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A Morning to Remember (Genesis 19:23-29)

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There are certain events that take place in history that are recognized from the moment of their occurrence as "milestone events." They mark a turning point in the tide of human affairs and determine the subsequent course of history. The bombing of Pearl Harbor was one of those events. It marked a turning point in history, by insuring the entry of the United States into the Second World War, which would lead in time to the defeat of the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific.

This morning, we are going to look at an extremely important "milestone event" in history. Biblical scholars estimate that it took place around the year 2070 B. C., but the exact date cannot be ascertained. What we know from Scripture is that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and two others cities on the plain Jordan River took place on a single fateful day in the historical past-- a day which began like any other, but which ended quickly in a terrifying storm of fire and brimstone falling from the sky, burning up the inhabitants of those cities with all their possessions.

There are actually three notable events that took place on that dreadful day of history that are recorded for our instruction in the nineteenth chapter of the book of Genesis. The first is the destruction of Sodom and the other cities of the Jordan river valley. The second is the doom of Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom in direct disobedience to the Lord's explicit command. The third is the deliverance of Lot from harm, which took place in fulfillment of Abraham's intercession on behalf of the righteous living in Sodom. From these three events, we learn a great deal about God's righteous character, the nature of sin, and the important role that intercession plays in the outworking of God's purposes for His elect people. That is why God wants us to remember all of these events.

I. The Destruction of Sodom (vs. 23-25)

This morning, however, we will focus only on the first of these events-- the destruction of Sodom. It is important for us in our day to remember this cataclysmic event and the reason it took place. God had given forewarning of Sodom's destruction to Lot and his family, and for that reason, they had left the city in the early morning just before daybreak, led away by two angels who literally dragged them from their home and conducted them through the city gates out into the fields around Sodom. There,

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God told Lot and his family to flee to the mountains east of the city, but Lot beseeched the Lord to allow them to flee to a nearby city called Zoar, and amazingly, God granted Lot's request. In so doing, He showed mercy to the inhabitants of Zoar, since that was the only city in this river plain that was spared destruction.

So that is where the narrative begins this morning. It is early morning. The sun has just risen over the mountains to the east of the Jordan River Valley and is shining down cheerfully over the whole plain. It is a peaceful scene of pastoral quiet and tranquility. We can see in our mind's eye shepherds taking their flocks out to graze in the open fields and farmers busily at work plowing furrows in the rich soil. In Sodom and the other cities of the plain, the inhabitants are waking up groggily from the previous night's revels and the city streets are stirring to life. No one has the slightest idea of the sudden calamity that is about to overtake them; nor did anyone take the slightest notice of the departure of Lot and his family from Sodom and their arrival in the city of Zoar just as the sun was rising.

Then suddenly, it happens. As soon as Lot and his two daughters are in the city of refuge to which they have fled, God opens the storm clouds of His wrath upon that valley and its inhabitants. Without warning, the heavens begin to rain fire and the people begin to be pelted with flaming brimstone-- a highly flammable substance similar to asphalt or tar. There is no escape from the raging tempest of fire, for wherever you go, balls of fire are falling from the sky, setting everything ablaze. Soon all the roofs of the city are a raging inferno; buildings are collapsing, a fire-generated wind blows the scorching flames through all the streets, so that there is no place to escape. The flames surround people on every side, licking at their clothing and setting them ablaze like a thousand torches. The screams of terror and pain go up and are heard above the constantly growing roar of the flames. The entire city turns into a furnace. It is a scene of utter horror and devastation. And it is a scene that God wants us to observe very carefully, because of what it reveals to us about His character as God.

What words can we use to describe the cataclysmic judgment that came on Sodom and the other cities of the plain?

A. Factual-- The first thing we must say about this event is that it is factual-- that is to say, it actually occurred. It is not a made up legend or story, but an event that really happened in time and space just as surely as any other calamity we read about in the annals of history. Of course, there are many secular scholars who claim that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is a myth. But they have no reason to say that

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other than their rejection of the idea that God would wipe out entire cities in order to judge the inhabitants of those cities for their sins.

The interesting thing is that, even outside the Bible, we find corroborating evidence that supports the record we find here in Genesis 19. For example, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is reported even by pagan historians of the ancient world, such as the Roman historian Tacitus, who makes reference to it in his writings.

