

Part 20: Get a Grip

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When someone says, “Have you heard the one about the Baptist preacher and the fire and brimstone sermon,” you know you’re walking into a joke. But for all of you today, it was a sign that you’ve walked into church.

Today, our study in Genesis brings us to chapter 20, which is *the* fire and brimstone sermon: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. You know the story even if you don’t. “Turn or burn.” God’s wrath consumes man’s wickedness.

Maybe this is the first time you’ve ever heard the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. But, whether this account seems new and odd to you, or old and cliché, I, for one, am excited to preach this passage.

You might think that says a lot about me, but it is only because this passage says a lot about God. That’s not to say it doesn’t speak about us—it does! The sinfulness of our hearts and the dangers of our sin should be clear to us.

The smoldering ruins of judgment speak to who we are apart from Jesus and what we rightly deserve. But a careful reading of this passage shows something that rises higher than judgment: God’s saving mercy.

This passage says a lot about us, but it says more about God and his mighty saving hand.

That’s why the title of our sermon this morning is “Get a Grip.” As much as Sodom had a hold on Lot, God’s covenant mercy had a stronger one. Our main point this morning is this: **Faith clings to the God who grips us by grace.** We will see this in three parts today. First, we will see **The Grip of Sin**, second **The Grip of Grace**, and finally **The Grip of Faith**.

For many of us, the thought of God’s judgment seems harsh and unfair. Would God really punish good people? That’s actually the very answer Genesis 18-19 answers. Last week when Abraham heard of the Lord’s plan to judge these two cities, he appealed to the Lord and his two angelic visitors: “Far be it from you to put the righteous to death with the wicked.”

Abraham, knowing his nephew Lot was in the town, and knowing God to be fair, petitioned God’s justice. Would you punish the righteous? In light of Abraham’s petition, the Lord said he would indeed spare the entire city if there were even 10 righteous individuals in the town.

We don’t know how many people lived in Sodom and Gomorrah—but it seemed like good odds. Perhaps even in a room of a few hundred this morning we might find 10 good people. And it’s this reconstruction that forms the context of chapter 19. What would they find?

And here is where we encounter our first point: **Sin’s Grip**.

It didn't take long for these two messengers to see how deeply sin's grip was on man: **Genesis 19:1-2**, "The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth and said, "My lords, please turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the town square."

Notice first of all how soft, but serious, sin's grip was on Lot. Lot was well aware of Sodom's wickedness but notice how he grew increasingly comfortable with it. In chapter 13 he settled outside the town, in chapter 14 he was found inside the town, now in chapter 19 he is not only a property owner in the town but he might as well have been Mr. Mayor himself. Lot's presence at the gate of the town was a sign of his position within the town. To be on the welcome committee was a position of honor and influence in the town.

Lot went from a cautious outsider to being the face of the town. This is what will happen to any of us if we think we can safely navigate the dangers of sin. Lot thought he could keep the upper hand. He'd test the waters, hold his line, and then carefully move a little deeper in. Just like a casino design in Las Vegas, sin's hospitality is designed to lure you in with the promise of provision and safety.

Have you ever found yourself flirting with sinful temptation because you think it might bring you peace or comfort? We think we have sin firmly under our control. We carefully and wisely engage in a little lust, a little anger, a little lie here and there because we've got a good grip. Like Seal Team 6, we get in, get what we need, and come out none the worse.

But if you think you can get a grip on sin and wrangle it into a helpful and happy partner, sin will have its grip on you. You don't tug on Superman's cape, you don't spit into the wind, and you don't give hospitality to sin. Herman Bavinck once said that the church is hostile to nothing but sin. While we often try to talk ourselves into a safe sense of hospitality regarding sin, God's word calls us to be violent towards it. That's why we are called to put sin to death and to test all things by God's word.

The danger of sin is that it feels comfortable in the moment. So if we allow immediate comfort to be the guide of what is safe—like Lot we will find ourselves in a false sense of happiness and security. Lot feels safe, even though he knows his town isn't safe! Lot is fine living in Sodom, but the reason why he urges these men inside is that he knows Sodom isn't safe. Lot was fine. He'd managed to learn how to be happy and healthy—but for these men—he had to make sure they were safe. **Genesis 19:3**, "But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate."

