

Finding God in the midst of disaster (Part 1)

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[0 : 0 0] Well friends, I want to try to focus today on the incident that took place here in Genesis 19 and as a sort of central hook I guess for our thoughts to look at verse 29. Genesis 19 verse 29, so it was that when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived.

Just want to clarify at the very outset that the choice of topic today is completely unrelated to anything that happened in the island this week. This is something which Murdo asked me to help about today that I had decided that I would look at any or try to look at so please don't think that this is a deliberate timing going on here there's not at all but I think that this passage has a lot to teach us at any time and in any circumstances and I hope and pray that with the Lord's help as we'll look at that today that we'll see how much he has to teach us and tell us about himself and what's going on here. Well the story of Lot's life is a fascinating one.

So many dramatic things happen to him and happen around him that it would be easy to focus on the events or on the characters that we have before us and not go deeper than that. Now that's not to say that it wouldn't be interesting to study Lot or his wife or his daughters or his sons in law or you know the people of Sodom and Gomorrah the angels and so on it would but what we want to try to do friends is to see God in everything that's taking place here to see God in everything that's going on amongst the chaos and the carnage that comes with the destruction of these cities.

Now you can read this and you can look at what takes place here and you can wonder where God is. You can almost look at what's going on here and say with confidence that God clearly has simply walked away from the situation and is nowhere to be found and I wonder how often you think that about your own life. Do you look at your own circumstances at any time and you think oh they are so hard, they're so challenging, they're so disastrous that God clearly has just given up on me and left me to it.

Well we can see at least five of God's attributes of God's characteristics and therefore how we see his characteristics we see evidence of himself in what's taking place in Sodom and Gomorrah and we'll try to look at them all during both services today God willing to just now and three later and if we can find God in a catastrophe like this in Genesis 19 you can be sure that you can find him in your own personal disaster whatever they may be. And the first of God's attributes we see here is his mercy. Now what is mercy? Well mercy is God not giving you what you deserve. That sounds like a strange thing to say after all what exactly do you deserve that God doesn't give to you?

[4:16] Well you deserve God's wrath and you deserve God's judgment and you deserve that because of your sin against him. You know were it not for God's mercy God not giving people what they deserve there'd be nobody alive today. Well Lot's here in a dangerous situation and some ways you might think that God should help him because he's a righteous man he's a Christian a man who follows God and it would be easy to look at Lot's life and look at the decisions he's made and ask how could he possibly be a righteous man but that's what Peter calls him righteous Lot. Still we need to remember that it's actually Lot's fault that he and his family are in peril. He chose to live in this region when he and Abraham went their separate ways and he chose it because the land looked good it looked fertile it looked promising and he saw profit for himself he saw a way of feeding up his flocks and his herds and it's interesting ultimately that he made his choice to live and saw them based on the benefit he saw to his animals the benefit he saw to his bank balance and in the end every single animal he owned every coin or note he possessed was destroyed when God destroys the cities and the time has come then when God's going to destroy the cities of the plain and Lot and his family are going to be destroyed too if they stay where they are this doesn't like Rahab and Jericho where all the walls of the city are going to fall down except the walls of her house God doesn't intend to spare any part of Sodom or Gomorrah or anyone in Sodom or Gomorrah but even though that's his plan we see God's mercy so we see God's mercy in at least four ways in what's going on in this passage what's going on with Sodom and Gomorrah we see it firstly in the angels who come to Abraham now that's in chapter 18 we didn't read it but it's all linked up in that chapter the same angels who come to

