

GOD'S JUSTICE AND INTERCESSORY PRAYER  
GENESIS 18:16-33

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Oded and Yocheved Lifshitz are 83 and 85 years old. (PROJECTOR ON--- LIFSHITZ'S) They were founding members of the kibbutz Nir Oz, which is located just to the east of the Gaza Strip in Israel. Oded was a career journalist and peace activist. He was known for his advocacy of human rights.

In their later retirement years Oded and Yocheved developed what we might call a ministry of regularly going into the Gaza Strip and taking sick Palestinians to hospitals in Israel to get treatment for cancer and other diseases.

On October 7 Hamas invaded their kibbutz of about 400 residents and killed or kidnapped about 100 of them. The Lifshitz' house was burned to the ground. Oded and Yocheved were both taken captive into Gaza. On October 24 Yocheved was released by Hamas. Oded still remains a captive. He is not in great health and is dependent on regular medications. It is unknown if he is still alive. Such is the treatment they received for being kind to Palestinian residents of Gaza. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There is a lot of injustice that happens in our world. We don't have to go beyond our borders to find evidence of it. Several weeks ago three UNLV professors were killed and a fourth wounded by some guy who apparently was hurt because he was not accepted on the faculty of the college. A couple of weeks before that there was the high school student in Las Vegas who was beat up by a gang of kids after school and killed. And then more recently there were the two state troopers who pulled over to help a stranded motorist on I-15. They were wiped out by a car driven by a man who was under the influence. Last week in North Las Vegas a pastor was shot by an irate neighbor, leaving behind a wife and two small children. Sometimes we wonder why God allows such evil and injustice in the world.

In the first book of The Lord of the Rings trilogy Frodo complains that a great evil has erupted in his generation. He says, "**I wish it need not have happened in my time.**" Gandalf provides a wise response: "**So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.**"

Such is the challenge which we face today. Such is the challenge which Abraham faced in his day. In the passage before us this morning Abraham is forced to confront the reality of evil in the world and God's response to it. All of this is part of the individualized training program that the Lord had for Abraham. In the end He is seeking to develop his faith. That is a concern that the Lord has for each of us as well.

Last week in our study of the first part of Genesis #18 Abraham and Sarah were taught that God is all-powerful. The question that the Lord Himself asked them in v. 14 was: **“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”** The question that Abraham poses in the second part of this chapter is: **“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”** Abraham and Sarah have been reassured that God is all-powerful. Now they will learn something about whether the God who is there uses that power justly. Is God just, and what does justice look like?

We saw last week that three angels appeared at the camp of Abraham near Hebron (HEBRON MAP) in south central Canaan. Their purpose was largely to establish Sarah’s faith in God’s promise that she and Abraham would have a son. Sarah was now an old woman. She was long past her childbearing years. But one of the angels, the Son of God Himself, displayed His omniscience--- his all-knowingness--- and Sarah believed. She trusted in God’s power and promise to provide her with a son. Now they shall learn about the justice of God.

I.

In vv. 16-19 of Genesis #18 we find that GOD EXPLAINS HIS PLAN TO HIS PEOPLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD EXPLAINS HIS PLAN TO HIS PEOPLE) In the first part of the chapter the Lord was one of the three angelic visitors to Abraham in his camp, bearing the promise that Sarah would have a baby in the next year. Now in v. 16 we read, **“Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way.”** Jewish tradition says that he walked with them for three miles to a point where the lower Dead Sea valley is visible. (DEAD SEA)

In the following verses the angel of the Lord, the Son of God, asks a question of the other two angels. According to v. 17 He asks, **“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”** The Hebrew grammar implies that He will reveal what He is about to do. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Lord gives two reasons for doing this. In v. 18 He says, **“...Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.”** One of Abraham’s responsibilities was to be a blessing to the other nations of the world. He had already rescued Sodom and the other four cities of the plain from the northern alliance which had attacked them. So Abraham has been a blessing to Sodom. Lot also lives there. My understanding is that the Lord desires here to explain to Abraham why this city-state is about to be removed from the face of the earth. He wants to explain why one of the objects of Abraham’s blessing is about to be judged and removed from the opportunity for further blessing.

Then secondly, according to v. 19, God was revealing His plan to Abraham so that it would be a vivid lesson to Abraham’s descendants about God’s justice. The Lord says, **“For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that**

**the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”** Notice again God’s sovereign choice of Abraham.

Other Canaanites might have labeled what happened to Sodom as a natural disaster. We see in this inspired account that the disaster which befalls Sodom was the result of the judgment of God. The Lord says here that part of the reason for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is that the Israelites will be motivated to pursue righteousness and justice and also learn a proper fear of God. In later Biblical history what happens to Sodom and Gomorrah will become an object lesson about the need that all people have to respect the justice and judgment of God.

