

GOD DECIDES WHO GETS SAVED

IT IS SO EASY to breeze right by a Bible verse without stopping to consider its implications. One rather striking example of this can be found in a remark that Jesus made about Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord said something about those two cities that is extremely shocking – and yet for years I read right over the statement without stopping to consider its staggering implications.

In order to give a little context to the passage let's back up a bit. As most people know, Sodom and Gomorrah were two ancient cities that were so wicked that God decided to investigate them *in person*:

Genesis 18:20: “And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous;
21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.”

Now, there were many times in the Old Testament when God sent down judgments upon a person or a nation. In nearly all cases, though, God acted through an intermediary. Throughout the Old Testament God meted out judgment through angels, prophets, storms, plagues, and natural disasters. However, it was very rare for God to go down to Earth and do it

Himself, in person. Aside from the Tower of Babel, the only other example of this that I can think of is the Second Coming, when the Lord will return to put an end to *the entire world*. In other words, this kind of personal visit by God Himself is a Very Serious Matter. It is a sign that someone has crossed the line in a *big* way. If you are in so much trouble that God is coming to *personally* execute judgment against you, then your world is about to end. It's simply not possible to get into more trouble than that.

As an aside, there are some commentators who claim that God didn't actually go Himself; instead He sent angels to investigate. However, that's not what Genesis 18:21 says. As best I can tell at least one of the three men who visited Abraham on that fateful day was actually God Himself. If you read through Genesis 18 and pay close attention you will notice that when one of the men speaks, the Bible says that it was actually the Lord who was doing the talking. For example:

Genesis 18:9: “And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent.

10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. ...

12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?

13 And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?

14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.

15 Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for

she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.”

Do you see what happened? In verse 10 the man said “I will certainly return unto thee”, and then in verse 14 we are told that it was “the LORD” who said “I will return.” That man, then, must be the Lord! It's as simple as that.

But to continue the story: as we know, the Lord told Abraham that He was going to judge Sodom. When Abraham heard this he interceded on the city's behalf, and after a round of negotiations the Lord said that He would not destroy the city if He found 10 righteous people there:

Genesis 18:32: “And he said, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake.”

As it turned out, though, Sodom didn't have 10 righteous people, so the Lord destroyed it:

Genesis 19:24: “Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven;
25 And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.”

When it was all over those wicked cities were utterly destroyed, and everyone who lived in them perished.

Now, this is all well-known and there is nothing new here. However, what *is* startling is what Jesus had to say about it. When Christ was on Earth He performed a great many notable miracles. Some cities repented when they saw His works, but

others did not. The cities that refused to repent, *even after witnessing Jesus Himself perform mighty miracles*, were singled out by Him for special condemnation:

Matthew 11:23: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.”

Do you see what this verse says? Jesus said that if the miracles that He performed in Capernaum had been done in Sodom, the people in Sodom would have repented and the city would not have been destroyed. Stop and think about that for a minute! Do you realize how shocking that is? It means that God knew exactly what the people of Sodom needed to see in order to repent *and yet God did not save them*. God could have raised up a prophet (or just asked Abraham, for that matter!), sent him to Sodom, and used him to do mighty works and save the city, but He didn't. God *knew* they would repent if “mighty works” were done in the city, *but He didn't send anyone to do those mighty works*. Instead of saving them He wiped them all out. God could have saved them but instead He chose to kill them.

What makes this even more striking is the fact that there is another very famous case in which an equally wicked city was on the verge of judgment, but instead of destroying them the Lord *did* send someone to save the city. That wicked city was Nineveh. As we all know, the Lord treated Nineveh *very* differently from the way He treated Sodom. Instead of going down to see the wickedness of the city and then destroying it, the Lord sent Jonah to preach a message of repentance:

Jonah 1:2: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come

up before me.”

One of the things that makes this story so famous is that *Jonah did not want to go*. He was *not* a willing participant in this missionary journey and he did everything possible to avoid going. His reasoning was very clear:

Jonah 4:2: “And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”

The whole reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh was because he knew that if he went and the city repented, the Lord would not destroy them – and Jonah desperately wanted God to kill everyone in Nineveh and send them all straight to Hell. But the Lord forced Jonah to go. Let me emphasize that fact: Jonah only went because *the Lord forced him to go*. God actually held Jonah hostage in the belly of a fish until Jonah finally gave in. Jonah was not a willing participant in any of this, but the Lord forced him to go anyway because God was determined to save Nineveh – and sure enough, Nineveh was saved:

Jonah 3:5: “So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

6 For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and

published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:

8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

9 Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?"

