

## CHAPTER 5

PEOPLE WHO  
WALK IN  
GOD'S WAY

## GOD'S SELF-REMINDER

For I have known [chosen] him [Abraham] for the purpose that he should instruct his children and his household after him that they should keep the way of the LORD, by doing righteousness and justice, for the purpose that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has spoken [promised] to him.

Gen. 18:19 (my translation)

“All peoples [nations] on earth will be blessed [or will bless themselves] through you” (Gen. 12:3). This is the grand, sweeping scope of God’s promise to Abraham. As we explored in chapter 4, if we ask what is the mission of God’s people, the first thing the Bible tells us, when God’s people had not yet even been conceived in the womb of Sarah, is that they will be a people of blessing for the nations. Indeed, says Paul, that is the good news, the gospel (Gal. 3:8). Blessing the nations is the declared mission of God, and that is the reason why he calls this people into his existence—to be the vehicle of that mission of God in the historical world of nations.

The history of God’s saving work began with the call of Abraham and the promise that through his descendants, *blessing would come to all nations on earth*.

But how?

That, of course, is the question that we will be answering in different ways as we explore the many dimensions of the task God lays on his people in the Bible. But here in this single verse, in delightfully human language, God reminds himself of what he had in mind when he chose Abraham in the first place.

Genesis 18:19 is a remarkable text, for it puts together in a single sentence God’s *choice of Abraham*, God’s *moral demand on Abraham’s community*, and God’s *promise to Abraham* (which the immediately preceding verse 18 has spelled out yet again, that “all nations on earth will be blessed through him”). *Election, ethics and mission* all in one verse—that’s biblical theology for life! In this chapter we will be looking at how these three great biblical themes are inseparable—integrally intertwined with each other.

How was Abraham going to be a blessing to the nations? First of all, as we saw in the closing section of chapter 4, only by trusting and obeying God himself. So the first thing we have to say, if we hold up Abraham as the father of God's people and the embodiment of the mission of God's people, is that he reminds us that our mission has to start with justifying faith in God and practical obedience to God. That's an important lesson, but it's only the starting point of the missional significance of Abraham.

After all, Abraham had only the one lifetime, so how could *his* faith and obedience constitute a means of *blessing to the nations* (i.e., have a missional impact), other than by the story of his example? Genesis 18:19 gives us the answer. The power of Abraham's personal example was to be reinforced and multiplied by direct instruction and moral formation. Abraham's family, and then his whole household after him—that is, the whole community of Abraham's descendants who would be the people of God—were to be taught to walk in the way of the Lord, by doing righteousness and justice.

Now in terms of biblical theology, we have already pointed out that "the community of Abraham" includes Old Testament Israel along with all those who are in Christ—Jew and Gentile believers (Rom. 4; Gal. 3). So the ethical stretch of Genesis 18:19 is long indeed and extends right to where you and I sit right now. For if we are in Christ, we are in Abraham, heirs of the promise God made to him and the responsibility God laid on him. And if we inherit Abraham's blessing, we inherit his mission also.

What then is the mission of God's people? According to this text, it is to be the community who live by the ethical standards of the ways of God, so that God can fulfill his promise to Abraham and bring about the blessing of the nations. Our ethics and God's mission are integrally bound together. That is why God chose us in the first place.

However, before we look more carefully at what that means in practice, we need to pay attention to the context of our text. God's conversation with himself here comes in the middle of the story of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, a story that comprises Genesis 18 and 19.

So God's universal promise of *blessing* here is actually nested within the story of one particularly notorious instance of God's historical *judgment*. That's an important context. It reminds us that the mission of God operates within this fallen world, that the most glorious promise of blessing stands alongside the most terrible

The scope of God's purpose [in telling Abraham his plans] must be carefully noted. His will, as made known to Abraham, bound all Abraham's descendants. Certainly God does not make his will known to us so that knowledge of him should die with us. He requires us to be his witnesses to the next generation, so that they may in turn hand on what they have received from us to their descendants. . . . In this way we must propagate God's truth. It was not given for our private enjoyment; we must mutually strengthen one another according to our calling and our faith.