Thus God explains His plan to His people. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:9) In Ephesians #1 in the New Testament we have an updated version of that principle. Writing to Christians in v. 9 the Apostle Paul says, **“He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him [i.e. Christ]...”** There is much that we do not know about God’s sovereign will. But we know a lot more about God’s plan and God’s will than Abraham did. For we have much more of God’s written revelation. Because of that, we also have more insights into the nature of God’s justice. Because of that we should all have a certain respect and reverential fear for the holy God who is truly there.

II. A.

(II. GOD EXPLAINS HIS JUSTICE TO HIS PEOPLE) In the remaining verses of #18 we find that GOD EXPLAINS HIS JUSTICE TO HIS PEOPLE. We are told three things about the justice of God in these verses. First, we are told that HUMANS ARE DEPRAVED. (II. GOD... A. HUMANS ARE DEPRAVED) That is the message of v. 20. The Lord says, **“... the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave.”**

The Hebrew term for “outcry” is usually used in the Old Testament of oppressed people. Abraham had rescued the people of Sodom and Gomorrah from northern invaders some years earlier. I wonder if he thought that they were depraved and oppressed. When we think of Sodom and Gomorrah, we usually think of the sexual immorality that took place there. Next week we shall find that this indeed was an issue.

The prophet Ezekiel years later identified another moral problem in these cities. (EZEKIEL 16:49) In Ezekiel #16 vv. 49 & 50 the Lord speaks through the prophet, saying, **“Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. (EZEKIEL 16:50) They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it.”** There was arrogant pride; there was social injustice; and there were abominations before the Lord. The problem here, as was true of life in the time of Noah’s flood, was human evil in all of its various manifestations.

There is also a word play in v. 20 of Genesis 18. (TSEDIQAH- ZA'AQAH) God's concern in v. 19 is righteousness, which is *tsediqah* in Hebrew. But what he hears from Sodom is *za'aqah*, an outcry of oppression and evil.

God's evaluation of this situation is that "their sin is very grave." Literally He calls their sin "very heavy." We live in a culture which tends to minimize sin. Our culture tends to promote the notion that everyone suffers from victimhood. Las Vegas proudly bills itself as "Sin City." Like Sodom there is a lot of sexual immorality that happens in our metropolitan area. According to Yahoo Finance, Las Vegas is second in the country only to Houston for cities with the most sex trafficking. An outfit called Wallet Hub surveyed the states of the country a couple of years ago and used 43 measurements to determine in some kind of objective fashion the amount of sin in each state. They measured things like violent crime, excessive drinking, gambling disorders, sex offenses, and hate crimes. Which state do you suppose came out at number one as the most sinful state? Yes, Nevada.

God is repulsed by sin. His sense of justice provokes him toward judgment. His attributes of patience and love restrain that judgment. But Ezekiel reminds us that God's justice at times prompts Him to act firmly against the kinds of sins that he observed in Sodom: arrogant pride, callous disregard and oppression of the poor, and unrestrained sexual immorality. We humans suffer from a sin problem. The Bible tells us that we are all sinners.

B.

In v. 21 we find out that not only are humans depraved but also that GOD UNDERSTANDS CIRCUMSTANCES OF INJUSTICE. (II. A. B. GOD UNDERSTANDS CIRCUMSTANCES...) In v. 21 the Lord says, "**I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.**"

The Lord is omniscient. He knew exactly what was going on in Sodom and the other cities of the plain. But as a concession to man's limited understanding, He told Abraham that He would go down to investigate. The Lord's primary concern was that He wanted Abraham and His descendants to be fully assured that when He renders judgment, He does it with full and complete knowledge of all of the facts. He wants us to have that assurance as well.

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah had already had a warning shot fired across their bow. Several years earlier a northern alliance of city states had conquered their cities and hauled their surviving residents off as captives. But for the gracious intervention of Abraham and his forces they might all have been killed or enslaved.

There are bad things which happen to us individually and corporately. There are man-made disasters, and there are what we call natural disasters. There is 9/11 and October 7 in Israel. There was an earthquake last week in Japan. Were these judgments from God? It is difficult to make those evaluations, without specific revelation from God.

There were Christian people and seemingly innocent people who were hurt in each of these tragedies.

