JUDGMENT AND MERCY

2 Peter 2:4-10a

By

Steven J. Cole

February 21, 2010

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February 21, 2010
2 Peter, Lesson 9

Judgment and Mercy
2 Peter 2:4-10a

I heard of a pastor who was talking with a colleague about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The colleague said, “Well, if that’s the way God really is, then I’m not going to believe in Him!” That is strange logic! Not believing in God doesn’t make Him go away. Yet I’ve often heard people dismiss God’s judgment by saying, “I believe in a God of love. He would never judge anyone, except maybe the worst of sinners.”

Or, some will say, “I don’t believe in the Old Testament God of judgment. I believe in Jesus, who never condemned anyone.” Really? Jesus spoke more often and more graphically about hell than anyone else in the Bible. He used the story of Sodom’s destruction to warn about the final judgment when He returns (Luke 17:29-32). The entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, reveals a God who will bring judgment on sinners, but who shows mercy to those who repent of their sins and trust in Him.

The apostle Peter wrote his second letter to help churches stand against some false teachers who were infiltrating their ranks. These teachers not only promoted false doctrine, but also ungodly living. He alludes to them (2:10) when he says that they indulged the flesh in its corrupt desires and despised authority, including the authority of the Master who bought them (2:1). They exploited people in the church with sensuality and greed (2:2-3). At the root of their false teaching was a denial of the second coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory to judge the world (3:3-13). They even encouraged people toward sexual “freedom” (2:19), assuring them that a loving God would never judge anyone.

In our text, Peter wants his readers to know that although God’s judgment may be delayed, it is absolutely certain. He uses three historical examples of judgment and two examples of God’s rescuing the righteous from judgment both to warn and to encourage. The warning is, God will righteously judge all the ungodly. None will escape. The encouragement is, God will rescue the godly
from judgment. Therefore, we should have the courage to stand firm in following God in an ungodly world.

Since God judges all the ungodly and mercifully saves the godly, we should stand firm in following Him and resist all false teaching.

Our text is one long “if-then” sentence. The “if” part could be rendered “since,” because there is no doubt in view. Peter builds this part of the sentence toward the final conclusion in verse 9. The skeleton idea is, “Since God did not spare the angels when they sinned; and since He did not spare the ancient world in the flood, but preserved Noah; and since He did not spare Sodom and Gomorrah, but rescued Lot; then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly and to keep the ungodly under punishment for the day of judgment.” The examples of judgment are Peter’s warning not to follow the false teachers. The examples of rescue are his encouragement to follow the Lord, even when many around us live as if there will be no judgment.

1. God righteously judges all the ungodly.

Peter is arguing that history gives us vivid examples to warn us that God will judge the wicked. We should think about these examples and apply them to our lives.

A. God’s judgment of the fallen angels shows that He judges the ungodly.

“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment...” (2:4). God created the angels as righteous spirit beings, but Satan, a leader among them, rebelled and many others (now called “demons”) joined his rebellion. The Bible is sketchy about when and how this happened, although it had to happen before Satan tempted Eve. Many understand Isaiah 14:12-14 to refer to the fall of Satan, who desired to make himself like God. Also, many interpret Ezekiel 28:11-19 to describe Satan’s original perfection and subsequent fall due to pride.

Many reputable scholars understand our text to refer to a cryptic incident in Genesis 6:1-4, when the “sons of God” (interpreted as demons) took wives among “the daughters of men,” resulting in a dominant race called the “Nephilim.” This interpreta-
tion of Genesis 6 was prevalent among the first century Jews, and is explained in more detail in the 1st century B.C. Book of Enoch. In favor of this interpretation here (and in Jude 7) are that the story was common in Jewish literature; the three examples (angels, flood, and the destruction of Sodom) all come out of Genesis; and the incident in Genesis 6, which led up to the flood, would explain why some demons are now confined to “pits of darkness” (Edwin Blum, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 12:278).