In modern times, archaeologists have turned up some interesting discoveries that are consistent with what we find in the biblical narrative. For example, certain ancient tablets discovered at Ebla contain inscriptions that refer to Sodom and Admah, two cities mentioned in Genesis 19. Moreover, in an area south of the Dead Sea, ruins have been found of several ancient cities that were destroyed by fire. Two dig sites in particular, called by their modern Arabic names of Bab Edh-Dhra and Numeida, and are considered by some archaeologists to be the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Both cities show signs of having been completely destroyed in a massive fire that consumed them completely. There is a layer of spongy ash covering the entire area around these cities that is nearly three feet in depth in some places.

I should point out, however, that other archaeologists are convinced that a more likely site for the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah is found in an area north of the Dead Sea, in a place called Tall el-Hamman. Here archaeologists have found evidence of a massive fire that left an ancient city completely incinerated. They found scorched foundations and floors buried under three feet of dark grey ash, and dozens of pieces of broken pottery that appear to have melted from intense heat. The glassy appearance of this pottery suggests they were briefly exposed to temperatures of over 2000 degrees Fahrenheit, which is approximately the heat of molten lava. All these things suggest that the city was destroyed in a sudden, raging fire that burned it to a crisp.

The point I am making is simply this-- given the ample historical and archaeological evidence we find outside the Bible that is consistent with the Bible's teaching on Sodom and Gomorrah, there is no reason at all for modern scholars to reject the record of Genesis 19 as mythical. There is every reason to accept the biblical account of Sodom's destruction as historically factual. The only reason modern scholars reject that account is because of their anti-Christian bias-- in particular, their hatred of the biblical truth that God judges the wicked.

B. Supernatural-- The second thing we can say about the event of Sodom's destruction is that it was a supernatural event. By that I mean that what we see take place in this

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chapter cannot be explained merely in terms of a natural event like a volcanic explosion. Why do I say that? Because there is something extraordinary about what took place here; it is unlike any other disaster we read about in history.

First, the destruction of Sodom was extraordinary in its timing-- it came just after the angels had confirmed the great wickedness of the people of Sodom and Lot had entered into the safety of Zoar, the city to which he had fled for refuge. It was also extraordinary in its sweeping extent-- this fire fell from heaven, not just on one, but on four cities, and the destruction was so complete that not a single person survived but Lot and his two daughters. Moreover, the destruction was executed with pinpoint accuracy. By that I mean, all the citizens of Sodom and three other cities were wiped out completely, but not a single one of the citizens of Zoar were destroyed-- which is remarkable, since it was located in the same general vicinity. This was clearly a miracle-- as if a wall of protection surrounded that one city.

Some scholars have tried to explain what happened to her in terms of natural forces alone. They point to the fact that underlying the plain of the Jordan River are many subterranean deposits of a petroleum-based substance called bitumen, which is like asphalt. Bitumen contains a high amount of sulfur, which is easily ignited. Moreover, there is a fault line that runs through the Jordan valley that is subject to frequent tremors. It has been theorized that pressure from an earthquake could force through the fault line those deposits of bitumen along with flammable gases, which could then easily be ignited by lightning or some other natural force, causing a massive explosion. The bitumen would then fall to earth in the form of burning pieces of rock. The extruded deposits of bitumen would also catch fire, setting the entire valley ablaze.

What are we to think of the idea that God used natural forces involving earthquakes, lightning, and subterranean deposits of bitumen to produce this disaster? The only thing we can say is that it is highly speculative. God could have used any means he chose, but the text says nothing at all about earthquakes, lightning, or bitumen deposits. It speaks simply of God raining down fire and brimstone on these cities from heaven, while sparing a fifth city that was in very close proximity to them. To me, that sounds like a miraculous event that cannot be fully explained in terms of natural forces with which man is familiar. If God's judgment on the cities of the plain did employ natural forces, then in that case, it is clear that God overruled those forces by miracle to produce a surgically precise act of divine judgment. As Geoff Thomas puts it, "The destruction of the cities and the entire region didn't just happen because tectonic plates moved-- even by God at that moment. This event was by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. He decreed that this heinous place

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should be annihilated, and it was. Even the vegetation was destroyed. The very reason Lot chose for moving there was obliterated . . . The place was destroyed, never to be habitable again."

