**Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 14,
Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 18-19**

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This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews and his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 14, Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 18-19.

Lesson 14 pertains especially to Sodom and Gomorrah, and I think there are three items that we'll focus on in terms of the way we can learn from this.

The first is the near relationship that's developing between God and Abraham, a closer relationship, a deeper relationship. The second thing I think we learn from this is that Abraham will continue to indicate his role of intercession, intercession on behalf of others, and that he shows his care and interest for others. This will remind us of the promise in chapter 12, verse 3, where it speaks of Abraham as a vehicle of blessing for all peoples and how he has a very important intercessory role.

The third thing we'll want to talk about today is God's justice and mercy. Before we talk about Sodom and Gomorrah, we start with chapter 18, verses 1 through 15, pertaining to the hospitality that Abraham gives to three visitors. When it comes to tradition in antiquity, hospitality was highly valued.

That is, the welcome and reception of wayfarers of travelers, and it was highly expected that when travelers would come your way, you would provide for them. Given that, of course, you did not have the kind of hotel system that travelers have today. Now, when we come to the three visitors, this is very important to interpreters, both in ancient times and the early church, in wrestling with the identity of the three visitors.

And the passage itself uses various terms to explain the identity of the three visitors. First of all, notice that they are identified as men, and you will see this in verse 2. In verse 2, Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. And then, for example, in verse 16, when the men got up to leave.

So, men are indicative of a manifestation of the Lord and also the angels that accompany him. One of the three is identified as the Lord. For example, verse 10 reads, Notice that Lord is in small caps, meaning that the Hebrew word here is the covenant personal name of God, Yahweh.

Then the Lord said. And then again, verse 13, notice, Then the Lord said. Furthermore, in 14, among these three, we will find that one of those who is speaking is identified as Yahweh.

And then when we look further into chapter 18, we will discover that there are angels. Well, in particular, the example is chapter 19, verse 1, Where it says the two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening. So, the Lord stays behind with Abraham, and they have a discussion beginning in verse 16 through the end of chapter 18.

Two of the three men are, in fact, angels who go to Sodom and Gomorrah for the purpose of rescuing Lot. So, when it comes to these three figures, they are highly welcomed by Abraham. If you'll notice, it says in verse 2 of chapter 18, And this is an act of welcome and humility on the part of Abraham.

The description here commends Abraham because it says he hurried and welcomed them. Then it describes what follows in verse 3. In verse 6, it reads, So, this kind of description of, again in 7, He provides water for the men as well as providing comfort for them and a meal for them. And so all of this is important because we'll see a contrast with Lot.

Because notice in 19, verse 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. Well, we don't want to over-interpret the passage, but I do think that there has been in the general tenor of the Genesis account, This contrast between Abraham and Lot.

And I think we may well have another. That while Lot shows hospitality to the two angels, And, of course, he doesn't understand them to immediately be two angels. It is important for us to recognize that Abraham was a man of great righteousness and goodness.

And when it comes to Lot, regrettably, it says that he's sitting in the gateway of the city. Where in the gate, there you would have all kinds of community activity, Especially commercial activity in the gateway as well as judicial. So the impression you have from chapter 19 is that Lot has become so, up to this point, Such an integrated part to the city of Sodom that he can be found at the gateway of the city.

Whereas Abraham is dwelling outside of the city of Hebron. Now, when it comes to these visitors, sometimes it may be confusing. In what sense were these men? In what sense did they show themselves to be men? But in fact, it's the Lord and his accompanying two angels.

This is a manifestation, an appearance, what we have with the Lord as a man. Not an incarnation. He has not taken on the nature of humanity such as we find with our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, we will have throughout scripture manifestations of the presence of God as a human being. When it comes to the interaction that's so important between the Lord and Abraham, The first dialogue concerns Sarah. And Sarah's laughter in verses 12 and 13.

Then the Lord has said that she's going to have a son. That's in verse 10. So Sarah, verse 12, laughed to herself.

She says in verse 11 that she's past the age of childbearing. Probably a reference that she's experienced menopause. Verse 12.

So, Sarah laughed to herself as she thought. After I am worn out and my master is old, well, I now have this pleasure. In other words, this couldn't be the worst timing in her mind.

It's really an impossibility physically for her to have a child. The difference is, as it says in verse 14, Is anything too hard for the Lord? The point is that this rhetorical question says, No, nothing is too difficult for the Lord. And Sarah and Abraham are dependent upon and really have always been dependent upon, The Lord for their progeny and prosperity.