What we can take away from v. 21 of our passage is the assurance that God is fully aware of all of the circumstances when He does execute judgment, whether that judgment involves an individual, a family, a community, or a nation. There are also no accidents in His sovereign plan. Ultimately the sovereign and all-powerful God of the universe has a purpose for everything that happens in our world.

C.

The third aspect of God's justice is described in vv. 22-33. It is that **GOD RESPONDS TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER.** (II. A. B. C. **GOD RESPONDS TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER**) God's justice takes into account the prayers of godly believers. Prayers for others make a difference. Here we find that Abraham intercedes for the residents of Sodom.

Two of the angels headed down toward Sodom while the angel of the Lord--- the Son of God--- remained with Abraham. In v. 23 Abraham asks, **"Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"**

Abraham knew something about what the Lord would find in Sodom. He had been involved with these people before. He had rescued them when the northern alliance had taken the people of Sodom, including his nephew Lot, captive. So there was no denial by Abraham that there were bad people in these towns. The question that Abraham posed implies that there was great danger that God might judge this city, and its sister cities, when He investigated them. But, as we shall see, Abraham underestimated the extent of evil in Sodom and Gomorrah, or at least God's evaluation of it.

Nevertheless Abraham interceded for these people. In v. 23 his concern is for the righteous. Should the righteous be judged along with the ungodly? Is that just? How would such an action be consistent with the character of a just God? There is no denial that some are deserving of judgment, perhaps even many. But should the righteous suffer the same fate as the wicked?

In v. 24 the focus of Abraham's concern broadens to include the entire city. **"Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?"** Abraham is interceding for the entire city of Sodom, perhaps along with its sister cities. Abraham seems to imagine only two possible options. Either the entire place will be allowed to continue, or it will all be wiped out.

Thus he prays for the avoidance of judgment. His assumption is that there must be some godly people there. He knows that Lot and his family are there. In the next chapter in v. 8 Lot speaks of his two daughters. (GENESIS 19:12) In v. 12 we read, **"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.”** The implication seems to be that there are additional family members around.

Back in chapter 13 we saw that Abraham and Lot had to split up because their herds and flocks had grown too large to sustain themselves on the same land. Reference was made to additional herdsmen. (PROJECTOR OFF) When Abraham in #14 went to rescue Lot it was said that he had 318 men with him. Maybe Lot did not have that many people working with him. But I suspect that he had a significant operation with quite a few people in his tribe if he and Abraham had to split up. So Abraham might have hoped that some of them were followers of the true God. And would not Lot have had some kind of positive spiritual impact upon Sodom?

In v. 25 Abraham's appeal to God's justice is direct: **“Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked...”** Then he asks the question: **“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”** Notice Abraham's conception of God. God is not some local god whose power is limited to a certain area, as many people in the Ancient Near East understood the gods to be. He is not one god among many gods. He is the universal God. He is the only true God. He is Judge of all of the earth, and He is just. So Abraham pleads not for mercy but for justice.

In v. 26 the Lord promises to spare the whole city if there are fifty righteous people found there. This also tells us something about the character of God--- and about the impact of believers. We may have an influence far beyond what we might imagine. A minority of believers in a community, a tribe, or a nation may be responsible for averting the judgment of God, even in Sin City.

Abraham goes on and presses God even further: Would you spare the whole city for 45? What about 40? 30? 20? 10? Certainly there must be at least ten righteous people in Sodom. There may be ten in Lot's family alone. He had servants and tribes people who worked for him. Hopefully Lot had some kind of positive influence on the city. Sodom should be safe. Abraham thought that he was providing a significant margin of safety by means of his prayer.

Abraham is not really bargaining here. He has nothing to offer. He is simply pleading for the averting of judgment on the basis of God's character. He does it with humility, realizing that he has nothing in himself to offer. In v. 27 he says, **“I am but dust and ashes.”** He also knows something about the One with whom he is dealing--- the Judge of all the earth.

The Lord knew how many righteous people there were in Sodom. He knew that there were not even ten. But He allowed Abraham to go through this process so that Abraham's faith would be increased and God's judgment would be vindicated. He wanted Abraham to learn that his intercession meant something. It was important. The Lord also wanted Abraham's descendants to learn from his example that they had a responsibility to the other nations of the world.

The Lord wants His people to learn that He is just. When He acts in judgment, He does so having taken into account the depravity of man, all of the circumstances that are involved, and the intercessory prayers of godly believers. As we shall find out next week the Lord uses a third option for judgment that Abraham had perhaps not considered.