Lot was going to keep these men safe from the dangers of Sodom. Just as he had provided for himself, he would provide for them. Lot's hospitality was meant to be for the benefit of his guests—but it ends up being for his own benefit.

Biblical hospitality is meant to bless the people we are hospitable towards. But biblical hospitality often blesses the one who opens their home in uncomfortable ways. When we invite godly brothers and sisters into our home their presence often reveals hidden and comfortable patterns of sin in our own life.

My family once had the unfortunate pleasure of being sprayed by skunks. It was the most foul and sickening stink you've ever smelt. And it was all over us. We spent the next few days attempting to de-

skunk ourselves. We bathed, we washed, we stood by a fire to let the smoke overtake the smell. Once we all agreed that we couldn't smell skunk on each other, we went to the store. We thought we were fine. But it wasn't long before everyone around us was turning and asking each other, "Is there a skunk in here."

Lot thought he was safe, Lot thought he was clean. Lot thought he had managed to live well in the city of sin without taking on the stink of sin. But his hospitality brought fresh noses. He couldn't smell himself, but these men drew out the stink that was there the whole time. We are creatures of habit, and we aren't great at self-assessment. But the Lord gives us his word, his Spirit, and his people as a means by which we might have our lives assessed by fresh noses and fresh eyes.

When our conduct or conversation is seen by others, they might be able to say in gentleness, "This is not good. You need to get a grip on how badly things are." Lot wasn't in a good place, but it was the presence of these godly visitors which began his process of coming to grips with it.

How bad is Sodom? Really bad. Notice how all-encompassing and total Sodom's sinful appetite was: **Genesis 19:4-9**, "But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them." Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door down."

There is not one righteous person in this town. Every man, the author tells us, from every corner of town, young and old, rich and poor—all gathered together in wicked hospitality. They wanted to take these men for their own pleasure. And Lot's self-righteousness isn't any better. Did you see the hypocrisy of his own solution? Lot is too righteous to even think of handing these men his visitors—but, he says, "Here's my daughters do with them as you please."

You might be able to take comfort like Lot did: "Well, at least my sin isn't as bad as theirs." But that's a losing battle isn't it. There's no good cancer, and there's no safe sin. It's actually his self-righteous attempt to keep the peace that puts him in greater danger.

These men see right through Lot, they mockingly say, "Are you the judge now over us? You're one of us. Now we will do even worse to you."

The angels didn't find 45 righteous, they didn't find 30 righteous, they didn't even find 10 righteous—none were righteous. Not even Lot. But the very men whom he sought to protect took a grip on him and became his protectors: **Genesis 19:10-14**, "But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the entrance of the house, both small and great, so that they wore themselves out groping for the door. Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went

out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up! Get out of this place, for the Lord is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.”

The visitors saw what they needed to see. None were righteous. They called Lot to understand the danger he was in: God was going to destroy the city. And then they told him the one way he could escape it: “Up, get out of this place.”

What delivers us from God’s judgment against sin? The angels didn’t say: “Let’s have a chat about morality and you’ll be fine.” They didn’t give Lot five principles for wise living in the city of sin. If we are going to be delivered from judgement we must get out of the city of sin. God’s salvation doesn’t teach us how to keep on living in our sin—it calls us out of it. The only way up is out.

And this is why we need to see our second point: **The Grip of Grace.**

Make no mistake, responding to God’s salvation is leaving everything you once held dear behind. Jesus himself says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” It’s a hard sell for any of us to look at all the pleasures and comforts of sin that we see in this world and to believe they are as dangerous as God’s word says. But, it’s just as hard to look at the salvation we cannot see and believe it to be as safe as God’s word says it is. It’s a hard thing to grasp—but we don’t grasp it alone.

Lot was beginning to see the danger of his sin, but he was still struggling to see the definite promise of salvation. This caused three pauses for Lot and his family. All of them dangerous, one of them was deadly. I wonder if you’ve felt yourself in similar places.