So, it is the Lord who will make this impossibility a possibility. It's a reminder, I think, to those as Christian readers, Of what we find in Luke 1, verse 37, Where we read that, again, nothing is too impossible for God When it comes to the Virgin Mary. Yet she will conceive Jesus by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Keeping this in mind, you'll remember in chapter 17, when Abraham learns that he will have a son that comes from his own body, and that of his wife's body. He, too, laughed because of their age. And so, in verses 17 and 18 of chapter 17, he laughed.

I think that what's in mind here, the fact that both of them laughed, gives us a sense that Abraham and Sarah are co-participants. A sense of ownership on her part, that faith is required of her in this incidence as well. So, the promise is that in a year's time, that Sarah will give birth.

This kind of specificity has not been given in earlier chapters concerning the promised son. But here it is, in a year's time. Sarah was afraid, verse 15.

So, she laughed and said, I did not laugh. And so, the question, of course, was raised: I think that you have been laughing. She says, oh no, I haven't been laughing.

It is interesting, isn't it, that the Lord knows that she has, even though it is said in verse 12 that Sarah laughed to herself. She was laughing within herself. But the Lord had the perception of her thoughts, of her attitude.

And he corrects her, yes, you did laugh. So I think what we want to see from this incident is that the divine presence in their home, within the setting of this kind of life, within the tent, and within the relationship of Abraham and Sarah, as he provides the water and she provides the meal, and together they provide from the bread and the herd, this meal, that they have a co-ownership and both must walk in faith to receive the promises that God is going to bring about. So, this suggests, doesn't it, an even step further into a closer relationship between Abraham, his family, and that of the Lord God.

This is important for us because that's how we've understood the covenant. It is a relationship that has been made possible by God, since he is the one who initiated the covenant relationship and preserves and sustains the relationship. Now we come to the latter half of chapter 18, verses 16 through 33.

Here, the question is God's justice and mercy. So, in verse 16, it says, When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Now, we have to bring forward what we've learned about Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain.

The chapters that pertain to this are 13 and 14. Remember that in chapter 13, Lot chose the land that was most prosperous and beautiful and would serve his herds and his agricultural ventures. God blessed Abraham with a vision of how Abraham would be cared for.

In that context of chapter 13, the author tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah were wicked cities. And then in chapter 14, we're told of how the confederation of eastern nations did battle with a confederation of western nations and that in the west, the king of Sodom, where Abraham was dwelling, was defeated, and all of the wealth and also the families were taken hostage. Abraham formed his own confederacy, and he and his men raced northward to catch up. They delivered Lot and his family and much of the wealth that had been taken.

And then, upon his return, he encountered two kings, the king of Jerusalem, Salem, which is called Melchizedek, and the king of Sodom. And bringing that all forward into the mind and what does occur in chapter 19 in continued references to Sodom and Gomorrah in the prophets as well as in the gospels, Sodom and Gomorrah became a watchword for wickedness, a synonym virtually for vile mistreatment of the innocent and all kinds of moral deficiencies and corruption. Where we find Sodom and Gomorrah and also the other cities of the plain, we don't know.

However, scholars, for the most part, by and large, understand that Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain are at the southern end under the waters of the Dead Sea. And perhaps someday we'll have the technology to actually confirm this is the case. But that should be our working understanding of where Sodom and Gomorrah might be found.

Now, when it comes to this dialogue between the Lord and Abraham, we want to recognize, as I've said on many occasions, that Abraham is in the school of discipleship. He is learning during these travels and engagements with God and the various circumstances that he experiences that he is learning to trust the Lord more and more. And although he still has his setbacks, for the most part, we find that he's growing in his confidence in the Lord.

And so, what we find that's very important here is how the Lord takes Abraham into his own confidence, that he is a confidant, and that there is a lesson to be learned, not only does it show this closer relationship, but also to be learned about God's character when it comes to justice and mercy. So, let's look together then at verse 17. Then the Lord said, see, the Lord is going to inform, reveal His plan to Abraham.

That in itself shows a special relationship when He shares with Abraham what is to come about. And then, in verse 18, Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. So, we find that what the Lord is going to reveal is connected with the covenant that God made, first found in chapter 12, and that these divine promises that God has initiated and is going to bring about are a basis then for this unveiling of God's plan.

