

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN? - Part fifteen

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHY THE MESSAGE OF DIVINE JUDGMENT SEEMS UNREAL TO UNBELIEVERS

Genesis 19:12-15 - "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. [13] 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." [14] 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. [15] 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."

We need to be clear on one thing throughout this entire series. We need to be aware of the *motive* of studying this at all. It's certainly not personal interest on my part. What would drive a New Testament church to poke around in this old, dark account in the book of Genesis about Sodom and Gomorrah? What makes us do this?

God does. There is a reason for looking carefully at this old text from the book of Genesis as we gather together as a New Testament church today. The New Testament calls us to consider this account of Lot, his family, and the destruction of Sodom when we, the Church of Jesus Christ, study the nature of divine judgment:

2 Peter 2:4-9 - "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; [5] if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; [6] 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; [7] and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked [8] (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); [9] then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment [interesting phrase] until the day of judgment...."

This whole account of the judgment of Sodom is meant, Peter says, to serve as an *"example of what is going to happen to the ungodly"* (6). When Peter says Lot is one example of what is *going* to happen, he means Lot is an example, not for the people of *Lot's* day, but for the people of *our* day, for people living in Newmarket in the year 2013. He's an example for people who are careless about righteousness, inside our own church. Peter says this Genesis account is for the people in this sanctuary today.

And that's what I want to look at today. I want to look at one particular aspect of that old account. Our text teaches us that Lot was called upon, and was faithfully obedient, to *warn* many of his other relatives that they were to flee the coming wrath of God. I take from this that, when Peter says this account is to serve as an example to us today, we too are supposed to warn people of the coming wrath of God if they don't repent. We're to seek His face, and turn to Him for mercy in Christ Jesus. In other words, there is nothing loving or compassionate in not talking about God's coming judgment. It is a part of our divine assignment and mission.

As we saw last week, Paul actually says this message of coming judgment is a vital part of presenting the gospel - **Romans 2:14-16** - "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

But our Genesis text also points out a huge problem. Look at what the people said when Lot tried to tell them about God's coming wrath: **Genesis 19:14** - "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."

They said, "You're kidding, right?" The text says Lot's words of warning - words of their *destruction* - seemed *unreal* to them. Even though they *knew* Lot, and knew his character, and had heard him talk of God's righteousness and judgment before, they still could not attach much weight to what he was saying. "You've got to be joking," they said. They were totally *unaffected* by Lot's words. They were absolutely unchanged.

To them it was like he was only trying to scare them. This is the most common response the godless and careless give to the message of judgment. They conclude this is just an old fashioned way of trying to frighten people into changing their minds about God and salvation and things spiritual. Christians, and preachers and teachers in the church in particular, are simply fear-mongering - like one might tell ghost stories to children - by painting horrible pictures of what God will do to people if they don't behave.

Or, to change the illustration, unbelievers think of the doctrine of judgment as a *man-made invention* to keep people from wickedness just as gardeners invented *scarecrows* to keep the birds from eating the seeds and plants in the garden. The scarecrow *looks* menacing, but is actually only a *pretend* threat. As long as the crows don't know the difference, a good purpose is served. This is how many wicked people think of the Biblical teaching on divine wrath and judgment - "Be good or God's going to get you!" It's all staged and calculated. But nobody takes it all that seriously.

Look again at the reaction of Lot's relatives on the very eve of their destruction in judgment:

Genesis 19:14 - "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."

This is a striking verse. We simply have to give this serious attention because we get, on many occasions, the very same reaction to the message of divine judgment today. Look around you. Do you see the careless and wicked and unbelieving of this world en masse making wholesale changes in their actions because they hear about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? Or the day of judgment? Or the reality of hell and eternal destruction?

We have to think about this. The question we need to ask is "*Why does the message of divine judgment seem unreal to the wicked?*"

1) **TRUTH - ANY TRUTH - CAN ENTER THE MIND WITHOUT BEING FULLY REALIZED IN TERMS OF ITS MEANING AND IMPORTANCE**

Actually, two things have to happen in my mind before truth has an effect on my life. *First*, I have to believe something to be factually true. If I think something stated as true is merely fiction, it will have no impact on my behavior.