Lot in chapter 19 they tell Abraham that he's going to have a son great news for Abraham and then they tell him what God's plan is for Sodom and Gomorrah now I wonder if Abraham sent word to Lot to warn him about what was going to come or whether he did or not he could have because it seems like he's living relatively close to Sodom himself in chapter 18 it says they looked down towards Sodom that's when angel when Abraham and the angels are discussing things together so it looks like they're maybe up on a hill or up on a bluff somewhere and looking down and they can see the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the distance so perhaps Abraham sent a messenger to Lot to tell him to escape while he could and if he did wouldn't that be a great example of mercy now of course we can't know whether or not that happened but we do know this we know that as a result of what the angels tell him Abraham prays for Lot and Abraham prays for any other righteous men or women who are in these cities here's a situation where one person knows something that affects somebody else Abraham understands the danger that his nephew's in and he does what he does so often he does what comes naturally to him he comes to God and he prays he pleads to God on behalf of the people of the cities do you think it's an act of mercy when somebody prays for you maybe you're in trouble or danger or difficulty and someone's praying for you to get out of it maybe you feel far away from God and somebody like Abraham is praying for you even when your own prayers have gone silent well if that's the case isn't God merciful in doing that because even when you or I are disobedient and distant from God he sometimes puts you or I in the heart in the intercession and the prayers of others and do you pray for others friends well you should I should and especially when you have a good idea that they're not praying for themselves but you know if you're a Christian you're today it's even more wonderful than that because it's not just occasionally that someone is praying for you

Paul says in Christ Jesus is the one who died more than that who was raised who is at the right hand of God who indeed is interceding for us Christ remembers his people in his intercession all the time not sometimes all the time or God shows you and I mercy just as he shows lot mercy by sending these angels to Abraham to tell him what was ahead then we see God's mercy in the warning the angels give lot they talk to him about his family and they say bring them out of the place for we're about to destroy this place the Lord has sent us to destroy it now does God have to war a lot is he somehow obliged to give lot a heads up about what's going to happen well of course not yet in his mercy that's exactly what he does now lot must have been well aware of the wickedness and sin and evil that was prevalent in Sodom but there they ever cross his mind to leave there they ever cross his mind to walk away from the godlessness that was surrounding him or was he just so comfortable so familiar with the doll so concerned with his wealth and his success that he believed he was immune to being affected by it but friend before you criticize lot too much maybe you need to think about yourself and

I need to look at myself because how aware were you of your own faults your own rebellion against God and the selfishness and the wickedness that was all around you before you became a Christian well I'm sure most of you are very aware just as I was yet how many warnings did God give you you every time you've heard the gospel it's a warning every death you're aware of whether it's in your community or your family or further afield it's a warning every storm you've ever watched and heard and felt passed through it's a warning of the storm of judgment to come well you know you can criticize lot if you want but were you any better and if you're not yet a Christian here today well you can read this or you can hear this and you can go ahead and you can slate lot you can go ahead and you can point out everything he's done wrong you can go ahead and you can castigate him and you can ask what sort of

Christianity behaving that way and not listening to God when he's got the chance but when you're done doing that when you're done berating Lot in your own mind answer this why are you ignoring God's warnings why are you still living in a way that makes God angry why are you still sitting back and relaxing as it were in your own personal Sodom and Gomorrah surrounded by your own and other sinfulness and wickedness see God doesn't have to warn you about the catastrophe that lies ahead if you don't run for your life but he does it time and time and time and time again because of his mercy in the third way in which we see God's mercy is in the way in which the angels take Lot and his family out of the city they've warned him but he's slow to accept what they've said and he's slow to do anything about it he lingered as the phrase used he's got no excuse does he he knows what's going to happen he knows he needs to escape yet you can almost picture him there standing in the door of his house and he's weighing up the pros and cons of going against leaving it's unbelievable how arrogant how foolish to be dawdling over this decision when it's a matter of life and death when he has the chance to save himself and to save his family but even then despite lots arrogance despite lots foolishness God doesn't look at him and say okay you're going to get what you deserve Lot it serves you right for not taking the chance when I gave it to you listen to what happens the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand the Lord being merciful to him and they brought him out and set him outside the city isn't that amazing Lot has pretty much turned his back on safety but here are the angels taking him and his family by the hand and leading them out of the city isn't God's mercy wonderful that it doesn't abandon us even when we reject his offer of salvation but maybe you're saying to yourself what how does this work then when I keep being told I need to do something to be saved can I not just do what Lot did can I not just sit back and wait for God to do something like he did here well God does everything to make it as easy as possible for Lot and his family to escape the looming destruction just as he does for you and me in a spiritual sense but notice friends that although the angels take Lot out of the city it's not enough he still has to do something he has to flee to run to the place of safety because if he stays where the angels have left him he's going to be destroyed then the fourth place we see God's mercy here it's in the city of Zoar the angels tell Lot escape to the hills and Lot and you know when you read this you can hardly believe your eyes you can hardly believe that you're reading this Lot says no I cannot escape to the hills bless the disaster of me taking me and I over taking me and I die behold he's pointing to the city this city is near enough to flee to it's a little one how bad can it be it's not the size of these big giant cities like Sodom and Gomorrah how bad can this little one be and incredibly God listens and he says behold I grant you this favor also