A second element of basis is in 19, for I have chosen him. So, the loving election of Abraham and his descendants are such that he's going to teach Abraham, and in turn, Abraham, it's supposed, will teach the people of his descendants. So, we continue to read. I have chosen him so that he will direct his children in his household after him to keep the way of the Lord.

I think that expression, the way of the Lord, is very important. It's broad, but the point is, is that the way of the Lord has to do with the way that God exercises his sovereign rule in the lives of his promised people and the nations, and the importance of the character of the Lord. And so, one way in which the character of the Lord is explained is what is right and just.

And so, how do they keep the way of the Lord? Well, they have to learn the way of the Lord, and then they keep it by doing what is right and just, by doing and living out the character of the Lord, so that, reading 19, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. So that's important for us to remember this special connection that is taking place between the Lord and what he is going to explain to Abraham. So, it is striking that elsewhere, we are told in the Bible that there is a linkage between the two.

In Isaiah 41, verse 8, Isaiah says that Abraham, or by means of Isaiah, that Abraham is the friend of God. Friendship must be kept in mind as a close, trusting relationship. In Exodus 33, verse 11, it is Moses who is said to have spoken with the Lord as a man speaks with his friend.

And then you remember in chapter 15 of John's Gospel, verse 15, Jesus brings his disciples even closer in their relationship as confidants when he begins to explain to them what is about to occur, his arrest, his death, but looking beyond that to the life of his resurrection. And also, what they themselves, as he identifies them as friends of the Lord, their mission to declare that the kingdom of God is available through the resurrected Lord Jesus. So John 15, 15.

Now, when we come to the bargaining between Abraham and the Lord as is found in verses 20-33, there we have the revelation of what's going to occur in verse 20. And the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so grievous that I will go down. That reminds me of the Tower at Babel, you recall that God went down to see what the Babylonians were up to.

So, he says, 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. So, when it comes to the relationship of the nearby city Hebron, then you would go down, and you would descend topographically down to the southern part of what is today the Dead Sea.

Verse 22, the men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. So, the men who, in fact, are angels are representative of the Lord, given that the Lord said I will go down, but He is sending the two angels. In what sense is it that He goes down? Well, one can see then that the angels are in alignment, and this can be translated as messengers, that the angels are in alignment with the knowledge and status of the Lord, either as messengers, or is there something more at work here? The plurality is suggestive and somewhat speculative, but just to mention that perhaps what can be gained from this is that God in accordance with what we have found in chapter 1 of Genesis and chapter 3 and chapter 11, these three occasions where there is mentioned the plurality of God where you have the plural pronouns, that although there is one God, there is a plurality within that unity.

So, with that in mind then, there is, I think, a useful idea here that the Lord is not acting capriciously or unjustly, but rather, what He does is inquire. He investigates. He wants to know what is the nature of this outcry and what is its severity.

Now, Abraham brings to bear here a series of requests asking the Lord in his investigation if it's not right to preserve the cities because they are righteous, and we can understand this word righteous as innocent; there are innocent people in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So, in verse 23, Abraham approached him and said, Will you sweep away the innocent, the righteous, with the wicked? That would certainly not be seen as just on the part of God. Now, I think what we have here is sequentially fewer and fewer moving from if there are 50 people all the way down to the last numbered 5 people.

So, what I would find is in verse 32, 10 people, not 5, 10 people. So sequentially then fewer and fewer are required in order for God to spare the cities. Now, what Abraham is thinking, he has in his mind two options.

And that is to say, either the cities will be completely destroyed, and the innocent will be consumed with the wicked or the cities will not be destroyed on account of the innocent who are living there. He doesn't really see a third option, but this is, in fact, what will occur because some in the family of Lot will be spared. So, there is a third option, sparing the innocent, Lot, but bringing judgment against the wicked.

So, the only way that he can learn about what God is to do and what I would underscore is he keeps talking to God. That's so important when we bring our questions and our doubts. Keep speaking to God.

He is identified as the judge of all the earth. And so, as the judge of all the earth, squarely the role of God who administers mercy and justice are the Lord's prerogative. And Abraham will learn to accept how God can see beyond the obvious.

The two options show our finiteness, Abraham's finiteness. But God really doesn't explain other than the description that follows. But otherwise we would not know there is a third option for all that went into the decision made the Lord.

