

Finding God in the midst of disaster (Part 2)

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[0 : 0 0] Now again just to those who weren't here in the morning at the midday service just to clarify that intention today, tonight is not to link the events of Sodom Gomorrah to the parade that took place yesterday far from it. This is something that was on my mind to do weeks and weeks ago. We just want to be clear that nobody thinks it's a reaction or a response or anything like that to the events of the story yesterday. The truths in the Bible, this part as well are relevant all the time, not just at certain times, are a response to certain events. So the Lord's help would like to think about these verses.

Now earlier we tried to look at how God, or how God's attributes can be found in disaster and especially in the disaster that takes place here in Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities in the plain and to see how he's evident in his dealings with Lot and Lot's family.

And we saw God's mercy and we saw God's patience and tonight we want to look at three more of God's attributes that we can find in this passage. The first of them is God's anger.

The people often have this image of God as a caring, kind old man. A sort of benevolent maybe grandfather figure or Santa Claus figure who's going to reward people for being good.

What do they get the idea? Well to an extent it's from the Bible, God is kind, God is caring, God is love. So to an extent it's biblical. But if that's your view of God then you have a major problem because you're only paying attention to the parts of the Bible that suit yourself. Because there are other places in the Bible, many more places I think, where the focus is on God's anger. So we see God's anger for example when Adam and Eve are part of the Garden of Eden. We see it when Cain is made a fugitive after murdering his brother. We see it when the entire world is destroyed by a flood and that's all just in the first five chapters. The Bible is full of God's anger. But here's a question. How is God's anger different to yours? Is it different? I'm sure every one of us here gets angry at something at some time. But you and I rarely have genuine reason to be angry. Yet every single time God is angry there's a reason for it and his right to be angry. John Stott sees this. He says his anger is neither mysterious nor irrational. It's never unpredictable but always predictable because it is provoked by evil and by evil alone. That's a good explanation of God's anger isn't it? And your anger and mine aren't only provoked by evil. It's similar to what Paul says to the Romans when he tells them because of your heart and impenitent heart you're storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. But that's not the biggest difference between God's anger and yours.

[4 : 28]

So what is it? I'll come to that just in a second. But notice before we deal with that that something always goes hand in hand with God's anger. Think of the three examples we mentioned a minute ago. Adam exiled, Cain sent away, Noah's flood. Think of the destruction of the cities that we've got here in Genesis 19 and there's something else alongside God's anger. What is it? It's judgment. Judgment accompanies God's anger doesn't it? Now I'm not absolutely certain of this but I think it's right to say that God's judgment and God's anger always go hand in hand. I don't think you can have one without the other to some extent at least. If I'm wrong about that please do point it out to me. I don't think you can have one without the other. And this is most clearly seen at the cross of Christ because at the cross God's anger and his judgment are poured out on Christ without anything being held back, without anything being left over, without anything being restrained. Christ experienced God's anger, God's judgment in the fullest sense. They go together. And I guess for us it's fairly easy to understand or to accept that anger and judgment go together because it makes sense to us. But friends something else always accompanies God's anger as well. And again especially at the cross we see this and this is the single biggest difference between God's anger and yours or mine. And it's this. God's anger is full of love. Now how can God's anger and God's love be present and active and visible at the same time and in the same action? Surely that's impossible. Well listen to what a man called Joseph Schumann who works in John Piper's ministry says about it. God's wrath is his love in action against sin. God is love and God does all things for his glory. He loves his glory above all. Therefore God rules the world in such a way that brings himself maximum glory. This means that God must act justly and judge sin i.e. respond with wrath. Otherwise

God would not be God. God's love for his glory motivates his wrath against sin. God's love for his glory motivates his wrath against sin. See you and I look at God's anger, God's wrath in the Bible and we say there's no way God's love is in the flood. There's no way God's love is in the plagues of Egypt. There's no way God's love is in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. There's no way God's love is in what's happening on the cross at Calvary when Christ is forsaken of the Father and suffering in the room and said of sinners but it is there. It's love that motivates God's wrath. Where God's anger is there's God's judgment. Where God's anger is there's God's love. Or who can understand that friends?