Notice first, Lot’s lingering. Look at **Genesis 19:15-16**, “As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city.” But he lingered. So 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.”

J.C. Ryle said, “He was slow when he should have been quick—backward when he should have been forward—trifling when he should have been hastening—loitering when he should have been hurrying—cold when he should have been hot.” In light of all that had happened, Lot lingered in Sodom.

Second, we see Lot’s bartering. Here’s my summary of what we read in **Genesis 19:17-22**, “As the angels brought them out, one said, ‘Escape for your life, don’t look back, don’t stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.’ Lot said to them, ‘I can see you’ve been gracious to get me thus far out of the city, but I have a small question. Is there wifi in the hills? Do they have memory foam mattresses? What about pickleball? Have they got any pickleball? I’m grateful for all you’ve done, but really, I can’t live without that stuff. But look over here, there’s a small town. They don’t have everything—but they seem to have enough to make up for all that I’m losing.’”

I wonder how many of us barter in such a way with God. We want his salvation—but to what are we being saved. I’m fine leaving Sodom, but I don’t want to lose the pleasures of Sodom. But when we are being saved from a burning building, we don’t stop to ask the fireman where he’s taking us—we just say, “Anywhere but here please.” But remarkably, and importantly for later, the angels give Lot his request.

But finally, notice the longing of Lot's wife. **Genesis 19:23-26**, "The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. 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. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."

So what happened here? The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "You become what you think about all day long." Lot's wife died not because of the action of looking back, but because of the affection of looking back. The Hebrew word is not a brief glance; it's looking back to Sodom like I look at a good steak. It's how you might look at your fiancé on your wedding day.

God's grace to save us does two things. First, it grips our hands and changes our direction. Second, it grips our hearts and changes our affections. There are times when you must run. Get out. That's what a wise person does when the house is on fire. But over time, our hearts need to learn to hate the fire. We must see sin for what it is—dangerous, deadly and deserving of judgment. If you wonder what repentance looks like, it looks like leaving behind the things of this world and feeling from sin. But true repentance, godly repentance, cries out to the Lord to change our hearts.

This is a big task. To be delivered from sin you've got to change change your direction and your affection. I wonder if you can do it? Do you have what it takes to take that hand firmly and resolutely?

Some of you might be familiar with Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In it, he beautifully portrayed the gap between God in heaven and Adam on earth. The two are attempting to reach each other again. God's arm is fully extended, and Adam's arm is outstretched, but there's a space in between.

It's a span of 2.5 centimeters. It's precisely the distance of Adam's drooping finger. Michelangelo wanted to portray God's willingness to save if only Adam would reach out fully and take God's hand. The painting is perfectly fitting for the Catholic Church—but it has no place in a Christian church. Why?

Because the story of Sodom and Lot is not a story of Lot reaching out his hand to God. It is a story of God's brutal grip of grace drawing Lot out of his own sin and danger. That 2.5-centimeter gap might as well be 2.5 million light-years, we'd never cross it. But God grabs us by his grace, God spans the gap. God grips us in mercy.

Do you remember the command given to Lot in verses 12 and 14: Bring them out, up, get out. But then look at what happened in **Genesis 19:16**, "But he lingered. So 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."

The very command the Lord gave Lot for him to gain salvation is the very thing the Lord himself did to secure Lot's salvation. The Lord seized him. God's grace led him out of his sin. This is God's mercy. Lot had to go—but apart from the Lord's saving hand, he never would have. Do you have a hand in your salvation—absolutely. It's your hand that God grabs when he drags out of our sin by his merciful grace.

Why did Lot deserve such a grace? Look with me at **Genesis 19:27-29**, "And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord. And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace. 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.”

God’s judgment against sin is serious. Fire and brimstone came. In one of the areas where these towns likely stood, archeologists have discovered what they call “a massive destruction layer” at least six meters thick. The layer includes bones, pottery and glass shards all of which have an odd glassy coating on them. This coating is created only by immense heat, and most commonly it is found in nuclear test sites.