The only answer really for Abraham is just knowing the Lord and His character. And hence, that's why he can raise the question about the Lord: Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? It's a reminder of what we find with Job. God never fully explained to Job the background of his suffering.

He just simply revealed himself, and once Job had seen and come to a better understanding of how God is not only the judge of all the earth in terms of the physical world and how He maintains the physical world, but He's also the one who's maintaining the moral equilibrium, the moral world. So, this expression, judge of all the earth, that is found in verse 19, or rather 25, far be it from you, will not the judge of all the earth do right? And, of course, he does and he will. Now, in the case of the Lord and Abraham, they both show compassion and mercy.

And this is what's at work with Abraham. I recognize that he had, of course, an investment in his nephew Lot, and no doubt he was thinking of his nephew. But what we can say is that Abraham is a man of compassion toward Lot, even though he could have been angry against Lot and could have well said to Lot, see, I told you so, kind of response.

But he has compassion upon Lot and his family and all those who are innocent. So, when we come to the next chapter, in chapter 19, we actually have the account of the angels rescuing Lot in verses 1-29. Sadly, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, there is an incident here at the end of chapter 19 regarding Lot and his incestuous relationship with his two daughters.

So, there are again; we want to keep in mind the contrasts between Lot and Abraham and nothing more than it says in chapter 18, in the beginning, it was in the heat of the day, in the midst of the day, that the three visitors came to Abraham. Whereas it says in chapter 19 the two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening. So, there's a contrast between the day and the night, between the running and the sitting, between being outside Hebron, on the part of Abraham, but being so closely integrated and absorbed into the life of Sodom by Lot.

So the response on the part of Lot shows us again the importance of hospitality, which should provide protection, and that's why we have this: what in our mind is certainly extreme, and no doubt was extreme too in the mind of Lot and in that culture, and that is the offering up of Lot's daughters when the men of Sodom came to the house and insisted on knowing the men, the angels, who of course are manifesting themselves as men, for sexual purposes. Verse 5 tells us that the men of the city surrounded his house. They called to Lot, where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them, or the NIV rightly understands this so that we can have sex with them.

The word no is a metaphor for sexual relations, and the best example of that is Genesis 4 verse 1, where it says that Adam knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant with Cain. So, what's in mind here is clearly, I think, we must understand that these men of the city want to have sexual relations with the men as they understood them to be, visiting Lot, and because of the great value and reputation of a host, Lot chose to surrender his virgin daughters to these men to have the sexual relations that they wanted. And this is reminiscent of what takes place in Judges 19.

In Judges 19, we have a similar incident, and there also the word no surely clearly refers to sexual relations. So, there is quite an irony, I think, in this account that it is Lot who believes he is delivering the angels from this violation when in fact what will turn out is that the angels will rescue Lot from the catastrophe that's going to befall upon the cities. Initially it had to do with the men attempting to break down the door and take the visitors for their sexual pleasures.

But the angels step in and they strike the men who were at the door of the house, were told, verse 11, young and old with blindness so they could not find the door. Now, since his household included sons-in-law and then his two daughters as well as his wife, the angels mercifully decide to provide protection for them and escape as well, and the sons-in-law, we may surmise, were members of the Canaanite population; maybe they were members of the city of Sodom. They rejected this idea, and they thought he was joking, we were told.

They didn't take him seriously. And then later we will find that Lot's wife herself struggles over departing from Sodom, all that she had known and what was attractive there. So, the angels in verse 15 say, hurry, take your wife and your two daughters who are here or you will be swept away when the city is punished.

And we are told, when he hesitated, that Lot is so invested in Sodom that he hesitated. He was troubled by whether or not the men were being truthful. And the men grasped his hand, such an extraordinary act of mercy on the part of the angels, in 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. And so, we have the exhortation by the angels, don't look back and don't stop anywhere in the plain. Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away.

And I think that there's an implication as well as an explicit idea here. The explicit, of course, is that they were actually commanded, exhorted, and advised not to look back physically. But I think also that what is being called for is for Lot and his family to reject the life that they had taken up in Sodom, to reject what was taking place in Sodom.

Well, we do find that Lot was a righteous man. He was not totally sold out to the vileness, but he had compromised. For example, in 2 Peter 2, verses 7 and 8 describe Lot as a righteous man but one who was tormented by the vile wickedness of Sodom.

