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I was reading in the paper a while back about a very strange incident that happened in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. It was about a married lady called Vera Czermak. Apparently this lady had been told by her husband that he was having an affair, a long standing affair with another woman. Vera was heartbroken, distraught and over time she became suicidal. One day she decided to end it all by jumping out of their third story apartment window onto the pavement below.

But the local Prague newspaper reported that her attempt to kill herself had failed and that she was in hospital recovering. Do you know what happened? When she jumped she ended up falling on someone on the pavement below, her husband! She survived but he was killed. As the paper reported it seemed that justice had been done.

Justice. It's something we all desire isn't it? We want to see people get what they deserve. So we hate it when people are denied natural justice, when there are unjust laws, or when judges take bribes or when fancy lawyers can get people off on a technicality. Often after horrendous crimes have happened in our community, we see on our TV large crowds forming outside the court house. They are there calling for justice, an eye for an eye, or even worse. For there is something within us that hankers for justice. We want people to be judged when they do something wrong. It is important to us, very important.

But there is another deeply held view within our modern society and that is we don't like people to judge us. We can judge others, but we don't like people judging us. We tell them it's wrong for someone to judge our beliefs, our actions, our morals.

So that brings us to a dilemma. Who ultimately has the right to judge? Do our friends? Our neighbours? The government? The judges? Or just ourselves?

Well at present the answer to that dilemma is that the public has the right to judge. That is why pollsters are always asking our opinion. That's why politicians are always seeking the current mood of the public. It is the community that judges and determines justice. Which seems fair enough, which seems democratic, unless you believe that communities can also get it wrong also.

Did the German community get it wrong in 1930's? Did the Russians get in wrong in the 1950's? Did the Serbs get it wrong in the 1990's? Are the Jews getting it wrong right now? We will only be able to tell if we compare the community's standards to a higher standard. To our Creator's standard!

For the Bible says that it is not public opinion that judges, but God Himself. He is the ultimate judge. He may allow us our parliaments, our courts, our judicial system, but he

expects us to follow His standards. And in the end he will bring about a final judgement and then he will judge according to His standards and not our standards.

And we see this point made very clear in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. Here God judges these two cities. He destroys them both completely. Now to our modern ears, this passage is difficult to take, very difficult to take. But before we make a judgement on this incident, let's look at the fact together.

1. Flouting God's standards.

Sodom and Gomorrah have for many thousands of years been by-words for evil. Even today some people describe particularly immoral places as Sodom. And we have a distasteful sexual practise called sodomy. But what in fact was their sin? What did they do wrong? Do they deserve their reputation?

Well those are the very questions that God was asking some 4000 years ago. It had come to his attention that Sodom's sin was extremely great, so he came down Himself to check it out. Last week we saw that God Himself came as a man and spoke to Abraham face to face. And now in chapter 19, he sends two of his angels into the city to check it out.

The angels were quite content to spend the night in the town square but Abraham's nephew Lot insists they stay with him instead. For Lot knows these people. He lives with them. He sense what could happen to them if they stay out all alone. They reluctantly agree and later on that night, the men of Sodom come to Lot's door. And in a passage that is truly repulsive, they demand that the men may be brought out so that they could have sex with them.

This is not just homosexuality, even though the Bible has plenty to say against that practise. This is homosexual gang rape and even outside the people of God at this time this practise was totally unacceptable. In fact it was a capital offense. And to do attempt to do it on defenceless travellers where there should be hospitality makes it even worse. The people of Sodom are not just flouting God's laws but their own somewhat laxer moral standards.

Now 99.9% of people today would think that these people have breached the standards of acceptable moral behaviour and so deserve punishment. Yet to God and to the writers of the OT, this sin was just the icing on the cake. For that was not their only sin, nor the only time they flouted God's standards. Isaiah declares that pride came into it was well. Not only do they commit these sorts of sins but they do it openly, unashamedly, before visitors.

The write of Jude in the New Testament talks about their crime as not just homosexual rape but sexual immorality and perversion. They have a wrong view of sexual practise and they don't mind perverting a good thing like sex and making it suit their own evil desires and passions. But the most striking indictment on this incident comes from the prophet Ezekiel who says *"Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned. They didn't help the poor and needy. They were proud and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen."*

It was not just their abuse of sex that condemned them, it was their lack of social justice. It was due to the fact that they didn't look after the poor and needy. It was because of their arrogance.