God’s judgment fell with staggering force. And the same God who promised this judgment has promised another. One in which he will judge the living and the dead. And like Lot, none of us are able to avoid it on our own.

But Lot was spared because Abraham, the promised one, interceded on his behalf. God remembered Abraham and his promise, and he spared Lot from judgment on account of the promise. The Lord has sent a better intercessor, Jesus himself. Who takes the punishment of God’s immense wrath so that those who were sinful might by grace be saved.

What is our part then? We just sit back and it’s done? What does a response to God’s saving mercy look like? It looks like continuing to live in faith: faith that sin and her promises never pay out and God and his power is never ending. This is seen by way of it’s opposite in the odd and final portion of this passage.

Here is our final point: **The Grip of Faith.**

Lot was delivered. But remember how along the way, the thought he had a better plan for his saved life than the Lord did. He fought to be put back into another city. Even as God delivered him out of the city of man, he still couldn’t give up his faith in the things of this world. He asked for a town. But only a little one. That’s what “Zoar” means. It’s just a “little one.” That’s all he wanted, just a little security in the world.

He trusted the Lord to save him, but he didn’t trust the Lord to sustain him. He required a city—but look at what happened to him in the city: **Genesis 19:30**, “Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters.”

Derek Kidner said of this, “Fear had driven him [to Zoar], and fear blindly drove him out again.” It’s all too common for those who have been genuinely saved to trust God eternally, but to doubt him immediately.

We want the confidence of heaven, but we require the Lord to give it to us in the things of earth. But those things will fail. Those things will not provide.

Notice also the paranoia and doubt of Lot’s daughters in 31 through the end of the chapter. They look around at the judgment the Lord gave, and they see how their dad took them out of Zoar and fearfully hid them in a cave. And now, just like the Israelites did in the desert, they said to themselves, “Did God bring us out here just so we might die?”

This would have been a shot to the heart of Moses' audience as they connected their own grumbling in the desert to Lot's daughters. Lot's daughter's sinful distrust manifested in a scheme which was equal parts devastatingly tragic and incredibly wicked. They got Lot so drunk that they were able to sleep with him without him noticing and becoming impregnated by their own father.

A life of those who have been delivered by the hand of God, and yet one that refuses to continue to rely on the hand of God, is no happy life. This seems like a tragic story. And it is. But it has a happy ending.

Consider how Peter reflects on this in **2 Peter 2:6-9**, "if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued righteous 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); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment."

Did you see that? Lot was called righteous. The Lot we see in this passage is anything but righteous. But Peter knows what we don't from this text. Apparently, Lot's deliverance from Sodom and his fearful decisions in the cave eventually led to him fully trusting and believing the Lord. Just as Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. So too did Lot.

While Lot didn't know the extent of it yet, God's grip of grace was not just on his hand—but his heart. By our eyes, he was a hopeless cause. Slow, stupid and sinful. But something changed.

It took Lot rock bottom, but he learned from his wife. His wife, preserved as salt, has the ability to preserve all of us for eternity. She reminds us that we must look only one place—to the Lord in faith. The grace of God produces in us a faith that only justifies us in Christ. It also produces one which satisfies us in Christ.

One Puritan pastor said it this way: "If my hands are laden with pebbles, I cannot clasp the diamonds that are offered to me. Unless you fling out the sandbags, the balloon will cleave to the earth, and unless we turn the world out of our hearts, it is no use to say, "Come, Lord Jesus." There is no room for Him anyway."

How do we get a firm grip on grace? We have to let ourselves let go of the pebbles of the world and the promise of our little towns. We know we've been gripped by grace when we grip nothing but Jesus. What do you cling to? And can it save? What are you hoping in and can it keep you from fear?

But God's grace to us is seen most clearly and we participate most knowing, when we ask him to save us and keep us in Jesus by faith. As William Jay said, "If you feel your need of salvation, run to him and say, 'Let my present ruin be under your hand.' He is mighty to save...And while his power enables him to save, his goodness inclines him to save."

Four were brought out by four hands in Sodom. But for all who cling to Jesus, none shall snatch out of his hand.