So, I think this is a lesson to be learned about the human condition and that compromise can lead even to catastrophe when it comes to compromising with wickedness. So, what we want to keep in mind here is how they escape. The wife, unfortunately, can't pull herself away from Sodom.

And so, she becomes a pillar of salt. We are told this in verse 26. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt, which became a proverb in later generations.

Luke 17, verse 32. It is striking that even today, pillars of salt are found at the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Well, verse 23 says, By the time Lot reached Zoar, which is even further south in the wilderness, the sun had risen over the land, so this is morning, and the Lord rained down sulfur, burning sulfur, Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens.

This reminds you of the flood narrative, in which God rained down rain that produced the flood that consumed the whole of wicked humanity. Verse 29 tells us that when God destroyed the cities of the plain, He remembered Abraham. What's important about that is that it doesn't say He remembered Lot.

Let's back up to the flood account. Remember in chapter 8, verse 1, it reads that God remembered Noah. In other words, His commitment to Noah.

Then, from chapter 8, and what follows in that chapter, there is a gradual descent, a descent of the floodwaters. And so, in chapter 8, verse 1, it says that God sent a Ruach. That's the word for wind, but also the Holy, or rather I should say, the Spirit of God, which is described as early as chapter 1, verse 2, where it says that the Spirit of God, which I take to be the Holy Spirit, is hovering over, protecting.

And so, God is using the wind to dissipate the waters and, therefore, provide for the disembarking of Noah and his family. In this case, God remembered His commitment to Abraham, and so Lot and his family are the beneficiaries of God's promises to Abraham because of the connection between Lot as a family relative and a family member, seeing that he is the son of Abraham's brother. And so it says, continuing, He remembered Abraham and He brought Lot out of the catastrophe to overthrow the cities where Lot had lived.

Now, we move to Lot's descendants. This is one of the sordid stories that you'll find in Genesis, and this has to do with the incestual relationship brought about by Lot's daughters. Now, what Lot had requested was that he would be permitted to go to Zoar.

But notice that even though the angels accommodated him and gave concession to Lot, he was so mortified by what occurred at Sodom and Gomorrah that he became a recluse. Notice in verse 30 that Lot and his two daughters left Zoar and settled in the mountains, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar. He and his two daughters lived in a cave.

And so, the daughters did not have the possibility of bearing children, and so they decide to make him drunk with wine and then to have sexual relations. And notice in verse 32, "...and preserve our family line through our father." So important was this custom, this tradition, this way of life that the two daughters would have this relationship with their father. The implication is that if he had not been drunk and thinking rightly in his mind, then certainly he would have resisted this.

But he was deceived. Now this should remind us also of what occurred with Noah. Here was a godly man, and then toward the end of his life, he became drunk.

And his drunkenness and nakedness led to the blessing and the curse that he bestowed upon his three sons, cursing Ham and Canaan for their ridicule of his nakedness. So, in verse 33, "...that night they got their father to drink wine." The older daughter went with her father a lot, and then the next day, the younger daughter did the same. Now, what's important is that the two Transjordan people groups came from them.

These two will be very important when it comes to the future life of Israel throughout its history. The Moabites and the Ammonites were two people groups that were traditionally the enemies of Israel so much so that you will have some of the most vicious warfare that takes place between these two, the Ammonites and the Moabites, against the future Israelites.

And this will be found in 1 Samuel and the parallel passages in 2 Chronicles where these wars will take place. And then again, we have a contrast between the beginnings of Israel's legacy, the work of God in a special way, bringing about the birth of Isaac, and their connection to Abraham. The legacy, however, of Lot ended most despicably.

That is the birth of the Moabites and the Ammonites by virtue of incest. So, what have we learned by way of this teaching of Abraham? And that is the closer the two, God and Abraham, are in their relationship by virtue of the divine presence in his life, in his home. Moreover, we can say that he became a confidant of God.

God trusted him to know what is going to take place. The second thing is that we learned that Abraham showed mercy, kindness and concern for others as an intercessor. And he pled for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And the third thing is that God reveals to him how God in his character exercised rightly justice and mercy, that it was not an either-or but a both-in by preserving the innocent household of Lot, those who were willing to take the offer of escape, and then the right judgment against the wicked. Our next lesson, lesson 15, is going to be our last session on Abraham. That takes into account chapters 20 through 25.

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