But *second*, for truth to effectually impact my life, I must not only concede something to be factually true, I must have that truth register as being *important* and *sense* its relevance for my life.

For example, I believe the pull of gravity on the moon is less than that of gravity on the face of the earth. I *believe* it. I am aware that this is true. But I don't much *care* about it. It simply makes no meaningful *difference* to me here and now.

Here is one reason why so much important truth isn't *sensed* as being important to many of us. Truths that we have simply *inherited* as true from our Bibles, churches, teachers, parents, and friends - even if we don't *deny* them as true - usually have very little impact on our lives.

What's important to remember here is you can come to know truth in *two ways*. You can *agree with someone else* that something is true, or you can become *convinced for yourself* that something is true. Only this second category of truth will have any effect on your life.

When you become *convinced* that something is true your own mind has become engaged. You've actually been *involved* in the discovering the truth. You've settled something about your own commitments. As you have become convinced. You have sorted out options. You have answered questions. You have *moved into the camp* of the truth you have embraced. Perhaps you have even had to step out of the pack of friends and peers who held very different ideas, but you've made up your own mind.

Your mind has landed. You've sold your being to the truth you are convinced of. *This is worlds apart from hearing someone else's truth, or memorizing someone else's truth and pretending it is your own.*

This is a huge problem for people who come to profess Christ, but do so to *please someone else other than Christ*. And it's an enormous issue for second, third, and fourth generation Christians. There is so much we *say* we believe, by which we mean we were told it was true by those with whom we associate. But we have never had any direct *verifying*, or *confirming*, or *convincing* of those truths in our own experience.

And, on today's study, this is particularly true regarding the truth of divine wrath and judgment. These things seem so distant from our daily experience. We live in an era bathed in such mercy and grace that there is very little *evidence* of wrath and judgment around us. I've tried in earlier teachings in this series to show that there *are* clear examples of divine wrath available to the discerning eye, but, in terms of eternal damnation and destruction, we simply have no experience from which we can gain evidence for it.

The result of this is even if this truth isn't totally *denied*, people find themselves *knowing* a truth about which they are quite *unaffected*.

2) **WE KNOW MANY UNBELIEVING PEOPLE REMAIN UNCONVINCED ABOUT THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE JUDGMENT BECAUSE, WHEN THEY ARE CONVINCED ABOUT OTHER FUTURE REALITIES, THEY PREPARE FOR THEM WITH GREAT ZEAL**

Consider this. We know many people must simply be *unconvinced* about the danger of future judgment because when they face danger or threat in some *other* area of life, they prepare for it with great intensity. In fact, Jesus *used* this very argument against the thinkers and leaders of His own day:

Matthew 16:1-4 - "And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. [2] He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' [3] And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. [4] An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed."

Jesus has such a wonderful way of making our minds notice obvious truths we might not pause to hear. See how people consult financial

planners regarding their investments when there is a drastic change in the market. See how they organize their business affairs if they think they will face bankruptcy.

Or consider the measures we take to avoid dangerous diseases and infections. Remember years back how the city of Toronto suffered the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars simply because people from all around the world heard of the **potential** risk they might face of catching S.A.R.S. if they came to the city. **Just the possibility of the danger was enough to cause people to consider their ways and change their plans.**

Now, look at Matthew's account of Jesus' words. Jesus **incriminates** the thinkers of His day with this evidence. He pointed out that this is the way we **all** are when we become **convinced** there really is a danger to be reckoned with. We get ready. We pay attention. We prepare. We make changes - even great **sacrifices**.

This makes it plain that the only reason people don't consider the certainty of God's coming judgment and turn from their wickedness is they must not be **convinced of the reality** of the danger they are in. Jesus says we **know** this is true because they **prepare** for coming danger in all **other** areas of life.

Perhaps now we are in a better position to know what the Spirit of God means when we're called to **hear** with our ears and **see** with our eyes. Let the truth of the Word **hang on** in our minds today by letting it **mean** what it **says**. Hear the Word of God with all of its **weight** attached to each sentence and paragraph. **Capture** the ideas instead of just **knowing** the jargon. This is the way to have the truth set you free indeed.