Different cultures have different ways of handling odd situations. In Abraham's place we would jump ahead and say: "Lord, that is a wicked place, but I have a nephew living there. Can we save him? Can we get him out?" Abraham lives at a time when you don't just ask for what you want. There is a time-honored and expected way to negotiate your way to those very few righteous folks (at least he hopes they are still righteous) who live in a wicked city. So the negotiation plays out – and God lets it play out – in the way that they do things in Abraham's world.

But more importantly – don't you suppose the sustainer of the world knows how many people in Sodom still call upon his name? Sure he does. This is for our benefit and it shows us something about God, which I'll say more about in a moment.

Now we're in **Genesis 19 - ¹ The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning."**

"No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square."

³ But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. ⁴ Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. ⁵ They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."

Now comes a part that I just can't explain, or explain away, the kind of thing that would be edited out of the Bible if it were merely a piece of propaganda that somebody was writing to invent a religion: **⁶ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him ⁷ and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."**

I don't have kids of my own but I have two god daughters that I think highly of, for whom I feel a lot of responsibility. What Lot suggests is unthinkable. I understand that it was SO important in that culture to protect the visitors who came under your roof. I suppose it's reasonable to say that Lot recognized these two men as messengers of heaven, and how do you turn over two visitors from God to a lustful mob? I get

that. But to offer up your daughters is beyond the pale, and I can't rationalize it. I can just say, "Here it is. This is what happened. This is what he said."

But it didn't make any difference, and listen to the mob's response: ⁹ **"Get out of our way," they replied. And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them."** Sound familiar? Who are YOU to judge us? You can't judge! You don't know us, you aren't one of us. You keep to your own ways and we'll keep to ours! This fellow came here as an alien and now he wants to play the judge! **They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.**

¹⁰ **But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door.** ¹¹ Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

¹² 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, ¹³ 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."

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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."

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. ¹⁷ 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!"

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²³ By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. ²⁴ Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. ²⁵ Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. ²⁶ But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

²⁷ Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. ²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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's what else hit me:

2. God isn't unclear about how he feels about the sin in Sodom and Gomorrah. The passage that grabbed my attention was this: **"The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me (18:20-21).** As I said, the act of going down to the city to find out is for our benefit, and the benefit is that we see firsthand that God is serious about sin. He doesn't laugh at it, or take a causal attitude toward

it. He doesn't want to dig down and try to find the grain of truth hidden behind the lie and he doesn't think that everyone should have a right to do whatever they want and decide for themselves what is right. He simply says: "I have heard that it's bad. I'm going down to see if it possibly could be as bad as I've heard."

So what was this great outcry about? What was this great sin? The easy answer is "homosexuality". The very term "sodomy" comes from this passage, after all. And it is true that the Bible throughout calls homosexual behavior a sin, in the Old Testament and the New, while at the same time never giving Christians permission to treat homosexuals or anyone else in any other way than the way of Jesus (love your enemies, serve the outcast, and all that). And all the men of Sodom, young and old, do mob up at Lot's door and demand, **"Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."**

But to say, "well, this is all about gays" leaves out a lot, and we need to admit that when we leave out a lot, we let ourselves off the hook. If all the men of the city had demanded Lot's daughters instead, would we feel better about that? "Well, at least they're straight!" Of course not! This is a mob bent on rape. This is animal behavior, satanic. When we turn our humanity over to our passions, our desires and actions get further and further out of control.

But that's not the whole story either. Ezekiel, speaking for the Lord, lays this on us while he is condemning Jerusalem of the day for her sins: ⁴⁹ " **Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.** ⁵⁰ **They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen"** (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Now it's true that this isn't what the angels saw that night in Sodom – or if they did, it was overshadowed by the mob at Lot's door. But when God says that he has heard a great outcry about this place, this gluttonous selfishness in the light of starving people was part of it.

Last week I saw part of the trailer for a new movie (which I won't name). The things people said in this 30 second trailer were so filthy that I'm sure they wouldn't have been in an X-rated movie when my parents were teenagers. And then I heard those words from **Genesis: "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me (18:20-21)**. When we let ourselves follow our lusts and put ourselves at the center of everything and we consume, consume, consume and we teach our kids to do the same, our souls rot, our culture decays. Someone I've forgotten used to go around saying: "If God doesn't judge America, he'll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah".

Here's the last thing that hit me:

3. Unbelievably, God wants to show mercy, which may be the forgotten element of the story. "What's the story of Sodom and Gomorrah teach us?" "God destroys the wicked". Yes, but how many people were in that city? No one knows for sure. Probably now fewer than a couple hundred, maybe as many as a couple thousand. And God says: I'll stay my hand for 50 righteous people. Or 45. Or 40, 30, 20, even 10. I said that this bargaining was for our benefit, but I don't mean that it is false. God would have spared a city overrun by wickedness for the sake of only a couple of families.

That's a hint of the Gospel, and anytime we study passages like Sodom and Gomorrah, we need to end up at the cross – because our God, the God of Sodom and Gomorrah, doesn't take your sin or mine lightly. He doesn't laugh at it or ignore it. He hates it just like you hate cancer in a loved one. It will end it

your destruction if that becomes your will. But God is merciful and is unwilling for you to die in your sins. He doesn't just judge sin and condemn it. He paid the price for it.

Will you accept it?