

The sin of Sodom

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THE STORY OF Sodom is often seen as a story of destruction and punishment, both at the corporate and the individual level. Sodom was destroyed, as was Lot's wife. The story of Sodom is also a story of salvation, a story about an imperfect man, Lot, and how he was saved through faith.

We know that Sodom was a very sinful city and that it was destroyed because of its sinfulness. However, we are not told explicitly in Genesis what the sin of Sodom actually was. The story does tell us implicitly how the Sodomites sinned, and serves as a warning that we must not sin in the same way. What is more, the sin of Sodom is something that each of us can commit, and we can probably commit it without even noticing.

Sodom in Genesis

The first few references to Sodom are fairly neutral. We know that it was on the Canaanite border (Gen. 10:19). It was in a fertile, prosperous region (13:10). The people of Sodom were "wicked and sinners" before God (v. 13). The King of Sodom was Bera (14:2), and when Bera went to war with Chedorlaomer, Lot was captured. Abraham rescued Lot, and in doing so he rescued Bera and his men. He would not accept any reward for this (ch. 14).

Genesis 18 and 19 contain the most detail about Sodom. At the start of Genesis 18, three angels visit Abraham and Sarah. Abraham welcomes them into his tent. Although he does not immediately recognise them as angels, he nonetheless treats them as honoured guests, feeding them and making them comfortable.

After promising Abraham and Sarah a child, the angels set off towards Sodom, and here we get the first indication that Sodom's days are numbered: "And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know" (vv. 20,21).

The wickedness of Sodom was already well established. The angels had not yet set foot in the city, and its sin was already considered to be

very grievous. What we are seeing here is God's formal process of judgement. He did not have to send the angels to Sodom to find out how evil the city was; He already knew. God was prepared to send Jonah to Nineveh, giving the Ninevites the chance to repent. The Sodomites were also sent messengers from God, and they also had the same chance to repent. The people of Nineveh responded, but the people of Sodom, as we see in Genesis 19, did not.

Abraham was a man of God, and he knew what Sodom was like. He knew what the angels would find. He asked that Sodom be spared if as few as ten righteous people were found there. God agreed; Sodom would be spared if there were even ten righteous people there.

The welcome the angels received in Sodom could hardly contrast more with the welcome they received at Abraham's tent. They were treated as honoured guests by all of Abraham's household. At Sodom, the only one who welcomed them was Lot himself. Lot's wife, his daughters and his sons-in-law are conspicuous by their absence. Lot's family sinned by inaction. The people of Sodom then tried to commit a terrible sin through action: "But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: and they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them" (vv. 4,5).

Abraham had done everything he could to make the visitors welcome, even though he had never met them before. The people of Sodom wanted to take the visitors out of the comfort of Lot's care and physically abuse them in the worst possible way.

Sometimes this incident is portrayed as sinful because of the gross inhospitality. At other times the attempted gang rape is seen as the core sin. Both points of view contain some truth. The Sodomites were inhospitable, but that inhospitality was not just a casual neglect of the visitors, it was an active attempt to harm them, two men who were on their own, two men who, as far as they could see, had no means of defence. There

can be no doubt. The sin the men of Sodom were attempting to commit was very grievous.

Grievous though the sin was, this specific incident was not the reason for the destruction of Sodom, however. The sinful nature of the city was already well established when the angels arrived. Abraham knew what the angels would find, and he knew it would lead to the destruction of the city, and that is why he pleaded that the city should be spared if there were even ten righteous people there. The people of Sodom were already being described as wicked at the time of Genesis 13.

What was the sin of Sodom? What was it about Sodom that made Lot's wife look back? To answer these questions we need to look at some of the later references to Sodom.

Sodom in Isaiah and Jeremiah

We get an indication of the nature of Sodom in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah says:

"Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats" (1:10,11).

These words were directed at the rulers and people of Israel. Their ostentatious sacrifices were being offered in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. The people this message was directed at had distorted religion. They were worshipping God in a way He did not want them to.

The people are also compared to Sodom and Gomorrah. They would not have been compared to Sodom if they had had nothing in common with Sodom. The issue under discussion is inappropriate worship. Isaiah 1 at the very least suggests that Sodom was also worshipping God in a distorted, unwanted, manner.

False worship is also associated with Sodom and Gomorrah in Jeremiah:

"I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria; they prophesied in Baal, and caused My people Israel to err. I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto Me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah" (23:13,14).

The prophets of Jerusalem are said to commit adultery, walk in lies, and strengthen the hand of evildoers. This support of evildoers also features in the most important Old Testament reference to Sodom outside of Genesis, in Ezekiel 16.

Sodom in Ezekiel

Ezekiel tells us exactly what the sin of Sodom was: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before Me: therefore I took them away as I saw good" (16:49,50). This is why the sin of Sodom is a warning to us all. It was not something unspeakable that only some people are prone to commit; it was pride, materialism, haughtiness, and neglect of the poor and needy.

Have you ever been proud? Have you been materialistic? Have you been haughty? If you answer yes to any of these questions, and I think all of us can, then you have committed the same iniquity as Sodom. Have you neglected the poor and the needy? Have you supported evildoers? Then you have committed the sin of Sodom.

Consider the two angels from the point of view of the Sodomites. Here were two travellers with no means of defence. They had nowhere to sleep. The people of Sodom neglected these poor and needy travellers. Later on, the whole city worked together in the attempted gang rape. There is no record of anybody apart from Lot trying to stop it. Some of the people, those at the back of the crowd, would merely have been failing to strengthen the hand of the poor and needy through their inaction. Those towards the front were actively adding their support, strengthening the hand of those at the front, those evil people who led the mob.