And yet it's true. And we can find God's anger throughout what's going on here. But I think it's summed up really in verses 24 and 25. Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven and he overthrew those cities and all the valley and all the inhabitants of the cities and what grew on the ground. The cities, the people and even the crops completely destroyed. Now here fire and brimstone represent God's anger. Now brimstone contains sulfur and apparently when sulfur creates a huge reaction when it burns. So what's going on as you mentioned earlier it's something absolutely terrifying.

Spartans spouting up from these bitumen pits in the ground, fire raining down from the sky and when the two things mix they react and obliterate everything in their path. It's a picture of God's power. It's a picture of God's relentless destructive anger. But I think there's even more to it than that because I think the sulfur has another message for us. Because one of the products of sulfur is salt. Now as we said earlier on the Dead Sea is where these cities once stood. I don't know if any of you have ever been there but you'll know I'm sure that it's the amount of salt in the Dead Sea that means that nothing can survive in it. So even that bit of geography which is still there today thousands of years later it is still there as a reminder of God's judgment on these cities. Now according to legend this may be factually accurate but I certainly haven't read it anywhere historical but it is a legend anyway. When the Roman army destroyed the enemies in the city of

Carthage they salted the earth so that nothing would grow there again. They didn't want the Carthaginians to rise up into a power once more. Salt was used there as a lasting punishment. Salt is used here with the Dead Sea as a lasting punishment. Nothing's living there. And in Judges we find a similar thing. Abumalik fought against the city all that day he captured the city and killed the people who were in it and he raised the city and sowed it with salt. Abumalik like the Romans sent you these later wanted to make certain there be no growth or produce there ever again. And surely friends that's the grim reminder God has for us and even in the elements he used to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. His anger and his punishment never end against sin. They never end against sinners who don't repent and the deadness of the Dead Sea at the sight of Sodom and Gomorrah is a reminder of that.

[11 : 52] Then the next characteristic of God we find here is his justice. Now God's anger and justice are closely related and in a sense it's hard to differentiate between the two.

In the simplest sense justice means doing what is right. Now that's harder than it should be for us to understand because we don't always have the same standards of right and wrong.

And the world around us is in chaos isn't it? Because everyone has their own interpretation of what's right and wrong. But when everyone is making up their own minds what we have is moral anarchy. And when we look around that's what we have in the world today. But friends if we begin with a clear absolute principle of right and wrong we wouldn't have this situation.

Now people will challenge you and they will ask you who gives you the right to tell me if I'm right or wrong. And the answer friends is that if you're using the Bible as your guide for moral issues then none other than God gives you the right to say what's right and what's wrong. Now God's justice this characteristic we're thinking about it takes this to another level as it were. Because God's justice abides by his rules and his standards absolutely and God's justice must be satisfied for every single time God's law is broken. It has a standard but it has a requirement that it will never lower. And God's justice is active here as the cities have been destroyed. We want to focus particularly on how God's justice is found in verse 26. But Lot's wife behind him looked back and she became a pillar of salt. Why I wonder did she look back? I'm sure that question's been asked tens of thousands of times over the years and I suppose there are thousands of possible answers. But whatever the specific reason she turned back it's the principle that's important. Because when Christ speaks about her in Luke 17 as we read it's in the context of how dangerous it is to long for what you've left behind. Remember Lot's wife he says whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it but whoever loses his life will keep it. But all she did was look. What's so bad about that? Well I can mention two things quickly. First of all and to be honest it's the only one that matters at the end of the day. God had told them all not to look back. Why? For his own reasons. It's not for us to question God's motives or to demand he explain his reasoning. It should be enough for us that that's what he wanted. He told them not to look back. But the second thing is the way in which she looked back. What do I mean by that? Well in verse 29 Abraham looks out over the remains of the city or the cities. Here in verse 26 Lot's wife looks back at the cities. It's the same action.

But she's punished for it. Why is that? Well it's because they're looking in very different ways and with very different hearts. It's not really about what they're looking at.

[15 : 37] It's about how they're looking at it. I find language to be really fascinating the way it's used and although the same word looked is used here in our Bibles two different words are used in Hebrew. The words that used for Abraham's look means to look at something within trust but with no emotion. To look at it passively. And the word used for looked in the case of Lot's wife apparently means to look with delight and desire and longing.