As an aside, I have heard people say that God cannot use you unless you are 100% right with God. They claim that if you are backsliding or in sin then God can't do anything with your life. I think that Jonah conclusively proves that statement to be a lie. After all, Jonah was *not at all* right with God. Jonah had a deep and abiding hatred toward the people of Nineveh, and he had a heartfelt desire to see them all burn in Hell. Jonah hated them so much that when they repented he got very angry. Yet the Lord *still* used Jonah to save them! The Lord used Jonah to save people *that Jonah hated with all his heart*. This proves that the Lord is the one who works through us. Any fruit that we bear is His doing, not ours. The Ninevites weren't saved because Jonah wanted to see them saved; they were saved because God decided to save them, and He saved them *in spite* of Jonah.

I say all of that to say this: God Himself said that both Sodom and Nineveh were exceedingly wicked cities. Jesus was clear that Sodom would have repented if someone was sent to Sodom to perform great miracles – but no one was sent, so Sodom was destroyed and its inhabitants perished. Abraham desperately wanted to save the city, and if the Lord had commanded him to go he would have gone – but the Lord gave no such command. Yet in the case of Nineveh, the Lord *did* send

someone (even though that person did not want to go!) and the city *did* repent and was saved. As you can see, *the Lord did not treat Nineveh the way He treated Sodom*. He saved one city and He destroyed the other.

Now, there is nothing evil about this. Sodom really did deserve to be destroyed, and the Lord was absolutely justified in destroying it. The Lord is under no obligation to save *anyone*, and no one deserves His mercy. Yet it is impossible to escape the fact that God chose to save Sodom (a city that *Jesus Himself* said would have repented) and He chose to destroy Nineveh. In other words, *this is a clear case of God deciding to save one person and destroy someone else*. God chose *not* to save someone who could have been saved. Both cities needed salvation but God only helped one of them. Nineveh would have been destroyed if God hadn't sent Jonah, but God *did* send Jonah – in fact, God actually forced Jonah to go against his will. That is something He did *not* do with Sodom. There were two cities that could have been saved, but God only chose to save one of them. He let all the inhabitants of the other city go straight to Hell.

The case of Sodom versus Nineveh is a clear case of divine choice. It shows us that God actually does not save everyone. There are some people that God divinely chooses *to* save, and there are other people that God chooses *not* to save. Divine choice is a real thing. This idea may seem shocking to us, but it shouldn't. The apostle Paul lays out the case for it in unmistakable terms:

Romans 9:14: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.

15 For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

16 So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth

mercy.

...

18 Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."

Notice how clearly Paul explains that God never promised to have mercy on everyone. Verse 18 is direct and to the point: God extends mercy to some people so that they *will* be saved, and God hardens others so that they *will not* be saved. You can go back and read those verses if you don't believe me – God is quite up-front about this. God chooses to save some people and He chooses to *not* save others.

Of course, a great many people absolutely hate this idea. I have seen some people use this verse to argue against it:

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Now, let me say that I completely agree with this verse. It is absolutely true that all who believe in Jesus will not perish but will have everlasting life. However, it is *also* clear that the people of Sodom would have repented and believed if the Lord had sent someone to demonstrate His power – but He didn't, even though He *did* send someone in the case of Nineveh. According to Jesus Himself the people of Sodom *would have believed* but God chose not to intervene on their behalf. Instead of sending someone to save them He sent them all to Hell.

Does God treat everyone the same? No – but then, God never promised that He would. God gives some people amazing talents while He gives others a life of disability and pain. Some people are given long lives while others die before they are even born. God moves miraculously to save some people, and He

hardens others and sends them to Hell. And make no mistake about it – God *does* harden hearts to make sure that some people *will not* be saved. For example:

Exodus 4:21: “And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go.”

Exodus 7:3: “And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.”

Who hardened Pharaoh's heart? The Lord did. He said this not once, *but twice*. The reason Pharaoh did not let the Israelites go is because the Lord hardened his heart – and after the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to stop him from letting Israel go, He destroyed him for not letting Israel go. Pharaoh's hardening led to the devastation of Egypt, the death of all the firstborn in the country, and the death of Pharaoh himself. And it all happened because *the Lord intervened and made it happen*.

People today don't like to hear this. They prefer a God who treats everyone the same. Many people say that God has given everyone a chance to be saved and it's up to us to take it. If some people aren't saved then it's their own fault, because God did all He could to save them. They teach that God has done everything that can possibly be done and the rest is up to us. The matter is out of God's hands.

