

"Wickedness Destroyed – Obedience Rewarded"
 Genesis 19:1-22:24
 Carol Martin

Over the summer Chuck and I took a little mini-vacation to Nebraska to visit our grandson, Patrick, and meet our fifteenth great-grandchild, Grayson. It's been quite a while since we were on an airplane. I like the window seat if it's available because you can just look down and get a big picture perspective of the landscape below. It almost looks like a patchwork quilt, doesn't it? I found myself thinking how God must view the big picture of this whole earth with a calmness of His eternal plan in mind, and yet be so near to each of us that He knows not only the external number of hairs on our head, but the internal thoughts and motives of our hearts.

Knowing I was going to do this week's lecture, I was meditating on how to approach this lesson's Scripture, and it seemed to me perhaps it would be best to step back – take the mile high view – and see what we can apply to our lives in three areas of broad perspective:

- 1) The perspective of influence
- 2) The perspective of internal motivation
- 3) The perspective of integrity.

The lesson this week finds Lot at the city gate of Sodom. This was a place of prominence where the legal, civil and business transactions were conducted. Potentially he was in a place to be an influence for righteousness. And we do need to remember that, as weak and passive as Lot was, he remained a believer.

2 Peter 2:7,8 says, "Lot, a righteous man, was distressed by the filthy lives of the lawless, for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard." He may have been entrenched in Sodom's city affairs, but certainly he was not completely naive about its moral condition.

So, when visitors to the city arrived, Lot was quick to urge them to spend the night in safety of his home. You may remember the story we studied in Judges 19 about the Levite and his concubine. They went into Gibeah to spend the night. Judges 19:15 says, "They went and sat in the city square, but no one took them into his home for the night." That was the custom of the day. You sat in the square until some kind soul offered hospitality. For the Levite an old man came in from the fields and offered his home. But, like Lot's visitors, the men of the city came demanding sex and were given the Levite's concubine, whom they raped to death. (But that's another story.)

The point is, offering hospitality was a sacred trust. There was no way Lot would violate that. So, Lot stepped outside and proposed a compromise . . . his virgin daughters. Was this a legitimate offer or just a ploy? Martin Luther believed he was just being shrewd and expected the citizens of Sodom to reject his offer. They didn't want women, they wanted men. Regardless, the angelic visitors came to the rescue by blinding the men at the door.

You know, when God sent the flood in Noah's day, it was a universal judgment. Now it was a judgment of destruction on cities. We need to remember that **judgment is God's finalizing of man's decisions**. Sodom and Gomorrah's fate for wickedness was destruction.

If you're at all familiar with the narrow land of Israel, you find at the north, the Sea of Galilee feeding into the Jordan River which flows into the Salt Sea, also known as the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is below sea level and it has no outlet. It is just stagnant, polluted, reeking water. The Dead Sea today covers the remains of Sodom and Gomorrah.

So, what was Lot's influence on Sodom? It would appear very little. Maybe his little bit of influence did stay God's wrath in grace much longer than Sodom deserved. But conversely, when we consider Sodom's influence on Lot's family, we get a new perspective. First of all, when the family was told they must leave and be quick about it, Lot hesitated; the others thought it a joke. Here are angels on a mission from God – not only to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but to save Lot and his family . . . and Lot drags his feet! He doesn't seem to appreciate what's being done for him, does he?

Isn't sin comfortable? Isn't compromise and rationalization easy? How well Satan knows we'll tolerate a lot of things we recognize as wrong rather than take steps to change either them or us.

The angels have to lead them out by the hand! Is that resistance to change or what?! There were five cities on the plain of Jordan destined for destruction according to scholars. Lot was told to flee to the mountains, but begged to go to the little city of Zoar. (He really liked city life, didn't he?) His request was granted, Zoar was spared and Lot, his wife and daughters escaped just in time. Burning sulfur and asphalt rained down on all the inhabitants. But Lot's wife looked back – did she miss her friends, her house, her possessions? Her disobedience caused her to be turned into a pillar of salt. What a lesson – flee from immorality and don't look back! The influence of wickedness is so subtle, so destructive. God's desire is that we saved out from among it.

Now over here is Abraham – he sees the smoke. Was Lot saved? The smoke carried a clear message. I am the Lord! Vengeance is Mine! Be holy for I am holy! And the message for us today?