So the second thing that's wrong here is that Lot's wife is looking back at the life from which she is escaping with longing and wishing she was back there. As J.C. Ryle puts it, though she fled with her husband she had left her heart behind. She willfully disobeyed the strict injunction which the angel had laid upon her. So even as Christians there's a danger that you or I will do the same thing even though you know that you're on the way to eternal salvation and safety sometimes you might look back and you might look back with longing to something of your old life that you've left behind. But Christ uses Lot's wife as an example of the danger of looking back friends. Your eyes should be looking ahead, your feet should be carrying you forward, leaving behind what is rescued you from. And so here we are, we're between Sodom and Zohar. Their safety offered to Lot's family if only they run to Zohar without looking back. They're on the threshold of safety. His wife glances back and immediately God's justice springs into action and she becomes a pillar of salt.

Could you not have showed her mercy while he's been doing that over and over and over again as we saw earlier? Could you not have been more patient while he's been that as well, waiting for them to get to safety before the destruction begins? Is this an excessive penalty for a minor sin? Well in a way you can understand why people would think that, she hasn't murdered or anything like that. But because God is holy and perfect and because as Paul says to Timothy he cannot deny himself, you need to understand that there is no such thing as a small sin. Because anything that offends a holy God is a major problem. Now God must be faithful to his own nature. He can't do anything that goes against his nature.

It's hard for us to understand how God's justice and anger and love and mercy and everything else work together, but they do. And God's justice must be satisfied. And here it's satisfied with Lot's wife, her punishment being turned into a pillar of salt. It's an awful thing.

It's a horror you just can't imagine, can you? We can't know the mechanics of how it happened or what happened in a chemical way. But I think it would be abnormal if you're not horrified by the sin playing out on the pages of scripture here. A woman running for her life one second and turned into a memorial, into a warning for every succeeding generation the next second. Imagine just now travelling through this desolate plain years later. A place where nothing is growing. A place which is infamous for the destruction that happened.

[20 : 17] You've heard the stories about the cities being destroyed. You've heard about this strange phenomenon of the lady who was frozen like a statue in the midst of it all. And as you walk or as you ride across this plain, you come across this pillar and you look at it and you think, this was a person. This was a person. Does it send a shiver down your spine? Does it give you a desire to turn away and get away from that place as quickly as possible? What's it mean to you? What's it telling you? Because here friends is a very real, very tragic and utterly terrifying example of God's justice at work. God's justice is active all the time. For the Christian it's already been satisfied by Christ's death.

But for you if you're still not a Christian, God's justice is waiting patiently, knowing that it's going to be satisfied in eternity when all God's enemies are gathered together in hell. Isn't that an awful thought? That you could, God's justice could be satisfied relating to you tonight if you trusted in Christ. But if you don't, it'll have to be satisfied when you're in hell. Friends, if only that was true. Because what I've said there isn't quite accurate. See, if God's justice was to be completely satisfied, it means that a time would come when he would no longer need to punish sinners and the punishment of hell would be over. But because you sin against an eternal God, it will take eternity to satisfy God's justice. And you know that eternity never ends. God's justice is incredible.

It's awesome. It's terrifying. And we see it here in the midst of this catastrophe taking place. So we can see God's mercy, God's patience, God's anger, God's justice, and finally God's grace in the midst of this disaster. What is grace? Well, grace is the opposite of mercy almost which we mentioned earlier. It's when you get something from God that you don't deserve. And that's true about everything in your life and mine, isn't it? Everything you have in a physical sense or emotionally or in terms of relationships or whatever it is, they are examples of grace. They are gifts from God that you do not deserve. And here's grace in the middle of the death and destruction and judgment that's taking place. And that might be surprising but it's how grace is. It's always at work despite what might be going on, despite what you might think. And there are two particular examples of God's grace here, I think. The first is how Lot is rescued from his desperate situation. We talked about that. But what do you make of Lot? What do you think of this guy? Do you pity him? Running for his life, his home and his circle of friends and tatters, his wife lost his entire life, turned upside down? Or are you thinking, well, Lot, it serves you well. Why don't you take the chance to run when you could? Or maybe that's a bit brutal.