The Sodomites "committed abomination". The Hebrew word translated "abomination" here is *tow'ebah*. In the Old Testament this word is normally used in connection with conscious inappropriate worship. Idol worship, for example, is considered *tow'ebah* in Deuteronomy 7:26. Someone who did not know any better would not be committing *tow'ebah* by sacrificing to an idol; someone who knew the Law of Moses certainly would.

At the very least, the use of *tow'ebah* in Ezekiel 16:50 suggests that the people of Sodom did have some knowledge of God that they rejected. Ezekiel 16 is directed towards Jerusalem. If the

people of Sodom had heard the Word of God as the people of Jerusalem had then it is even more appropriate that Sodom and Jerusalem are considered sisters. They not only shared a knowledge of God, they also shared a rejection of God. The people of Sodom were not ignorant innocents punished by a brutal God.

Sodom in the Gospels

Of the five references to Sodom in the Gospels, three reinforce the connection between Sodom and inhospitality: Matthew 10:15, Mark 6:11 and Luke 10:12. Hospitality—kindness to others—is a key part of Christ’s teaching, and we would expect that a city destroyed for inhospitality, neglect of the poor and needy, would feature as an example. Here is the Matthew verse in its context, the instructions of Jesus to the twelve when he sent them forth:

“Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat. And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter, enquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence. And when ye come into an house, salute it. And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it: but if it be not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city” (vv. 9-15).

One of the other references, Matthew 11:23,24, simply uses Sodom as an example of an iniquitous city. The final reference uses Sodom as a warning for the followers of Christ living in the last days:

“And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed” (Lk. 17:26-30).

The days of Lot and the days of Noah had one important thing in common: the people were worldly and materialistic, and that is what people will be like before the return of Christ. There will be pride, fullness of bread, abundance of idleness, neglect of the poor and needy again.

Sodom in the rest of the New Testament

The parallels between the days of Lot, the days of Noah and the last days are used as exhortation in 2 Peter 2:5-9:

“. . . and [God] spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (for that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished”.

Just as Lot was vexed with the filthy conversation—the godless, incontinent lifestyles—of those around him, so the disciples of Christ are vexed by the godless, incontinent people of the twenty-first century. To be vexed by these things is not the same as fearing that we have been abandoned by God. “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly”, and, as He delivered Lot, so He will also deliver us.

A further reference to Sodom in the New Testament is found in Jude:

“I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not. And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, He hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (vv. 5-7).

There are three groups here: “the people out of the land of Egypt”, “the angels which kept not their first estate”, and “Sodom and Gomorrha”.

The first two groups rebelled against God and were punished, so Jude supports my conclusion that Sodom and Gomorrah were not godless cities destroyed for their godlessness, but were rebellious cities destroyed for their rebellion, just as “the people out of the land of Egypt” and “the angels which kept not their first estate” were punished for their rebellion.

“Remember Lot’s wife”

The fate of Lot’s wife is probably the most chilling aspect of the story of Sodom:

“And it came to pass, when they [the angels] had brought them [Lot, his wife and daughters] forth abroad, that he said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed . . . The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar. Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:17, 23-26).

Lot’s wife looked back, and for that transgression she was killed. When I was growing up I used to have the image of Lot and his family fleeing from Sodom with terrible sounds behind them, and Lot’s wife being struck down for glancing over her shoulder, perhaps showing concern for the people she had once lived with.

That is not what happened. It was not a casual glance that cost her her life, not a concerned glance as they were fleeing. Lot’s wife looked back after they had escaped. They had reached safety, saved by the hand of God. She looked back with longing, she looked back to the city where they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, and they built, but they did not concern themselves with the things of God. She had been saved from Sodom, but she did not really want to be. She snatched damnation from the jaws of salvation.

This is why Christ tells us to remember Lot’s wife. Looking over your shoulder is not intrinsically sinful. Looking back with desire to a sinful, godless lifestyle, is what we must never do. Look at what Christ describes in the verses which follow the passage from Luke 17 quoted above:

“Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed. In that day, he which

shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (vv. 30-33).

He that was on the housetop was not to go back for his possessions, he that was in the field was to leave without his things. And the third example? “Remember Lot’s wife”. Do not go back for your material things, for your lifestyle, your stuff in the house. Remember Lot’s wife. She was worldly, and that was her downfall.

I think just about every Christadelphian has loved ones who do not follow Christ. It is difficult. I am sure that each of us has, in the darkness of the night, thought that they might look back as Lot’s wife did. And I am sure that each of us is frightened by that. Yes, we must remember Lot’s wife, and pray that we never look back as she did.

But we must also remember Lot. Even when receiving a direct instruction from his angelic visitors, Lot hesitated and disobeyed, and he hesitated and disobeyed because of his family:

“And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city. But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law. And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying, Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters, which are here; lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city. And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the LORD being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city” (Gen. 19:14-16).

It would not be human, it would not be Christian, to have a casual disregard for your family, whoever they may be. When we hear the wonderful message that Christ has returned, there will be a part of each of us that wants to linger, part of us that wants to stay behind to save those we love. That is normal because that is what love is. The Lord was merciful to Lot, and the angels led him by the hand to safety. The Lord is merciful to us, and it is His good pleasure to give us the Kingdom. Lot was not condemned for his human compassion, and we will not be condemned for ours either.