John Calvin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Genesis* (The Crossway Classic Commentaries; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 177.

words and actions of judgment, and that the people of God are called to live like Abraham in a world like Sodom.<sup>2</sup>

## SODOM: A MODEL OF OUR WORLD

### Disobedience of the Nations

Sodom represents the way of the fallen world. It stands in Scripture as a proverbial prototype of human wickedness and of the judgment of God that ultimately falls on evildoers. With Sodom, we seem to come again to a story like the Tower of Babel—stories that illustrate the horrendous capacity of human societies for evil, in the wake of Genesis 3. It is the disobedience of Adam, Eve, Cain and their descendants multiplied to a national level.

In order to make this clear, let's do a condensed "biblical theology of Sodom" and trace the theme through several texts.

Starting in *Genesis 18:20*, we hear the "outcry" (*ze'ûqah*) that comes up to God from Sodom—a word that immediately tells us there was cruelty and oppression going on there.

Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin is so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me." (Gen. 18:20–21)

The term *ze'ûqah*, or *se'ûqah*, is a technical word for the cry of pain, or the cry for help, from those who are being oppressed or violated.<sup>3</sup> It is the word used for Israelites crying out under their slavery in Egypt (Ex. 2:23). Psalmists use it when appealing to God to hear their cry against unjust treatment (e.g., Ps. 34:17). Most graphically of all, it is the scream for help by a woman being raped (Deut. 22:24, 27). As early as *Genesis 13:13* we were told that "the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD." Here that sin is identified as oppression, for that is what the word "outcry" immediately indicates. Some people in or near Sodom were suffering to such an extent that they were crying out against its oppression and cruelty.

In *Genesis 19* we read further of the hostile, perverted and violent sexual immorality that characterized "all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old" (19:4).

In *Deuteronomy 29:23* the future fate of Israel under God's anger and judgment for their idolatry is compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, which suggests that

2. The exposition of Gen. 18:19 that follows is abbreviated from a much fuller discussion of it in *Mission of God*, 358–69. Used and quoted with permission.

3. See Richard Nelson Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

part of the sin of the twin cities was unbridled idolatry, along with their social evils (cf. Lam. 4:6).

*Isaiah* portrays the Jerusalem of his own day in the colours of Sodom and Gomorrah when condemning it for its bloodshed, corruption and injustice (Isa. 1:9–23). He further portrays the future judgment of God against Babylon (another prototypical city) for its pride as a replay of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 13:19–20).

*Ezekiel* even more caustically compares Judah unfavourably with Sodom, describing Sodom's sin as arrogance, affluence, and callousness to the needy. They were overproud, overfed, and underconcerned—a very modern sounding list of accusations (Ezek. 16:48).

So, from this wider Old Testament witness, it is clear that Sodom was used as a paradigm—a model of human society at its worst. At the same time, the name Sodom spoke of the inevitable and comprehensive judgment of God upon such wickedness. Sodom was a place filled with oppression, cruelty, violence, perverted sexuality, idolatry, pride and greedy consumption, and it was a place empty of compassion or care for the needy. A model, indeed, of the fallen world in which we still live.

When we draw the theme through into the New Testament, we find a similar "Sodom catalogue" in Paul's portrayal of human wickedness in Romans 1:18–32. Though Paul does not name Sodom, his devastating list of human sin reflects all of the above items in the sin of Sodom, and that is probably what is in the back of his mind from his own Jewish traditions.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Paul begins his list with the statement, "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against" all such behaviour, and he ends it with the statement that "those who do such things deserve death". It was indeed from heaven that fire and brimstone rained death upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24).

Now, if that was the world as Paul saw it in his day—a world of nations typified by Sodom—that was also the world into which Paul was called to engage in mission. What a world of evil! How, then, did Paul see his mission in such a world? He tells us twice, at the beginning and end of Romans. Paul's mission was nothing less than to bring about "the obedience of faith . . . among all the nations" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26 ESV).