But that's not what the Bible says! Jesus clearly said that *Sodom would have repented*, but God chose to destroy them instead. Nineveh was on the same path to destruction but God *did* intervene to save them (over the strenuous objections of

Jonah). Pharaoh might have let the Israelites go, but God hardened his heart so that he wouldn't. God chose to save some people and then chose to *not* save others:

Romans 9:18: "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."

Notice that verse 18 does *not* say "God has mercy on everyone, but some people are rebellious and don't listen." No, what the verse **actually says** is "God has mercy on some people and God hardens others." It is frighteningly clear.

The reason that people don't believe it isn't because Romans 9 is somehow unclear; it's because people don't want to believe it. They don't want to believe that God chooses to save some people but not others. They don't want to believe that some people have no chance of ever being saved because God predestined them to go to Hell before they were ever born. No matter what the Bible actually says, they just can't bring themselves to believe that God would actually choose to send someone to Hell.

But that *must* be true. Stop and think for a moment: doesn't God know who will be saved and who won't? Couldn't an all-powerful God have arranged for all unbelievers to never be born in the first place? Couldn't God have created a world that only has believers? Of course He could – *but He didn't*. There are people that God *knows* will never repent, but He still allows them to be born, live, and then die. An all-powerful God could have stopped that from ever happening *but He didn't*.

On some level we know that God is the one who saves people, because we pray to God and ask Him to do exactly that. Christians are always praying for the lost – and that activity only makes sense *if there is something God can do about it*. If God truly has done everything He can do for everyone, and if

salvation really does depend upon the individual and is out of God's hands, then praying for the lost is a complete waste of time. That kind of prayer only makes sense *if God is the one who makes the final decision*.

Why would God ever create people and then choose *not* to save them? The Bible tells us that He did it in order to demonstrate His power:

Romans 9:22: “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,

24 Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

What people do not realize is that God is glorified by those who are saved *and* by those who are damned, because both groups allow God to demonstrate His character. Those who are saved glorify God by giving Him an opportunity to demonstrate His mercy and love, and those who are damned give God an opportunity to demonstrate God's wrath and justice. All of those attributes were a part of God's character for all of eternity, but until sin entered the world it was not possible for those attributes to be revealed. After all, God could never demonstrate His mercy or His wrath until He was wronged.

The key to remember is that *everyone* deserves to spend eternity in Hell. All have sinned, and the wages of sin is death. Hell is the just punishment for our immense crimes against God, and there is *no one* who deserves to be forgiven. No one can stand up and say “God owes me salvation” or “God owes me mercy.” It is a gift – and that means that God has the right to give

it to some people and to withhold it from others. As Paul said:

Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

We are saved through faith, and that faith is *not of ourselves*. God is the one who gives us the faith we need in order to be saved. However, God does not give that faith to everyone. There is nothing unrighteous about this because no one deserves anything from God, and God has not promised to save everyone. Those who *are* saved are given a tremendous gift, because God has given them something that they did not deserve and could never have earned. Our salvation did not happen because we decided to accept God; it happened because God chose to bless us with saving faith. If God had decided to harden us (as He did with Pharaoh) then we would have been lost and there would have been nothing we could have done about it. Our eternal fate rests solely on the divine choice of God.

If this seems incredible to you, or if it seems like something God would never do, remember the cases of Sodom and Nineveh. One was saved and the other was lost, simply because God chose to have mercy on one city but chose *not* to have mercy on the other.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOSPEL?

There are some who might speak up and say “Well, if God decides who gets saved then why bother preaching the gospel or sending out missionaries?” The reason we must do these things is because God has commanded us to do them. Jesus Himself

ordered us to go into all the world and preach the gospel:

Mark 16:15: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

The reason He did this is because God has chosen to work through preaching in order to save those who believe:

1 Corinthians 1:19: “For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:

23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

As you can see, God chose to use the “foolishness of

preaching” to save them that believe. He commanded us to go into all nations and to preach the gospel to everyone, and the reason He did that is because *God has chosen to use the mechanism of the gospel to save the nations.*

Yes, it is true that God is the one who saves us. It is true that God is the one who draws the lost to Him – but God has chosen to work through pastors, missionaries, and evangelists. God has given us a responsibility and we must not take it lightly. We are not allowed to stay at home and do nothing. God has commanded us to preach His message while He works in the hearts of men – and that is what we must do. But never forget that God is the one who gives the increase.