[17 : 00] that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken you know people's opinion of God is so far removed from reality after any disaster you're almost inevitably hear someone say well why did God allow such a thing to happen they'll say it's unfair if this all powerful all knowing God has allowed a hurricane or an earthquake or a terrorist attack or whatever it is to take place but what exactly is unfair about what's going on here in Sodom he's given lot an escape route he sent angels to literally drag him out of the city he's cleared a path for lot through the town's people who hated him who opposed him in that he was taken out in the out of darkness when the streets had been quiet he's done all the hard work and all lot needs to do is get himself to the hills that the angels are pointing out but it's just too much effort to do even that but in his mercy God listens to lot for this too and he gives him permission to go to Zohar instead of to the hills because Zohar is closer and easier to go to now you might not think that's a very big deal he's still going to run he just doesn't have to run quite so far but listen to what God says through the angels I will not overthrow the city talking about Zohar what does that mean it means that God's initial plan was to destroy Zohar as well it's not just that he gives lot a different place to be safe he decides to spare Zohar from its fate so that lot can be safe there an unfair God really we find God's mercy right throughout this story of destruction and you find it in your own life friends what are you going to do with it and remember that lot was a righteous man and that question is as relevant to you and I as Christians as it is to anyone who still hasn't come to Christ for salvation are you as aware and as grateful as he should be and I do you understand the wonder of God's mercy in your life the second of God's attributes we see here is his patience and this is an attribute that also runs right through the narrative we see it when Abraham prays for the cities going back to God with a different number six times and God listens to Abraham's request every time we see it in the angels dealings with lot in the city and as they stand in the outskirts of the city but perhaps the place we most see God's patience here is in the journey that lot takes between Sodom and Zohar now this city Zohar has another name in Genesis 14 it's called Bila and apparently the word Bila means gulp in the sense of something being swallowed up and disappearing it's an image of destruction and the original name for this city tells us that this city was destined for destruction

but as we saw God changed his plan apparently there were five cities in this plane in this valley Sodom Gomorrah Zohar and two others Adma and Seboim which are mentioned in chapter 10 of Genesis we almost always talk about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah don't we but all five cities of the plane were to be destroyed and Zohar is the only one that's spared so how do we see God's patience in this journey that lot takes between Sodom and Zohar well isn't what the angels tell lot escape there quickly for I can do nothing till you arrive there I can do nothing there's God's talking through the angels now there are some things God cannot do because they contradict his nature this isn't one of those things because here God is willingly limiting himself he's restricting what he can do to these cities until such time as lot is safe he doesn't give lot a time limit to get to Zohar he doesn't say well you've got 30 minutes to get there if you're not there tough he gives himself a condition of lots safety being achieved and ensured before he begins the destruction in the plane it's not incredible well we see God's patience in three ways firstly we see it in as we just mentioned God waiting for lot to get to Zohar how long did he wait well archaeologists have different views on what the geography of the day was but I think the Bible gives us a hint that it can't have been more than a handful of miles from Sodom to Zohar because obviously lot could see Zohar from the gates of