## Obedience among the Nations

Haven't we heard that language already? As we emphasized in chapter 4, Paul saw his mission in Abrahamic terms. His mission was to carry on what God commanded Abraham in our text—to create communities of faith and obedience, communities

4. Philip Esler ("The Sodom Tradition in Romans 1:18–32", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 [2004]: 4–16) suggests that this catalogue of vice and evil that characterized Sodom had shaped the Jewish mind in relation to sin and judgment and was well-known to Paul.

committed to walking in the ways of the Lord in a world of nations that were walking in the ways of Sodom—transformed communities that would present a stark contrast to the Sodom all around them.

Paul's mission, therefore, had a strongly ethical content. There was mission beyond evangelism. It was the mission of teaching the new communities, of moral transformation into the ways of God. This was fundamentally Abrahamic, and in line with our text in this chapter.

Our mission, in line with Paul's and Abraham's, is the same. And it requires no less of the miraculous transforming grace of God in the gospel to even contemplate what it means.

The world has not changed much from the world of Sodom. The mission of God's people has therefore not changed either. We are still called to be those who are taught by Abraham's example and who are committed to "walking in the way of the LORD" by "doing righteousness and justice". What those phrases mean, we will come to in a moment. But for now, it is unavoidably clear from this text that the ethical distinctiveness of God's people is an integral part of the role they are called to play in God's mission of bringing blessing to a world that otherwise stands under his judgment, like Sodom. Indeed, according to Genesis 18:19, that ethical quality of life is part of the very purpose of our election in Abraham.

If the nations are to be blessed, God's people must walk in God's ways.

## ABRAHAM: A MODEL OF GOD'S MISSION

God's conversations with himself and with Abraham in Genesis 18, then, are set within the context of the wickedness of Sodom. It was that wickedness that had led to the investigation being conducted by God with his two angels, an investigation that seemed certain to end in judgment. God's conversation with *himself* begins in Genesis 18:18 with a recapitulation of the original covenant promise: "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him."

### Immediate Judgment: Ultimate Blessing

By repeating this overarching missional goal for the world, God explains why he had just renewed his promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son (which he had done a little earlier in the story, over dinner; Gen. 18:10, 14). Whatever God is about to do—judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah, or a son for Abraham and Sarah—must be seen in the light of this purpose. God, while he is on his way to act in immediate judgment on a *particular* evil society, stops to remind himself of his ultimate purpose of *universal* blessing to all nations. It is almost as if God cannot do the one (judgment) without setting it in the context of the other (redemption).

The immediate particular necessity was judgment. The ultimate universal goal is (as it always was) blessing. This is an important part of our biblical theology of mission. Never forget Paul's definition of the gospel in Galatians 3:8—God's will that the nations of the earth should be blessed. That's the good news to bear in mind even in the contexts of awesome judgment such as this one.

## A Promise for the World

So then, God stops for a meal with Abraham and Sarah. God need not have done so, of course, any more than he needed to "go down" to discover what was going on in Sodom. The reason that God and his two angels choose to stop off and have a meal with Abraham just as if they were three travelers (as Abraham at first thought they were, 18:2) is not because they know Sarah is a good cook. It is because God saw in this elderly and still childless couple, camped there on the hills above the cities of the plain, the key to his whole missional purpose for history and humanity.

The story reminds the reader (just as God reminds himself in vv. 17–19) of the centrality of Abraham in the biblical theology of the mission of God. Abraham and Sarah will have a son, promises God. Why? Not just as a special treat when they both thought it was too late for all that kind of thing (Gen. 18:10–13 seem deliberately humorous). No. They must and they will have a son because God's whole plan for the evangelization of the world to bring blessing to all nations depends on it. After all, the whole idea that God's people should have the mission of being a blessing to the nations does rather depend on such a people of God actually existing. And that can't even begin until Abraham and Sarah are blessed with the promised son.

So we need to give full attention to the global scope of verses 17–19. God's promise to Abraham is the foundation stone, or mainspring, of all the mission of God's people throughout history.