C. Sudden and Unexpected-- The third thing we can say about Sodom's destruction is that it came suddenly and unexpectedly. It came when the inhabitants of that city were feeling secure in their wickedness and unaccountable to anyone for their actions. The fact it happened suddenly, however, does not mean that God acted hastily; on the contrary, God gave them ample room for repentance. His dealings with them well illustrate His character as a God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy" (Psalm 103:8). Extra-biblical sources tell us that the city existed for fifty-two years before it was judged by God. So God withheld His hand of judgment for years as an expression of His patience, for He takes no delight in judging sinners for their sins. If in the long-run, God judged the cities of the plain for their hard-heartedness, yet that judgment came only after a prolonged period of trial, in which God gave the people ample room to consider their ways, and to turn from their wickedness. But all His cries to them were met with mockery and outrage, as we see in the way they responded to Lot.

Jesus tells us in the gospels that the day of final judgment will come in like manner. It will overtake the unbeliever swiftly and unexpectedly, like a thief invading a home in the dark of night. In Lot's day, Jesus says in Luke 17, people "ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke 17:28-30). Because of this parallel that Jesus draws between God's judgment of Sodom and the judgment of the last day, Genesis 19 is relevant to every generation that dwells on the face of the earth. It is relevant because the God of the Bible doesn't change in His character or His ways. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. Therefore, the events recorded in this chapter are as relevant for us today as they were for Abraham who witnessed these events with his own eyes.

F. Just-- One final thing we can say about the destruction of Sodom is that it was just. As horrifying as it was, it was an absolutely just act by God as the righteous Judge of all. God was not cruel or sadistic in sending fire and brimstone on this corrupt city. He was impeccably just. It was an event that had to occur in order for God to uphold the moral government of the universe, and to display for all time His hatred of sin.

When we speak of the justice of God's judgment of Sodom, the question that naturally arises is, what was the fundamental sin of Sodom for which it was judged? It

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is important for us to have an answer ready to that question because of the times in which we are living. We live in days in which the old landmarks are being removed and traditional views of Scripture are being challenged. Consequently, some are now saying that the traditional view of God's judgment of Sodom must be reexamined. In the past, Christians generally understood that the people of Sodom were judged for the practice of homosexuality, which was rampant there. But that view is now being challenged.

What is surprising is that even some scholars who recognize that the Bible speaks against homosexuality in other passages of Scripture believe that the sin for which God judged Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexuality, but rather, the sin of inhospitality to strangers. These scholars say that what angered God about the conduct of the men of Sodom was the way they treated strangers. Instead of being kind to them and showing them hospitality, they abused them and mistreated them by acting in a bullying manner toward them. Why? For the same reasons people bully others today. Some bullies want to impress their peers by showing themselves to be powerful and strong, and they do that by terrorizing those who are weak. Some bullies are driven by a desire to express their anger at the world by taking out that anger on innocent people. Since they feel like victims themselves, they express their feelings of rage by victimizing others. Still, there are others who engage in bullying behavior out of desire to declare their rebellion against authority. As one writer says, "Because it is frowned upon, bullying is the quintessential act of defiance, a declaration of autonomy. Their behavior screams, "You can't tell me what to do. I do exactly what I want, when I want." Finally, there are bullies who engage in bullying behavior simply because they find it fun-- they get a thrill out of dominating other people, making them cower or beg for mercy. They have a cruel streak in them that makes them enjoy inflicting pain on others. It gives them a sense of empowerment. They think, "I am somebody to be reckoned with, because I have the power to inflict pain on others."

As I said, there are a number of theologians in our day who claim that the sin of Sodom was not so much the sin of homosexuality as the sin of inhospitality. The men of Sodom wanted to bully any strangers to their city, and the way they chose to do that was by raping them. This was more an act of violence than an act of sexual lust; it was motivated, not by sensual desire, but by a desire to dominate, intimidate, and humiliate others. Consequently, say these theologians, Genesis 19 really tells us nothing about God's attitude toward consensual relations between two persons of the same sex-- relations based on mutual desire or mutual willingness. It only speaks against abusive relationships, in which one person dominates another against his will. It speaks against violence and bullying, but says nothing against homosexuality per se.

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Well, how ought we to respond that argument? First, we must admit that the men of Sodom were indeed guilty of bullying the two strangers in Lot's house. It must also be admitted that God hates bullying, and that it provokes His righteous wrath. He hates any act involving violence, or cruel abuse of others-- especially of the weak and vulnerable. Therefore, it is correct to see the sin of bullying figuring into the mix of sins of which the people of Sodom were guilty.