You see what happened to the angels was just the icing on the cake. Already the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had flouted God's standards. He had already given them a second chance by allowing Abraham to rescue them from an earlier battle in Genesis 14. Now he had provided them with another chance to amend their ways by sending these angels. And even after the incident at Lot's door, Lot's relatives are given a further chance to escape, but they just laugh at him. Now they will all have to face God's judgement. And as Jonathan Edward's once said, *"it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a just God."*

For when societies, when individuals, flout God's standards, there is judgement. It happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, it happened to Noah's generation, it happens to Egypt in Moses time, to Israel numerous times throughout the Old Testament and because God doesn't change, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that it could happen again to us in the modern world.

As one commentator has said, *"If God does not judge us today, then the Lord will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah."* For the proof, all we have to do is turn on our TV sets and watch the news. Rape, sexual perversion, arrogance, greed are common place. The rights of the poor and needy are often not defended. So often as a society, we are found to be unconcerned with the fate of others – the refugee, the unborn, the poor and the elderly.

This is not about pointing the finger at others. This is not saying, well Sodom and Gomorrah deserve everything they had coming to them. This is about realising that when we flout God's standards, that we won't in the end get away with it. For God is a God of justice. One day he will stop giving out any more chances. And instead we will face God's judgement.

2. Face God's Judgement

That's what happens in Genesis 19, God brings about his judgement in the most horrible of ways. He rains down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah. One night there are these two towns, the next morning there is nothing left. The people are killed, the houses are destroyed, the cattle are wiped out, the crops disappear and the place becomes a desert region – never to be inhabited to this day. Due to the sins of these towns, nothing in the whole region remains.

It's a horrible description. It's frightening to see judgement like this metered out. It should bring tears to our eyes. In Genesis 3 God kicks Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 7 God floods the whole earth. In Genesis 19, he reminds us that God will judge all evil. We might in 2009 not want God to judge. We may think that each person can have their own sense of right and wrong, but God has other thoughts on this matter.

God will judge us as a nation, as a community, as individuals if we flout His standards. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah then stands as a witness – a witness to this solemn truth.

But isn't this just the god of the Old Testament? Isn't he a God of law, or war, of judgement in the Old Testament but has had a makeover by the time we reach the New Testament and turned into a God of love and of grace by the time Jesus comes? Well Jesus picks up the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Gospel of Luke and says this, *"It was the same in the days of Lot. People were buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be like this on the day that the Son of Man returns."*

If we don't like the reality of God's judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah, then Jesus has some hard words for us to swallow. It will happen again. God's judgement will strike again. Whether we like it or not, Jesus will return and Jesus himself will implement a repeat performance. He will judge all those who flout God's standards. He will destroy all those who fall short of God's standards.

Sodom flouted God's standards and involved themselves with homosexual rape, sexual immorality, arrogance and a lack of concern for the poor, the needy, the helpless. And I find myself asking, is our society any better? Have we in Australia learnt the lessons of Sodom? Have I? For we have to look even closer to home. Do I care for the needy? Am I too proud? Am I involved in sexual immorality? Do I reach out to the homeless, the orphan, the elderly and those in need?

This is a frightening passage, as we see God's standards. And as I see my country, my suburb, myself breaking these standards everyday, I realise, with much pain, that we, that I, that all of us deserve to face God's judgement.

Yet if that was all there was to this story then there would be no hope. Yet in the midst of tragedy, in the middle of judgement, we see the rainbow of God's grace touch the life of Lot and his family. We see that some are favoured by God's grace.

3. Favoured by God's grace.

For in the midst of this story we see how God deals with Lot and his family. The apostle Peter says of Lot that he *"was a righteous man who while living among these people day by day was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard."*

God had already promised to Abraham, in response to his prayer, that he would not destroy the righteous along with the wicked. That God will always be just in his judgements. And so when he saw Lot, he graciously rescued him and his family. For Lot had been tormented by his neighbour's behaviour. He had welcomed the two men that came to Sodom's gate, not knowing that they were angels. He risked his life to save them from being humiliated by going outside to meet the mob himself.