- When individuals came to saving faith in the God of Israel within the Old Testament itself (such as Ruth, Naaman, the widow of Zarephath), God was keeping his promise to Abraham.
- When Solomon prayed that people from the ends of the earth could come and have their prayers answered by God in the temple, he was praying for God to keep his promise to Abraham.
- When psalmists, prophets, apostles and gospel writers all saw the extension of the good news of God's saving love to the Gentiles, they knew that God was keeping his promise to Abraham.
- When the gospel moved north to Asia Minor, west to Europe, south into Africa, and East to Arabia (within the New Testament era itself), God was keeping his promise to Abraham.

- When the gospel stretched further over all the centuries, reaching the very ends of the earth (like my home country, Ireland, from Israel's perspective), God was keeping his promise to Abraham.
- And when the gospel reaches you and me and embraces us within this great multinational community of Abraham's faith and obedience, God is still keeping his promise.

That is what constitutes the mission of God's people—to be those who, having received the blessing of Abraham, continue the task of reaching those who have not yet been touched by it.

Abraham and Sarah may have not seen much beyond their tent door and their longing for a son, but God had a long-term vision in mind that lunchtime.

## "THE WAY OF THE LORD": A MODEL FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Returning to the key central verse (Gen. 18:19), we find *ethics* in the middle of it, with *election* (God's choice of Abraham) on one side and *mission* (God's promise to Abraham) on the other. So we need to examine what the key phrases: "the way of the LORD" and "doing righteousness and justice" actually mean. Then we will take note of the strong missional logic that runs through the verse. And we will finish up with some challenging practical reflections.

### An Ethical Education

God says that he had chosen Abraham to be a teacher, specifically a teacher of the way of the Lord, and a teacher of righteousness and justice. This ethical education will start with his children and then pass on to "his household after him". That means that there will have to be transmission of the teaching down through the generations—which is exactly what we find in later Old Testament Israel (e.g., Deut. 6:7–9). Two phrases summarize the content of the Abrahamic family curriculum:

#### "The Way of the LORD"

The expression "keeping the way of the LORD" or "walking in the way of the LORD" was a favourite metaphor used in the Old Testament to describe a particular aspect of Israel's ethics. A contrast is implied: that is, walking in *YHWH's* way, as distinct from the ways of other gods, or the ways of other nations, or one's own way, or the way of sinners. Here, the contrast is clearly between the way of *YHWH* and the way of *Sodom* that immediately follows.

As a metaphor, "walking in the way of the LORD" seems to have two possible pictures in mind.

One picture is that of following someone else on a path, watching his footsteps and following along carefully in the way he is going. In that sense, the metaphor suggests the imitation of God: you observe how God acts and you try to follow suit. "O let me see thy footsteps and in them plant my own," as the hymn says about following Jesus. It is a way of talking about the imitation of God, or better, of reflecting his character.

The other picture is of setting off on a path following the instructions that someone has given you—perhaps a sketch map (if that is not too anachronistic for ancient Israel), or a set of directions to make sure you stay on the right path and do not wander off on wrong paths that may turn out to be dead ends or dangerous. This use of the metaphor is most commonly linked to obeying God's commands, which is one dimension of reflecting God himself.

The commands of God are not just arbitrary rules; they are frequently related to the character or values or desires of God. So to obey God's commands is to reflect God's character in human life.

One of the clearest examples of this dynamic at work is Deuteronomy 10:12–19. It begins with a rhetorical flourish, rather like Micah 6:8, summarizing the whole law in a single chord of five notes: fear, walk, love, serve and obey:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, *to walk in all his ways*, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you this day for your own good? (Deut. 10:12–13, italics added)

And what are the ways of YHWH in which Israel is to walk? The answer is given first in broad terms. His was the way of condescending love in choosing Abraham and his descendants (vv. 14–15), so that Israel should respond in repentance and humility (v. 16).

But when the passage goes on *specifically* to define the ways of YHWH, it focuses on his character and actions.

[He] shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. *And you are to love those who are aliens*, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. (vv. 17–19, italics added)

To walk in the way of the Lord, then, means doing for others what God wishes to have done for them, or more particularly, doing for others what (in Israel's case) God has already done for you (deliverance from alien status in Egypt and provision of food and clothing in the wilderness). You know what God is like because you have experienced him in action on your behalf. Now go and do likewise!