### III. A.

(III. THE APPLICATIONS) Consider then THE APPLICATIONS from this passage. I find at least two of them. First, WE CAN TRUST GOD BECAUSE HE IS JUST. (III. THE APPLICATIONS A. WE CAN TRUST GOD...) The view of most of the religions in ancient history and even some religions today is that the gods are capricious. They are not rational. They are not dependable. They are not just.

A Babylonian poem from this general time period is called "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer." It is typical of this attitude. A holy man tries to obey the gods, and his world falls in. The gods are unresponsive and do not care. (POEM OF THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFERER) The holy man says, **"What is good in one's sight is evil for a god./ What is bad in one's own mind is good for a god./ Who can understand the counsel of the gods in the midst of heaven?"**

The Lord reveals Himself to be different from all of the false gods. He is just. He is willing to save an evil city and its neighboring communities from judgment for the sake of only ten righteous people. (PROJECTOR OFF) But there are not ten righteous individuals to be found. So His judgment is just, and He rescues out of Sodom those who are righteous.

That is not to say that every disaster or every incident of suffering is the result of God's judgment. There are many reasons for suffering besides the judgment of God. The lesson here is that God is just, and He can be trusted. Christians have often been the victims of evil. Sometimes they have been martyrs for the faith. But God's promise is that we can look forward to eternal life and rewards in heaven.

### B.

Then secondly we need to realize that WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO INTERCEDE IN PRAYER. (III. A. B. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO INTERCEDE IN PRAYER) God made Abraham aware of a situation of divine judgment. Abraham thus had the opportunity to intercede for others. Abraham's prayer for Sodom made a difference. As we shall see next week, Sodom was destroyed, but #19 v. 29 says, **"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 is sovereign, but somehow Abraham's prayer made a difference in the rescue of Lot and his family.

When the Israelites were at Mt. Sinai, and Moses was on the mountain, the people made a golden calf and worshipped it. (PSALM 106:21-22) In Psalm 106 we are told, **"They forgot God, their Savior,/ who had done great things in Egypt,/ wondrous works in the land of Ham,/ and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. (PSALM 106:23)**

**Therefore he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one,/ stood in the breach before him,/ to turn away his wrath from destroying them.”** Moses interceded for his people, and his prayer made a difference.

The Bible commands us to pray for political leaders, for church leaders, and for each other. With renewed conflict in the Middle East, we are reminded that we should pray for God's chosen people in that part of the world. (PSALM 122:6) In the Davidic Psalm 122 the writer urges people, **“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May they be secure who love you!”**

There was a family in the Netherlands in 1844 which took that challenge seriously. They attended a Dutch Reformed church, and they felt a responsibility to pray for the Jewish people. So they began a weekly prayer meeting which always included prayers for the Jewish people. They became committed to intercessory prayer. When the patriarch of that family and the leader of the prayer meeting died, his son took up the mantle. The weekly prayer meeting continued. When that man died, his son took over. That son's name was Casper. His prayer meeting ended on February 28, 1944, 100 years after it began, when Nazi soldiers came to the house to take the family away for aiding local Jews. Casper ten Boom died ten days later. The Jews suffered horribly in the Holocaust. But out of that tragedy the modern nation of Israel was formed. Also the story of this heroic Christian family was told by the daughter in the family, Corrie ten Boom, who survived a Nazi concentration camp. In 2008 Casper and his daughter Betsie, who died in a Nazi concentration camp, were honored at Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. Corrie was honored earlier, in 1968. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We can't always know when God is judging or disciplining people. But we can pray for people and groups and nations facing difficult circumstances. We can pray that God might withhold judgment from our city and state and country for the sake of the righteous who live here.

Intercessory prayer makes a difference. Mary believed that. She was active as a young person. But she became afflicted with a degenerative spine disease, and by the time she was 25 she was paralyzed. Her brother went into Christian ministry, and she prayed for him diligently. Much of the time Mary was unable to speak. But she wrote long encouraging letters to her brother. He responded with letters in return.

Mary's pastor once commented, **“Her work in her affliction, in its way, was as great as that which her great brother wrought.”** Her brother was William Carey, the Father of Modern Missions. In the divine scheme of things his sister's prayers may have been largely responsible for his Christian impact on India.

Intercessory prayer makes a difference. God will always be just, but somehow our prayers can temper and restrain His judgment. Those prayers can also be effective and useful in meeting the needs of groups and individuals around us. Our country needs prayer. There is much that goes on in our nation that does not match up with God's

standards of justice and morality. Our political leaders need prayer. Our community needs prayer. There are significant needs in our own congregation that need prayer. Perhaps some among you would be motivated to join our Wednesday morning prayer group, which specializes in intercessory prayer. Let's join together now in prayer.