Sodom but also it says the sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar which suggests I think that the sun was up but probably hadn't been up very long and we know that Lot left Sodom at around dawn so it might not have been a particularly long delay but it's the fact that there was a delay it's the quality of the delay it's what was achieved in the delay that are important and that are examples of God's patience and then secondly we see God's patience in how the angels deal with Lot now it's obvious when you read this that Lot really doesn't want to leave he's comfortable he's wealthy his family are in the city and as he stands outside the walls of the city he's ungrateful he's looking for a compromise to make things easier for himself instead of doing what the angels tell him to do I wonder if you really believe that this destruction was coming I wonder if he thought he'd go to Zoar it wasn't far away and really when this threat passed he could just easily make his way back to Sodom but friends despite Lot's reaction God isn't impatient and isn't that what he's like with you and I as well because you try God's patience often yet he remains patient with you but in case you get too comfortable and in case you assume that God will just be just as patient with you and you do so obedience as he was to Lot and who's disobedience

God does something for Lot that he will never ever do for you he gives him an alternative place of safety escape to the hills that's what he was told to do and that simple phrase itself is full of meaning should be full of meaning for you friends because it's full of Christ how all Lot's being told to do is run to the physical hills around him but the Samaritan writes and we sang just a few minutes ago do thou me lead unto the rock that higher is than I when Hannah's praying in the temple she says there is none besides you there is no rock like our God it's common enough in the Bible for rocks or hills to be meant to be mentioned in relation to God and Lot should realize that the hills that he's being told to escape to the hills where he's going to be safe represent God and represent his salvation but friends Lot's in a bad way spiritually and he's not seeing God in anything and still and still God is patient well you know where you will be safe and you will never be given an alternative like Lot is here because in Christ is the only place where you'll find salvation the only place where you'll be spared from the destruction to come and there's no point going to go looking for a compromise there's no point going to God asking or arguing for a better solution the name of the Lord is a strong tower the righteous man runs into it and is safe it's only there in Christ where you can be safe well God allows Lot to escape to Zoar but that's just the first part of the lesson he's teaching Lot and the lesson he's teaching us here see Lot has spared the fate of Sodom Gomorrah Sodom and Adama but he's not completely safe in Zoar and it's in what Lot does after arriving in Zoar that we see the third example of God's patience the last verse we read says this Lot went up out of Zoar where did he go and lived in the hills here's Lot coming to a census at long last and he's making his way to where he's been refusing to go he's understanding that he's not really going to be safe in Zoar it's eventually dawning on him that God actually knows what he's doing he comes round to see that he needs to obey God he looks over the scene of complete destruction in the plain in front of him the devastation and the death in the four cities and he realizes that Zoar can only offer a temporary rest night he was afraid it says to live in Zoar he realized he wasn't going to be safe well God's judgment on the cities of the plain is horrific and I might have said this before if I have I apologize for that but I think that one of the problems we have when we deal with stories in the Bible with which we're so familiar is that they become just that stories that we sometimes tune out the fact that these are actual events that took place in actual places and that affected real people and here's fire and brimstone raining down on the cities