Yet in this account we also see a fair bit of weakness in Lot and his family. When Lot bravely meets the crowd outside the door he is in an interesting situation. He had a choice to make. He could comply with the request and let them have the men or he could refuse the request and stand up for righteousness. Lot would choose to protect his guest, but he would not

choose to stand up for righteousness. Instead he would make a proposal that would truly be a compromise of this righteous character.

We are told in verse eight, *“Now, behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof.”* Protecting the guest was noble, but sacrificing his two virgin daughters can hardly be considered a quality of a holy and righteous character. The only moral choice in this situation would have been to stand up for righteousness and not give in to compromise.

A bit later when he told to leave Sodom, Lot hesitates. Is it his home that he doesn't want to leave, his belongings, his memories? We don't know. But there is something in Sodom that he loves so much that he doesn't want to give it up. And later when he gets out of the city, Lot complains that the distance they have to travel is too far and so he asks the angels to let him go just a short way to a small town called Zoar.

Here we see a man with his doubts. Here we see a man with divided loyalties, used to making compromises. We see his wife also finds it difficult not to look back. We see daughters who are engaged to men who don't want to leave Sodom at all. So we see a family of faith, a family who are righteous, but a family that are far from perfect and a family who need a helping hand.

Now God sees that to and he gives them a helping hand. The angels themselves take them by the hand and lead them away from danger. When Lot hesitates, the angels are strong. When Lot dallied, the angels did not delay. God knew that even the righteous need his help to escape his judgement. So he leads them by the hand away from the danger. He favours them by His grace.

That teaches us something that is important, really important. As the apostle Peter says, *“If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials.”*

Yes there is judgement spoken about in the Bible. Yes that judgement is real, very real. But if you put your trust in Jesus righteousness rather than your own, if despite your failings and doubts, you have faith that God will deliver you out of the judgement to come, then you two will find yourself in Lot's situation. When Jesus comes again and ends the world; when he comes to judge justly everyone who has been on this earth, you two will find that God will lead you by the hand, he will favour you with his incredible grace, he will ensure that you escape the judgement to come.

For in the gospels we read that God himself took the punishment we deserved. It should have fallen on us, but instead it fell on his son Jesus. He dies on that cross. He receives the full weight of God's punishment. He dies, so that we might live.

The same fate that falls on Sodom and Gomorrah falls on Jesus. Not just death, but separation from God the Father. For when Jesus is on the cross he shouts, *“My god, my god why have you forsaken me?”* Jesus does not just take us by the hand, but he pushes you and

I out of the way. He carries us to safety and then goes back to take the full force of our judgement.

You see judgement is not just an Old Testament concept, it also appears in the New Testament as well. But the difference is that in the New Testament the judgement falls on Jesus, the innocent for the guilty, the perfect Son of Man on behalf of billions of sinful men. But if we are not following Jesus, if we have trusted in his righteousness, then the price has not been paid and we will have to face God's judgement ourselves. If we reject God's ways or if we are like Lot's wife and never really give up our old way of life, then Jesus death will do us no good. And so the fate that overcame Sodom and Gomorrah will also come to us.

So be filled with thanks for what Jesus has done. God does know how to save those who are his own. He saved Lot and he will save us as well. From all our trials and then from the trial at the end.

But in the meantime we need to be aware of the fate of this world. We need to be tormented by the ways of the people around us. So we seek to avoid compromise but instead try and live righteous lives in the midst of an unrighteous world. With tears in our eyes, we need to pray, preach and live godly lives. For when you flout God's standards, you will face God's judgement, unless you are favoured by God's grace.

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I have to agree with one commentator who said, "If God does not judge America, then the Lord will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. "

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The Spiritual Decline of the Spiritually Inclined

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When you hear about preachers or other Christian leaders falling, you need to understand that it just didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual process, a process that came about from some moral fault lines within their lives.

Just this week an earthquake with a 7.6 magnitude shook Central Mexico killing several people. This earthquake didn't just happen. There were things taking place beneath the surface long before the earthquake came and destroyed lives. The spiritual decline of the spiritually inclined is the same way. There are things happening beneath the surface long before we see the moral earthquake take place. When God's people don't deal with the underlying sin issues they lead us to a spiritual decline. And when we don't deal with the spiritual decline, it can have destructive consequence. The spiritual decline is gradual. The spiritual decline is destructive.

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