The contrast with Sodom stands out now even more clearly. For these things were exactly what the people of Sodom were *failing* to do, in their callous oppression and



lack of care for the needy. So Abraham is to teach his people to be fundamentally *different*. "To keep the way of the LORD" would mean renouncing the way of Sodom. It still does. And it is a fundamental part of the mission of God's people that we do so.

The phrase "keep the way of the LORD", then, would have been enough for any experienced reader of the Old Testament to understand the full, rich significance of God's point here. But to make absolutely sure we get the message, our text explains it further with two more words.

### Doing Righteousness and Justice

Here is a pair of words that stands right at the top of the Old Testament's ethical vocabulary. Each of them individually, in various verbal, adjectival and noun forms, occurs hundreds of times, and they are often found together as here. Let's look at the two root words.<sup>5</sup>

(1) The first is the root *sdq*, which is found in two common noun forms, *sedeq* and *sedaqah*. These words are usually translated "righteousness" in English Bibles, but that word, with its somewhat religious flavour, does not convey the full range of meaning that the words had in Hebrew. The root meaning is probably "straight": something that is fixed and fully what it should be. So it can mean a norm or standard—something by which other things are measured.

It is used literally of actual objects when they are, or do, what they are supposed to: for example, accurate weights and measures are "measures of *sedeq*" (Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:15). Safe paths for sheep are "paths of *sedeq*" (Ps. 23:3). So it comes to mean *rightness*, that which is as it ought to be, that which matches up to the standard.

When applied to human actions and relationships, it speaks of conformity to what is right or expected. But this is not in some abstract or absolute way, but rather according to the demands of the particular relationship or situation one is in. It means doing what is right in *this* relationship, or according to the priorities and expectations of *this* situation. It is not an abstract norm, but a particular sense of what it means to do the right thing, as a parent, as a child, as a judge, as a king, as a brother, as a farmer, as a spouse, as a friend, as a worshiper, and so on. Righteousness is doing all that one ought to do in the given circumstances and relationships.

(2) The second is the root *špt*, which has to do with judicial activity at every level. A common verb and noun are derived from it. The verb *šapat* refers to legal action over a wide range. It can mean: to act as a lawgiver; to act as a judge by arbitrating between parties in a dispute; to pronounce judgment by declaring who is guilty and who is innocent respectively; and to execute judgment in carrying out the legal consequences of such a verdict. In the widest sense, it means "to put things right", to intervene in a situation that is wrong, oppressive, or out of control, and to fix it. So

5. A much fuller analysis and discussion of these terms, with relevant bibliography, can be found in my *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 253–80.

when the psalmists looked forward to God's coming "to judge the earth", they were not thinking just of his condemning the wicked, but of God's putting all things right that have gone so badly wrong in society and creation.

The derived noun *mišpat* can describe the whole process of litigation (a case), or its end result (the verdict and its execution). It can mean a legal ordinance, usually a case law based on past precedents. Exodus 21–23, known as the Covenant Code, or Book of the Covenant, is called in Hebrew, simply, the *mišpat im*.

But *mišpat* can also be used in a more personal sense as one's legal right, the cause or case one is bringing as a plaintiff before the elders. The frequent expression, "the *mišpat* of the orphan and widow", means their rightful case against those who would exploit them, their just cause in an unfair world. It is from this last sense in particular that *mišpat* comes to have the wider sense of "justice" in a more active sense, whereas *sedeq/sedaqah* has a slightly more static flavour.

There is a great deal of overlap and interchangeability between the two words, but if there is any distinction, one might put it like this: *mišpat* is what needs to be *done* in a given situation if people and circumstances are to be restored to conformity with *sedeq/sedaqah*. *Mišpat* is a *set of actions*—something you do. *Sedeq/sedaqah* is a *state of affairs*—something you aim to achieve. But actually both words can be used for practical actions.