But in a very real sense it's actually true. Think about Lot's life. Everything started to go wrong for him way back when his servants began fighting with Abraham's servants and they concluded that they'd be better off splitting up. And when he and Abraham stood looking out across the land, deciding who would go where, and when Lot chooses to live in the region of Sodom and Gomorrah for all the wrong reasons, prioritising profit and success above everything else, it started to go wrong right there. And it turns out to be a catastrophic mistake to make. And he made a mistake before that decision as well. Because if he had been humble and respectful to his uncle, he would have insisted that Abraham choose what land he'd prefer to live in. But Lot's folly and pride and greed and ambition cloud his judgment and he jumps at the chance to head for Sodom. And then whilst in Sodom, he's surrounded by every sort of sin, wickedness, depravity. Yet he seems not to be bothered by it from what we read in Genesis 19. How is that possible for a Christian? How is it possible for you and me though? Yet we do it. And it's pretty obvious that he doesn't even have the support of a congregation. He doesn't have the support of Christian friends in the cities. Remember

Abraham's prayer when he says, suppose 10 are found there and God's answer for the sake of 10, I won't destroy it. There aren't even people of the same mind as Lot in the cities.

[26 : 43] Or Lot's in a bad way. He's lost sight of what's important. But there's another side to it I think. And this is where we especially see how similar Lot is to you and me. Because here he is in a place that's defined by its sin, famous for its sin, particularly for its homosexuality. And it's famous for people who reveled in their immorality. They were proud of it. But it doesn't cross his mind to leave. But the situation bothers him.

It doesn't look like it in Genesis does it? But the portion we read in 2 Peter, Peter's talking about Lot and he says that Lot greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.

For as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard. The state of the world, the state of our community, the state of our families, our friends, bother us don't they? Actually they do more than bother us if we're Christians. They cause us distress, note the words that Peter uses in strong language. He says Lot's greatly distressed, tormenting his righteous soul over the sin that he's seeing. Is that you? But like Lot, what are you doing about it? What am I? Do you think Lot prayed about the state of Sodom and Gomorrah? Well I think we have to conclude from what Peter says that he did. But sometimes that's not enough.

There's a way in which Lot deserves what he gets. He had opportunities to leave, he had opportunities to avoid it all. He didn't take them. But I wonder if you're doing what he is doing. I wonder if you're putting up with everything around you even though you might be praying about it? Or are you praying and acting which is what Lot never did? Well despite Lot's catastrophic errors of judgement, despite every terrible decision he makes and despite his overwhelming worldliness at the time, God still shows him grace. And we see the second example of God's grace in Lot's wife. How can that be the case? How can we say that Lot's wife is an example of God's grace? Well in herself she's not. But the puller of salt that stands in the plain is an example of grace. How? Christ's words remember Lot's wife.

She said memorial. But to whom? Say memorials only of use if there are people to see it and remember something. If there are people who are going to pick up some message from it. So to whom is she? A memorial. She's a memorial friends to you. She's a memorial to me. She's a memorial to all of us here in Carly tonight. She's a memorial to everyone who ever passed by that puller of salt literally. She's a memorial to everyone who has ever heard of Lot's wife in scripture. If it wasn't for Lot's wife, you wouldn't have this warning.

[30 : 42] And there are two sides to this warning as well. She's a warning to you tonight if you're a Christian. Imagine just now standing on the walls of the city of Sodom as day breaks on this morning. And you can see four figures running across the plain away from the city and there's nothing to suggest that one of them is any different to the others. Lot, his wife, his daughters, they're running for their lives. They know where they'll be safe.

They know what they need to do. And suddenly as you watch one of the figures freezes in place as the others carry on oblivious to what's just happened behind them. What a sight.

Lot's wife is escaping a coming disaster and she turns right into a different catastrophe.

Ryle says this. He says Lot's wife went far in religious profession. She was the wife of a righteous man. She was connected through him with Abraham. She fled with her husband from Sodom in the day when he escaped for his life by God's command. But Lot's wife was not really like her husband. Though she fled with him, she had left her heart behind.

And when he comes to address what Christ said, remember Lot's wife, this is what he says. What a solemn warning our Lord gives us against unsound profession. He says to us in immediate connection with the description of his second advent, remember Lot's wife.