1) **God is still a God of holiness.** He's still grieved by sin. He still gets angry when it's flaunted in His face. One commentator remarked that, "If God doesn't judge America for its wickedness, He owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology." Wicked influences are still with us. Which brings me to another observation,

2) **Depravity has not improved over the centuries.** It is still going to be judged by God and we need to flee from its corrupting influence in our lives. The answer?

3) **God's grace is still our only hope for survival.** Today is the day of salvation. It's the power and influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit that can and will protect us from every fiery dart of Satan.

Billy Graham remarked, "When the morals of society are upset, the family is the first to suffer. . . The breaking up of a home does not often make the headlines, but it eats like termites at the structure of the nation."

Former Harvard professor Carle Zimmerman wrote in his book Family and Civilization published in 1947 (76 years ago) about these signs of a deteriorating family:

- Marriage loses its sacredness and is frequently broken by divorce.
- Traditional meaning of marriage ceremony is lost.
- The feminist movements abound.
- Increased public disrespect for parents and authority in general.
- Acceleration of juvenile delinquency, promiscuity and rebellion.
- Refusal of people with traditional marriages to accept family responsibilities.
- Growing desire for and acceptance of adultery.
- Increasing interest in and spread of sexual perversions and sex related crimes.

There is no limit to what a family will do if it lacks moral guidelines. Today we're often guilty of passive parenting. One old TV ad used to ask, "Do you know where your children are?" Perhaps it should have followed up with the question, "What are you going to do about it?" One of most important marks of good parenting is staying aware of children's lifestyles and whereabouts. Who or what is exerting influence over them besides you?

Lot had moved his family into place of extreme debauchery. He failed to establish a standard of holiness. His daughters ran with men who took spiritual matters lightly. When a crisis occurred, like visitors being accosted, no one turned to the Lord. Finally, incest and lack of shame.

Two acts of incest between Lot and his daughters would bring bitter fruit. The Moabites and the Ammorites would always be thorns in the side of Israel.

Well, from thinking about a perspective of influence, let's look with perspective at internal motivations.

Abraham is on the road again. Same song, second verse . . . he lies about his relationship with Sarah to Abimelech. The name Abimelech means "my father is king." One interesting thing I read is that Abimelech might have been a title for kings just as Pharaoh was the title for the ruler of Egypt. Nonetheless, we find that Abimelech is mentioned five times in Scripture and we need to remember they are different men.

I want you to give me some feedback . . . what are some motives that drive us as human beings (good or bad)?

Greed, Fear, Love, Self-preservation, Hunger, Lust, Envy, Protection, etc.

Certainly, for Abraham with Abimelech, it appeared to be fear and self-preservation. And he used that age-old line "do this to prove you love me." There really is nothing new under the sun, is there? And fear of man . . . that is perpetually in front of us, often times more so after we become Christians. We're afraid to witness, or afraid to speak out about injustice, or afraid to let co-workers know we're Christian because they might think we're a "goody two-shoes."

"Holier than thou." We fear rejection. What a victory we claim when we really believe, "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world!" (1 John 4:4)

Let's think about Abimelech . . . here is a presumed heathen, yet God spoke to him in a dream . . . and he listened! Here was a man motivated by lust to take Sarah in the first place, but also a man of conscience. He believed Abraham; his conscience was clear and God knew that. I, for one, am glad God judges the thoughts and intents of the heart. Don't we sometimes do things with clear conscience only to recognize latter it was wrong or out of God's will? God knows, He directs us; He protects us oftentimes from ourselves, and most of all He forgives us.

I like the character Abimelech shows, don't you? There's no retaliation; he offers Abraham the hospitality of the land; and even peacefully settles the dispute over the well. God liked it too. He listened to Abraham's prayer of intercession and opened the wombs of Abimelech's household so there would be children.

Do you ever ask yourself, "What's my motive for doing this?" Is it to gain the favor/applause of men? Is it because I'm afraid God can't or won't handle this, so I'll do it? Is it that I love God, more than any inconvenience this may cause me? Self-examination of motive is good for us and should drive us to our knees either in confession or praise.