A variation of that interpretation is that the demons themselves did not actually cohabit with women, but rather they possessed powerful men who cohabited with these women (John MacArthur, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 2 Peter & Jude [Moody Publishers], pp. 86, 164-165; he is somewhat ambiguous as to which of these two views he believes).

While I could accept the second view, the first view to me is incredulous and supported only by unbiblical Jewish myths. How (physiologically) could demons, who are non-human spirit-beings, procreate children? While demons (and angels) sometimes take on male human bodies, there is no biblical evidence that they can produce offspring (Matt. 22:30). What kind of genetic makeup would those children have? Would they have human souls? What about their children? It seems to me that the demons mating with humans view creates far more problems than it solves.

Thus I prefer a third view that the “sons of God” refers to the line of Seth (Gen. 5) that intermarried with godless women, leading to the degrading sinfulness of the human race that led to the flood. (See my sermon, “Sin’s Full Course,” on Gen. 6:1-8, [3/3/96] on the church web site for a more thorough treatment of this issue.)

This means that 2 Peter 2:4 refers to the general fall of the angels and that God relegated some of the fallen angels to confinement in pits of darkness, being held for their final judgment when they will be cast into the lake of fire. The Greek word here translated “hell” is a verb that means, “cast into Tartarus.” It’s the only time it occurs in the Bible. It was a word from Greek mythology with which Peter’s readers would have been familiar. It referred to a place lower than Hades, where the especially wicked were consigned. Peter is not approving of Greek mythology, but rather is
saying, “God judged these fallen angels by confining them in a really awful place until the final day of judgment.”

In this discussion, we shouldn’t lose sight of Peter’s point, that God is powerful enough to judge the angels that sinned. The Bible shows that these spirit-beings are powerful creatures that once dwelled in the very presence of God. Yet they sinned and God judged them. So we should be on guard against sinning, because God will judge all who sin against Him and do not repent.

B. God’s judgment of the world through the flood shows that He judges the ungodly.

Verse 5: “… and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; …”. We’ll look at the preservation of Noah and his family in a moment. But for now, Peter’s point is that God brought the flood on the world of the ungodly. The flood destroyed all people and every living creature, except for those on the ark. That story is in the Bible to warn us that a day of judgment on the whole world is coming, when none of the ungodly will escape. Peter refers to the flood again (3:6, 10), where he makes the comparison that just as the ancient world was destroyed by water, even so the present world will be destroyed by fire.

I think that with the flood we often get so hung up on the geologic issues or questions of how Noah could get all those animals on the ark that we miss the main point, namely, that the flood was a horrific judgment on the entire earth. Everyone and everything that were not on the ark perished! The Bible uses the flood story as a warning to everyone since that time that a far worse future judgment is coming, when all the ungodly who are not “on board” Jesus Christ will perish eternally.

C. God’s judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that He judges the ungodly.

Verse 6: “… and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; …” This refers to the story in Genesis 19, when God rained fire and brimstone on the cities that were located near the southern end
of the Dead Sea. Prior to God’s judgment, the area was a fertile
plain (Gen. 13:10), but afterward it was an uninhabitable wasteland.

Genesis 19 shows how corrupt Sodom was. The men wanted
to homosexually rape the two angels that came to Sodom to rescue
Lot and his family. Even when the angels struck them blind, they
didn’t repent. Lot’s future sons-in-law thought that he was joking
when he warned them to flee the impending judgment. Ezekiel
(16:49) also informs us that the people of Sodom were arrogant
and had abundant food and ease, but they did not help the poor.
Peter states that God made the people of Sodom “an example to
those who would live ungodly lives thereafter.” In other words, the
judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah was not a one-time oddity. It
is in Scripture as a warning of the judgment to come.