It would be completely unwarranted to conclude from that, however, that God's condemnation of the men of Sodom had nothing to do with the perverted sexual activities in which they engaged. That would contradict the Bible, which explicitly affirms that at least one of the reasons why God condemned the people of that city was because of their habitual practice of sexual immorality. We see that taught in the epistle of Jude, where we read in verse 7 that "Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."

There are several things to note here. First, Jude says that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had "given themselves over" to sexual immorality. This indicates that this had become their habitual practice. It wasn't simply that once in a while, whenever a stranger came into town, the people got sadistic pleasure out of bullying him by sexually abusing him. No, they were given over to sexual immorality-- meaning, that was their lifestyle, their daily practice. This is likely what God is referring to when he says to Abraham in Genesis 18 that "the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great. . .because their sin is very grave." The Lord was outraged, not only by the way the people gave themselves over to sexual immorality, but by the way they corrupted their own children by subjecting them to the sights and sounds of immoral behavior every day. Such complete disregard for the moral formation of young people would certainly constitute an outcry against the people of Sodom in the ears of God. The values of modesty and chastity were openly mocked and scorned and total sexual license was praised and celebrated.

No doubt, it is that habitual practice of sexual immorality that the apostle Peter has in mind when he speaks of the "filthy conduct of the wicked" that oppressed righteous Lot, so that he was "tormented from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless conduct" (2 Peter 2:8). Surely this verse does not refer only to bullying, but to grossly immoral practices which Lot was compelled to witness day after day, as the men of the city, engaged in filthy deeds in plain sight.

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Another thing to point out about Jude 7 is the reference to "strange flesh." The men of Sodom had gone after "strange flesh" Jude says. The word "strange" literally means "other," and in the context of sexual relations, the idea of going after "other flesh" refers to going after flesh that is outside of or contrary to the order of nature. Some might think that Jude is referring to the fact that the men of Sodom sought to unite sexually with angelic beings, but keep in mind, the men of Sodom did not know that the two strangers in Lot's house were angels. They thought they were men. So it is clear that the reference to "other flesh" has in view the fact that these were men seeking to have sexual relations with other men, and that is something contrary to the order of nature. So the sin here condemned in the men of Sodom is the sin of lusting after other men and seeking to have sexual relations with them. This is always contrary to the will of God, even when the relations are consensual-- that is, by mutual consent of both parties involved, as Paul makes clear in Romans 2:28.

The third thing to point out about Jude 7 is that their sin was so great in the eyes of God that God determined to "set them forth as an example." How did He do that? By punishing them for their sin-- and that involved, not only sending a temporal fire upon their city that was quickly extinguished, but it also involved consigning them personally to the eternal fire of hell itself. Jude says that they are set forth as an example by "suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." Jude is highlighting the horrific, eternal consequences that will befall all unrepentant sinners who persist in rebelling against the Lord and refusing to turn from their rebellion. They will be punished eternally for their sin.

The apostle Peter makes the same point when he says in his second epistle that God,

"Turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes," condemned the people of those cities to destruction, thereby "making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly."

God wants all of humanity to take a good long look at the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, in order to realize the terrible end that will befall all those who live in flagrant rebellion against God's authority and righteous will. The end of such persons is "the vengeance of eternal fire."

I know this is a sobering sermon this morning; and I have not lightened it up with funny stories and illustrations, because it is ought to fill with a sense of deep sobriety. I believe this is a very needed message for the time in which we are living-- a time in which gross sexual morality and flagrant perversion are not only tolerated in

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our society, and publicly portrayed in movies and television programs with growing frequency in order to desensitize the public, but it is actively promoted, and even celebrated by many leaders in our society-- in our halls of government, in the news media, in Hollywood, in our universities, colleges, and public schools, and even in some so-called Christian churches that have abandoned "the faith once for all delivered to the saints."

What we must never forget, however, is God's view of these matters-- for ultimately, God's view is the only one that counts. And God has shown us in His Word how he regards sexual lawlessness and immorality of all stripes. He has shown us by destroying four ancient cities and by consigning the inhabitants of those cities to the fires of hell. I know I won't win a prize for political correctness by speaking so bluntly, but my solemn duty as a minister of God's Word is to declare the teaching of God's Word on this subject without adding to it or taking away from it. That is the problem with the "new view" of Sodom that I have mentioned, which says that God judged the people of Sodom simply because they were bullies, not because of their sexually perverted practices. That view must be rejected, not because of what it affirms, but because of what it denies. It is right in what it affirms-- for the people of Sodom were bullies. They were horribly abusive to strangers. They violated the law of hospitality. I have no quarrel with that. But the new view goes wrong in what it denies-- for the people were also given over to depraved sexual practices, and that is one of the main reasons why God destroyed those cities with fire.