God had promised Sarah and Abraham a son. In this lesson, Isaac is born. Abraham's motive now was love of God as he obeyed the covenant terms and circumcised Isaac on the eighth day. Sarah rejoiced. By the way, you may know that the name Isaac means laughter. You can imagine what joy filled that household as a son was born!

But there was another son and yet another motive revealed . . . jealousy. God's forgiveness means our souls are pure, but though sins are forgotten by God, their consequences often live on. Remember: **though every act of sin is forgivable, the effects of some sins are not erasable.** Ishmael was a reminder of running ahead of God, and he had been a reminder for 14 years. As far as Sarah was concerned, Ishmael and Hagar had to go.

God may have chosen Isaac, but He honored Abraham's motive of protection and concern for his own flesh and blood and God didn't forget Ishmael.

Hagar was once again turned out into the wilderness. (A picture of the world.) She may have been without security of Abraham's camp, but God was there. And what's more He had a promise for a future. Someone commented that Hagar was the first recorded "single parent." There isn't time to explore that in depth, but with God's provision, we can see that they survived apart from Abraham's resources. And Ishmael did become a nation.

Well, next we turn our focus on the perspective of integrity. What does that mean? Simply put, integrity is doing what you said you would do. The old saying, "A man's word is his bond."

Let's look at God's integrity: There are two things to remember about God's promises: 1) **He's not in a hurry** and 2) **He never forgets or retracts His word.** **God's promises are fulfilled more by our obedience than by our calendars.**

Also, not all Bible promises are applicable to all people. Some are universal if Scripture says "whoever or anyone." Like Romans 10:13, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Some, however, may be personal – like Abraham's offspring will go to Egypt 400 years.

Or they may be conditional – James 4:10 "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and He will exalt you." 1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Now the real test of integrity for Abraham is on the line with the sacrifice of Isaac. Was God really God in Abraham's life? Was the covenant between them binding? Abraham's obedience was immediate, based on faith . . . thorough and complete. Isaac's spirit it would seem was as strong as his father's . . . no record that he struggled against his father's instruction.

God knew what Abraham would do, it was Abraham who needed to know the extent of his faith . . . and He passed the test. Here are a couple of things we might remember for ourselves –

1) What you retain for yourself, is usually what God asks you to release to Him. If something has become more important to you than it should be, God is likely to address your possessiveness.

2) What you release to God, He replaces with something even more valuable. Abraham released his grip on Isaac only to receive him back again with a greater appreciation for both his son and for God.

3) What God replaces he also rewards. What began as the greatest loss for Abraham was the greatest reward for us . . . through Isaac's line would come the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you're like me, it's hard to give some things over to God. Obedience can be hard. I like the prayer of A. W. Tozer in his book The Pursuit of God. Listen,

"Father, I want to know Thee, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self, so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without a rival. Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for Thyself wilt be the light of it, and there shall be no night there. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

Some things are sure:

- 1) **When we obey, God becomes more real;**
- 2) **When we obey, God relieves the pressure as He affirms our faith;**

- 3) **When we obey, God provides; and**
- 4) **When we obey, God multiplies His blessings as He ratifies His promises.**

So, what perspective do you have about this lesson?

Regarding influence – will you be positive to change your world, or will the world have the upper hand in your thoughts, words and deeds?

Regarding internal motivations – will your motivation to serve and please God be uppermost, or will you even question occasionally why you're doing what you do?

Regarding integrity – you may never have the severe test that Abraham did, and your test may be going on now or coming in the days to come, but will you be faithful to do what you've said you'll do . . . follow Jesus no matter what?

I have family in Kansas, and when I think of Kansas the Wizard of Oz movie comes to mind. Dorothy had a change of perspective . . . she found out "there's no place like home." I'm glad to we were able to travel, glad to have thought through some of the lessons God has to show us in these Scriptures. There are no magic "red shoes" to whisk us back in time ready to do or think about things differently. All we can do is go on, learn from the past and commit ourselves anew to whatever challenge God has ahead for us.

Let's pray. Father, You are holy; You are faithful; You are just. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, we know the truth that judgment will come to those who reject Your offer of grace and forgiveness. Depravity is all around us, yet Your Holy Spirit helps us to stay true to our faith and rely on You and Your promise to help us overcome sin and walk through this life with integrity that befits a child of God. We're so grateful for Your love and multiple blessings. We honor you in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Doxology