the geology of the region is interesting in genesis 14 we're told that the valley of Sidham which is the name of the valley where the cities were located was full of bitumen pits tar pits now this would have been dangerous if someone had fallen into a pit it would also be dangerous if the bitumen of the tar had been shot out of the pit like you see a geese are doing from time to time you may see it on tv and some believe that the sulphur would have been pouring out of these pits in the earth just as it was pouring down from heaven as well and chapter 14 also talks about the valley of Sidham that is the sea of that that is the salt sea you see the valley of Sidham by the time genesis was written was already consigned to history it didn't exist because it had been flooded and was now a sea and it has to have something to do with what goes on here what the time of year i have no idea but the valley of Sidham and the location of these cities are now under water what about Zor does it also lie at the bottom of the dead sea today well it's a question we can't really answer but i wonder if it does because when lot flees from Zor it opens the way for god to destroy the city as he had originally planned to do well what on earth is going through lot's mind as he stands in the gate of Zor and try and picture him he's run for his life he's shell shocked he's looking out over the valley which has been his home for years and he's seeing heaps of rock all over the place he's seeing smoldering timber he's seeing fire right across the plane he's seeing sulfur being thrown out of the earth he's seeing smoke he's seeing corpses littering the valley he's seeing carcasses he's smelling sulfur he's got the stench of death in his nostrils and somewhere out on the plane he sees a power of salt what's he thinking i wonder if he's angry with god i wonder if he's angry with god for taking his wife his friends his business his home i wonder if he's furious with himself for not listening to the angels as soon as they told him what was coming i wonder if he's grateful i wonder if he's grateful that he and his daughters at least have escaped with their lives does he understand that it's so far away from god he's been that's left him looking at the sin of destruction and devastation does he look around at the destruction and see god's patience and letting him get to safety or whatever he's thinking he understands that he can't stay in Zor and he understands that he'll only be safe in the hills or what a difficult lesson this is for lot to learn made even worse of course by his own hand in it

[33 : 05] but how often do you or do i do the same things if only you listened to what god says to you if only you were more willing to trust him things would be much better for you our god's patience is incredible when despite everything that's going on here he's still willing to bring lot to a place of complete safety so worse just a pit stop on the way to safety it's not an actual lasting sanctuary and there's only one place lot's going to be safe and there's only one place that you and i can be truly genuinely eternally safe and that's in christ the thing is though friends it's not just lot who experiences god's mercy and patience here because god is displaying his mercy and patience to everyone in all five cities of the plain because he hadn't already destroyed them despite their wickedness abrahams been praying for them angels have been in their midst mercy and patience everywhere just as that's the case for you but here's the thing god's mercy and god's patience run out as the people of sodden and Gomorrah and the other cities found out to their cost and this unthan this unimaginable horrendous way are you going to let it run out for you are you willing to take your chances like lot appeared to be or will you do the only sensible thing and run for your life to christ to be safe and to avoid the destruction the disaster the catastrophe that's to come when our prayer friends is that nobody here would be in the situation of those in sodden and Gomorrah being destroyed and at the mercy of god's anger and judgment run to christ while you can let's pray let's pray we realize lord when we read passages like this that you're teaching us a lesson and it's being taught to us at terrible cost to others we ask that you'd give each one of us here the wisdom to realize that the threat is real that the danger is imminent that those who don't listen are guaranteed to be destroyed and that the promise of safety and christ for those who flee to him is absolutely guaranteed don't let any of us be like lot dawdling wanting to stay being reluctant to believe you but help us to take the warnings that we to heed the warnings that we receive

whether in gospel or in the gospel or in the providence around us and go to the rock that is christ and be safe for his sake i mean we'll sing in sam 72 final saying sam 72 that's the scottish soldier version at verse 11 ye all the mighty kings on earth before him down shall fall and all the nations of the world to service to him shall down to verse 15 ye he shall live and given to him shall be of sheba's gold for him still shall they pray and he shall daily be extolled these verses to god's praise ye all the mighty kings on earth before him down shall fall and all the nations of the world to service to him shall be of he the needy shall preserve when he to him bet go

The German and the indigent, and mercy shall spare.

He shall preserve alive the souls of those that need it.

Born from deceit and violence, their soul is shall set free.

[40 : 39] And in his sight right precious, and in his sight right precious, And dear their blood shall be.

He shall live and give to him, shall be of sheba's gold.

For him still shall they pray, and he shall be exalted.

Thank you Lord that you would bless to us, our gathering, bless to us your word as we've read it and sung it and sought to think about it. Bless the rest of your day to us.

us, bless us in the evening worship and pardon our sins for Jesus' sake. Amen.