[32 : 31] She is a warning, a gracious warning to you and I as Christians, lest you make similar mistakes to her. But the second side to the warning is this. Lot's wife is a lasting warning to all who are out of Christ. She said memorial, a monument that reminds you that you need to make sure you're safe. See, nobody in all of the cities of the plains was as privileged as Lot's wife. Her family was wealthy. Her husband's a Christian, a believer. She's related to Abraham, that mighty man of God. People are praying for her. Her family's successful. God's given a personal warning about what's going to come. She's been taken out of the city by angels. She's given a place in which she'll be safe. She's put the danger behind her. She's close to safety from every perspective. She's in a great situation. She's in a privileged situation. But despite how things look from the outside, things aren't right on the inside because her heart is still in solemn. It looks for all the world like Lot's wife is going to be okay because of what she's doing. She's running away because of who she's with, that righteous man Lot, and because of God's merciful, patient dealings with her. Is that you here in Carloway tonight? Are you the 2018 Lewis version of Lot's wife? Do you come to church? Do you read the Bible? Do you live a moral life? Are you admired by others for how outstanding you are from the outside?

But your heart's still in solemn. In the wickedness, and the depravity, and the sin. How well better to be like Lot, friend, who's righteous despite all his feelings than to be like his wife, who looked like a righteous woman from the outside. But it looks like nothing has changed inside. God is showing you grace in Lot's wife. She's standing here in the pages of Scripture just as she stood literally as a pillar of salt in the plains, as a reminder to you, as a warning to you. The characteristics of God's that we see in Lot's experience here in the midst of the catastrophe taking place in Sodom and Gomorrah that evident in your life too. His mercy, his patience, his anger, his justice, and his grace. But the day's coming when you won't experience all five. You'll experience mercy, patience, justice, and grace just as Lot did at the end in heaven. Or you'll experience justice and wrath in hell. We live in a day of information overload. We have busy lives.

We hear something and as soon as we process it, then it may be popped out of our minds. We need reminders on our phones and lists on our phones of what to do because we're going at 100 miles an hour. And the danger in all of that is that we forget what's important.

The reason the word remember is used in the Bible is because God knows that we're liable to forget. And in the 100 miles an hour of your life, even on a Sunday, it's a bit more sedate than the rest of the week usually anyway. When we leave here in a few minutes, never mind what I've said. It's not what I say that's important. It's Christ's words. Remember Lot's wife. Not as an oddity. Not as some bizarre quirk of history. Not as something that defied logic and science. But as the warning that Christ intended her to be. And still tonight intends her to be. Remember Lot's wife. Run to Christ for your life, for your salvation, for your eternity. Don't stop till you get there. And never look back. It's by the prayer. Oh Lord, you warn us. You remind us. You give us memorials of your mercy and patience. Of your anger, your justice and your grace. We ask that you give us the wisdom to understand that all of these things are active in our own lives each day. To understand that it's not just an invitation you give to come to Christ to be saved. To be saved.

But it's also an instruction like Lot and his family received to flee to the hills.

[39 : 12] If we haven't already, help us tonight to begin to flee from the Sodom of this world, from the Sodom of our own lives, our own hearts. And to get to the safety of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. The final item of praise is Psalm 36. Sing Sam's version and we're going to read, we're going to sing from verse six down to the end of the Psalm. Your righteousness is very great like mountains high and steep. Your justice is like oceans depth, both man and beast you keep. How precious is your steadfast love, what confidence it brings, both high and low find shelter in the shadow of your wings. We're going to sing from verse six to the end of the Psalm. Your righteousness is very great like mountains high and steep.

Your justice is like oceans depth, both man and beast you keep. How precious is your steadfast love, what confidence it brings, both high and low find shelter in the shadow of your wings. They eat within your eyes and drink from streams of your delight, far away from the earth. Your righteousness is very great like mountains high and steep.

Your steadfast love impart maintain your righteousness.

Your justice is very great like mountains high and steep.

[42 : 39] Your justice is very great like mountains high and steep.

Approach and threaten me, nor let the hand of wickedness force me to turn and flee.

See where the civil doersong, her righteousness despise, thrown down on thee and there they taste it, unable to arise.

3 Oh Lord that you would bless our meeting together today that you'd bless you word as it's been read and sung and a free melody to donate. Let you forgive anything that's been said or thought or done amuse. Take us to your homes and safety and pardon all our for Jesus' sake. Amen.