Peter adds something that the parallel in Jude (5-7) omits,
namely, God’s preservation of Noah and Lot. Peter includes these
stories to show that God not only will judge the wicked. Also,

2. **God mercifully saves the godly.**

The godly do not earn salvation by their godliness. Salvation is
always by grace through faith apart from any good works. But
those who are truly saved live in obedience to God. Their godliness
results from their salvation and culminates in their eternal deliver-
ance from God’s judgment. These stories of temporal judgment
and rescue picture final, eternal judgment and deliverance. They
show that God will punish the wicked, but spare the righteous.

Before we look at them, I need to clarify something that many
misunderstand: When God sends temporal judgments, many godly
people suffer along with the wicked. I once heard a prominent
Christian leader say that the AIDS epidemic could not be God’s
judgment against those who are sexually immoral. His reason was
that some Christians had contracted the disease through tainted
blood transfusions and that babies also get it in the womb.

But that is a misunderstanding of the nature of God’s tempo-
ral judgments. When the recent earthquake destroyed Haiti, God’s
people in Haiti suffered along with the ungodly. Little children suf-
f ered along with hardened sinners. The same can be said of tsuna-
mis, hurricanes, wars, and famines. God uses these temporal judg-
ments to warn those who still live that eternal judgment is ahead
(Luke 13:1-5). God’s rescue of Noah and Lot from those temporal judgments is to give hope that if you will repent, He will rescue you from eternal judgment. But not all of the godly are exempt from temporal judgments (Luke 21:16-19).

There are three examples of judgment, but only two examples of deliverance from judgment. But we can learn from the omission:

A. God did not provide salvation for the fallen angels to teach us that He does not owe salvation to anyone.

God provided deliverance for Noah and his family and for Lot and his two daughters, but there was no deliverance for the angels that sinned. They perished with no possibility of salvation.

There are some that rail against the biblical doctrine of God’s sovereign election by saying that if He is able to save everyone but chooses only to save some, then He is immoral or unloving! That is not only blasphemous; also, it completely misunderstands the enormity of human sin and guilt. God does not owe salvation to any creature that has sinned against Him, including the fallen angels. In many ways, angels are more glorious and powerful beings than man is. But they sinned and God was perfectly just to judge them without providing any means of salvation. And, He is not unjust if He chooses some people for eternal life and passes over others, leaving them under judgment for their many sins to display His wrath and justice (Rom. 9:11-23).

But the good news for sinful people is that the stories of Noah and Lot show us that God has provided salvation for sinners. Unlike the fallen angels, there is hope for all who will trust in Jesus Christ, turn from their sins, and obey Him.

B. God saved Noah through the flood as an example of how He mercifully saves the godly.

God “preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly” (2:5). This is the only place where we are told that Noah was a preacher of righteousness, but it is not surprising. He spent at least 100 years building an ark on dry land, while everyone around him must have thought that he was crazy. Tour guides probably organized trips to see this lunatic building this gigantic boat, miles from any body of water. The people at that time were
notoriously corrupt and violent (Gen. 6:11-12). Noah’s actions in building the ark and probably his words warned them to repent of their sins before it was too late.

The Genesis account tells us (6:9) that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.” But he did not merit God’s salvation by his righteousness. The verse just prior tells us (Gen. 6:8), “Noah found favor [grace] in the eyes of the Lord.” Noah was a sinner, as we learn in the aftermath of the flood, when he got drunk and lay exposed in his tent (Gen. 9:21). But the overall pattern of his life was that he obeyed God, even when it was very hard to do. His story teaches us that if we will trust the salvation that God has provided in Jesus Christ and turn from our sin, we will be spared from the judgment to come.

C. God rescued Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of how He mercifully saves the godly.

Verses 7-8: “… and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), …” We can’t miss Peter’s point, in that he repeats three times that Lot was righteous, contrasting him with the sensual conduct and lawless deeds of the unprincipled men of Sodom. Their wickedness paralleled the conduct of the sensual, lawless false teachers.

