

Divine Choice

It's easy to go right past a Bible verse without stopping to consider its implications. One striking example of this can be found in a remark Jesus made about Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord said something about those two cities that's very interesting – and yet for years I read right over the verses without stopping to consider their implications.

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

Genesis 18:20-21: “And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; 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.”

There were many times when God sent judgments upon a person or a nation. In nearly all cases, though, God acted through an intermediary. Throughout the Old Testament the Lord meted out judgment through angels, prophets, storms, plagues, and natural disasters. However, it's *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 I can think of is the Second Coming, when the Lord will return to put an end to *the entire world*. That means this kind of personal visit by God is a very serious matter. It's a sign that someone has crossed the line in a big way. If you're in so much trouble that God is coming to *personally* execute judgment against you then that means your world is about to end. It's not possible to get into more trouble than that.

The Lord told Abraham that He was going to judge Sodom. When Abraham heard this he interceded on the city's

behalf. After several rounds of intercession the Lord said that He wouldn't 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.”

However, Sodom didn't have 10 righteous people. Therefore the Lord destroyed it:

Genesis 19:24-25: “Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; 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 the cities were utterly destroyed and everyone who lived in them perished. The reason God did this is because the cities were full of wicked people. The Lord judged them, giving them exactly what they deserved.

This is all well-known . What's startling is what Jesus had to say about it. When He was on Earth He performed a great many notable miracles. Some cities repented when they saw His works, but others didn't. The cities which refused to repent, *even after seeing Jesus perform miracles in person*, 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 which He performed in Capernaum had been done in Sodom, the people of Sodom would have repented and the city wouldn't have been destroyed. Stop and think about that for a minute! This means that God knew exactly what the people of Sodom needed to see in order to repent, *and yet God didn't save them*. The Lord could have raised up a prophet, sent him to Sodom, and used him to do mighty works and save the city, but He didn't. God actually *knew* they would repent if “mighty works” were done in the city, *but yet He didn't send anyone to do those mighty works!* Instead of saving them He wiped them all out.

What makes this even more striking is that there's another 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. 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 didn't want to go*. He wasn't 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 wouldn't destroy them. Jonah desperately wanted God to send everyone in Nineveh straight to Hell, so he tried to get out of going. But the Lord forced Jonah to go. I want to 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 wasn't a willing participant in any of this, but the Lord forced him to go anyway because He was determined to save Nineveh. The Bible tells us that Nineveh was indeed saved:

Jonah 3:5-9: “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. 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. 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: 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. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?”

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 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 didn't want to go!) and the city *did* repent and was saved. As you can see, *the Lord didn't treat Nineveh the way He treated Sodom*. He saved one city and destroyed the other.

Now, there's nothing evil about this. Sodom deserved to be destroyed, and the Lord was justified in destroying it. The Lord is under no obligation to save anyone. No one can claim that they deserve His mercy. Yet it's impossible to escape the fact that God chose to destroy Sodom (a city that *Jesus Himself* said would have repented) and He chose to save 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. That's something He didn't do for 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 and Nineveh is a clear case of divine choice. It proves that God actually doesn't save everyone. There are some people He divinely chooses to save, and there are others He chooses *not* to save. Divine choice is a real thing.

This idea may seem shocking, but it shouldn't. The apostle Paul taught this same doctrine:

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 He hardens others so that they *will not* be saved. God is quite clear about this! He chooses to save some people and He chooses to *not* save others.

There are many people who hate the idea of divine choice. Some 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.”

I completely agree with this verse. It's absolutely true that all who believe in Jesus will not perish but will have everlasting life. However, it's *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. In fact, 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're even born. God moves miraculously to save some people while He hardens others and sends them to Hell.

Make no mistake about it: God *does* harden some people's heart to make sure they won't 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 told Moses this not once, *but twice*. The reason Pharaoh didn't let the Israelites go was because the Lord hardened his heart. After the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he wouldn't let Israel go, the Lord then 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. The reason it all happened was because *the Lord intervened and made it happen*.

Some people don't like to hear this. They prefer a God who treats everyone the same. Many people teach 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.

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 that 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.

The Bible really does teach that God chooses to save some people and *not* to 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 that God has mercy on some and hardens others. It's very straightforward.

Why would God do such a thing? To demonstrate both His wrath and His power:

Romans 9:22-24: “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: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

God is glorified by those who are saved *and* by those who are damned, because both groups allow Him to demonstrate His character. Those who are saved glorify God by giving Him an opportunity to demonstrate His mercy and love. Those who are damned glorify God by giving Him an opportunity to demonstrate His wrath and power – not to mention His justice.

The Bible teaches that *everyone* deserves to go to Hell. All have sinned (1 John 1:8-10), and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Hell is the just punishment for our immense sins against God, and *no one* deserves to be forgiven. No one can say that God owes them salvation or mercy. Salvation is a gift – and that means that God has the right to give it to some people and withhold it from others. As Paul said:

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

We're saved through faith, and that faith is *not of*

ourselves. God gives us the faith that we need to be saved! However, God doesn't give that faith to everyone – and there's nothing unrighteous about that. Those who *are* saved have been given a tremendous gift because God has given them something they didn't deserve and could never earn.

The reason we're saved isn't because we decided to accept God. It's 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 remained lost and there would have been nothing we could have done about it. Our eternal fate rests solely in the divine choice of God.

If this seems like something God would never do, remember the cities of Sodom and Nineveh. One was saved and the other was lost because God chose to have mercy on one city but withhold it from the other.