What we also need to realize is that all the outward sins of the people against their neighbors stemmed from the same spiritual root, which was a spirit of pride. The prophet Ezekiel points this out in the sixteenth chapter of his prophecy when he says that the people of Sodom "had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination" before the Lord; therefore, the Lord "took them away as He saw fit."

Notice how Ezekiel analyzes the root problem in Sodom. It was the sin of pride. The people of Sodom had been blessed materially by God. They enjoyed "fullness of food." But because of their pride, instead of acknowledging God as the source of their prosperity and giving Him thanks, they became complacent and self-satisfied to the point that they denied their need of God altogether. Their prosperity also made them lazy-- as Ezekiel puts it, they had "abundance of idleness." This fatal combination of pride, wealth, and idleness is what worked their spiritual ruin by making them self-centered and irreligious. On the one hand, they became insensitive to the needs of others, and failed to lend a helping hand to the poor and needy. On the other hand,

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they became haughty and puffed up, so that instead of serving God, they served only themselves and their own lusts. They worshipped the creature rather than the Creator and spent all their time inventing new and increasingly perverse ways to pursue hedonistic pleasure. They engaged in practices that Ezekiel calls an "abomination."

Does that sound familiar? It ought to, because it is exactly what we are facing today in America. Multitudes of Americans, made fat with material prosperity, having fullness of food and abundance of idleness, are falling into the same sins that brought God's judgment on Sodom-- sins of pride, ingratitude, forgetfulness of God, gluttony, self-indulgence, self-centeredness, indifference to the needs of others, and a haughty attitude that justifies every abomination and every form of sexual perversion in the name of freedom and hedonistic pleasure.

Is there any hope for our nation? There is, but only if we are willing to learn the lesson God would have us learn from the smoking ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nothing will save us but an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit bringing national revival, but that has to begin with an attitude of self-humbling and repentance on the part of every one of us who is privileged to have the Word of God in our language and to hear the call to repentance ringing in our ears. God, the living and true God, is not a God to be mocked. He is righteous and holy, and takes no pleasure in wickedness, and He will certainly judge the unrepentant wicked, by sending them to hell. But the good news is that He will also save any and every sinner who, understanding the wickedness of his heart, turns in a spirit of humility and faith to the Savior whom God has sent, turning away from his sins and embracing the Savior in self-despairing trust.

Left to ourselves and the corruption of our own wills, we would fall into the same moral decadence and perversity that we see in the people of Sodom. We are no better than they; we have the same capacity for corruption as they. That is why we have nothing of ourselves in which to boast. If God has spared us suffering a similar fate, that is owing wholly to His sovereign mercy.

Keep in mind, moreover, that the greatest sin for which people will be judged is not homosexuality or any sin of carnal indulgence. It is the sin of rejecting Jesus Christ, the only Savior of men, whom God the Father sent into the world. That is why Jesus said to His disciples regarding the cities in which the gospel had been preaching without bearing any fruit, "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for that city!" (Matthew 10:15).

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? He is saying that as bad as sins of sexual perversion are-- or for that matter, sins of bullying or inhospitality to strangers--

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they are not as heinous as the sin of hearing the good news of salvation by Jesus Christ and rejecting it. Why? Because the gospel reveals to us the heavenly solution to our sin problem. We cannot save ourselves from any of our sin-- by nature we are sin's slaves and can do nothing to change our own hearts. We can no more pull ourselves up to heaven by our good works than we could lift ourselves off the ground by pulling on our boot straps. But Jesus Christ, revealed in the gospel, can save us from every one of our sins. He can save us from sexual sins, from sins of pride and idolatry and indifference to the needs of others and from whatever sins that have ensnared us. But if we refuse to hear the good news, if we turn a deaf ear to it, and will not be led by Christ's tender invitations to lay of hold of Him as our Savior, what hope is there for us? That is why rejection of Christ is the most heinous of sins. There is no greater offense that we can ever commit that to hear the glad tidings of salvation announced to us and to turn a deaf ear to those tidings. May you not be guilty of such a terrible sin. Seek the Savior now while he calls to you! Learn the lesson God would have you learn from the smoking ruin of Sodom, and do not follow in the path of that ill-fated city. Amen.