But how can Peter call Lot “righteous”? The story in Genesis seems to picture him as anything but righteous. When the Sodomites want to rape his two angelic guests, Lot instead offers them his two virgin daughters to rape! He only reluctantly leaves Sodom when the angels grab his hand and lead him away. He later allows his two daughters to get him drunk so that they can commit incest in order to get pregnant by him. This doesn’t fit the biblical picture of a righteous man!

I cannot resolve this in a totally satisfactory manner, but several considerations may help. We must assume that like Abraham, who believed God and “He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6), Lot also had been declared righteous before God by faith. But in the context of 2 Peter, he is not referring to imputed
righteousness, but to righteous behavior. There is a hint of an answer in Genesis 18, when Abraham gets God to agree that if there are ten righteous people found in Sodom, He will not destroy it. Abraham must have known that Lot was righteous enough not to have joined the Sodomites in their godless, sensual behavior.

Also, although we can’t understand Lot’s offering his daughters to be raped, he did so in an attempt to protect his houseguests. Hospitality to strangers was an important virtue in that culture. Lot risked his own safety to protect his guests, although in a reprehensible way. And, (I assume that Peter received it by divine inspiration, because you cannot deduce it from the Genesis account), Lot was oppressed and tormented by the ungodly conduct that he saw and heard around him in Sodom. This point should convict us: To what extent are we tormented by the wickedness of our culture (see Ezek. 9:4)? Do we enjoy watching movies that flaunt immorality, profanity, and violence? Do we laugh at the filthy jokes of godless TV sitcoms? If so, we are not as righteous as Lot was! Also, Lot obeyed God by not looking back toward Sodom, in contrast to his wife who was turned into a pillar of salt. This leads to the inferred conclusion: Since God will judge the wicked and save the godly...

3. **We should stand firm in following Him and resist all false teaching.**

In Ezekiel 14:14, God extols the righteousness of three men: Noah, Daniel, and Job. If Noah is one of the most righteous men in the Bible, Lot must barely be in the camp by the skin of his teeth. Perhaps these two are put together in 2 Peter to show us how we should stand firm against the godless culture around us. Noah did a commendable job; Lot is an example of the weakest of the saints. But God was gracious to both men and their families.

Verses 9-10a are the conclusion to verses 4-8: “then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation [or, trials], and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority.” The godly are not immune to temptations or to the test of living in an ungodly culture. They need God to rescue them from it. And He knows how to do it! If He has saved you from sin by His grace, He will preserve you unto heaven by His grace. So Peter wants to encourage us to have the courage, like
Noah (who did it well) and Lot (who barely passed the course), to stand firm against the tide of godlessness around us. He wants us to resist all teaching that downplays holy living. As we do, even if we suffer for it, we can have the joy of looking forward to the coming of Jesus Christ and our eternal reward with Him.

Conclusion

Many years ago, I conducted a funeral for a man from my church. On the little brochure that the funeral home prints up for such occasions was John 3:16, printed as follows: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life.” But they left out some crucial words: “shall not perish but have eternal life”!

I don’t know whether the family or the funeral home was responsible for the omission, but I didn’t let it go. I pointed out during the service that while God has provided forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who will believe in Jesus, the verse also warns that all who do not believe in Jesus will perish.

Jesus didn’t come and die on the cross just to give us warm, fuzzy feelings about God’s love. He offered Himself to pay the penalty for sin that we deserved to rescue us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10). The angels who sinned, the world under the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are there to warn us that God will surely judge all that have sinned against Him. The preservation of Noah and the rescue of Lot give us the hope that if we trust in Christ and turn from our sins, God will mercifully spare us from the judgment to come. Believe in Jesus Christ and you will not perish, but have eternal life!

Application Questions

1. How would you respond to a professing Christian who said, “I believe in a God of love, not of judgment”?
2. How would you respond to a professing Christian who said, “If God only chooses to save some, then He is not fair”?
3. Discuss: Can God-fearing Christians watch TV sitcoms or go to movies depicting sex and violence and remain unstained?

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