Here in Genesis 18:19 the two words are paired, as they frequently are, to form a comprehensive phrase. This pairing is what is technically called a *hendiadys*—that is, a single complex idea expressed through the use of two words paired together (like "law and order"). Possibly the nearest English expression to the Hebrew double word phrase would be "social justice". Even that phrase, however, is somewhat too abstract for the dynamic nature of this pair of Hebrew words. For *sedaqah* and *mišpat* are concrete nouns, unlike the English abstract nouns used to translate them. That is, in Old Testament thinking, righteousness and justice are actual actions that you *do*, not concepts you reflect on or an ideal you dream about.

Abraham, then, was to teach his household the way of the Lord and about doing righteousness and justice. And this ethical education was to pass down through the generations. That, says God, is what I chose him for.

But how would Abraham himself come to learn what he was supposed to teach? He gets his first lesson from God in Genesis 18. Who better than God himself to teach the way of the Lord and what it means?

The first point that YHWH draws to Abraham's attention is God's own concern about the suffering of the oppressed in the region at the hands of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the careful account of the conversation, Genesis 18:17–19 are soliloquy—that is, God speaking *to himself*. But at verse 20 God speaks again *to Abraham*, and the very first word that God speaks in that sentence is: *ze'raqah* ("cry for help"). The trigger for God's investigation and action is not only the appalling sin of Sodom, but especially the protests and cries of its victims.

Now this is an exact anticipation of what motivated God in the early chapters of Exodus (see Ex. 2:23–25; 3:7). God hears the cry for help from the Israelites under slavery. In fact this incident in Genesis is highly programmatic in the way it defines God's character, actions and requirements. When God acts in the story of the exodus, it will be in the same way as God tells Abraham he is about to act on Sodom and Gomorrah, and for the same reasons—his compassion for the suffering and his anger at injustice.

So the way of the Lord, which Abraham is about to witness and then to teach, is to do righteousness and justice for the oppressed and against the oppressor. The psalmist says that God taught this to Moses. He could easily have added, "and to Abraham".

The LORD works *righteousness*  
and *justice* for all the oppressed.  
He made known *his ways* to Moses,  
his deeds to the people of Israel. (Ps. 103:6–7, italics added)

### The Missional Logic

Returning again to our key text, we must also give attention to its grammatical structure and logic. Genesis 18:19 is a compact statement, and the order of clauses and the connections between them are important. Let's work through it in order:

Gen. 18:19 falls into three clauses, joined by two expressions of purpose—"so that..."

"*I have known him*"—which is frequently used for God's choosing to bring a person or people into intimate relationship with himself (e.g., also Am. 3:2). That is why it is usually translated, "I have chosen him".

God then states the purpose of his choice of Abraham: "*for the purpose that he will command/teach his children and household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice.*" This is what we have been exploring in the last section.

This in turn is then followed by another purpose clause, "*for the purpose that YHWH may bring about for Abraham what he has spoken/promised to him.*" This is the final clause, expressing the long-term goal of both the previous clauses. God intends to keep his promise of blessing the nations through Israel's descendants (just referred to in v. 18). That's why he chose Abraham, and that's why Abraham must teach his descendants to live in the way of the Lord.

In terms of our biblical theology, as we said above, this one verse thus binds together *election*, *ethics* and *mission* into a single sequence located in the will, action and desire of God. It is fundamentally a *missional* declaration, which *explains the reason for election* and *explains the purpose of ethical living*. It is enormously rich and significant.

6. The expression of purpose is emphatic, since the clauses are not merely joined (as they might easily be in Hebrew) by the ubiq-

uitous conjunction *w'*, but by the purposive conjunction, *lemā'an*, which means, "in order that ..." or "for this purpose that..."

We should particularly notice the way *ethics stands as the mid-term between election and mission*. Ethics is the purpose of election and the basis of mission. That is to say, God's election of Abraham (line 1) is intended to produce a community who are taught and committed to ethical reflection of God's character (line 2). And the result of such a community actually existing will be the fulfillment of God's mission of blessing the nations (line 3).

This builds on the link that we saw in chapter 4 between Abraham's election for the blessing of others and Abraham's own *personal* obedience to God. Both Genesis 22:18 and 26:4–5 make that link, connecting God's intention to bless the nations with Abraham's tested obedience. The personal obedience of Abraham was to be the model for his descendants, as God's promise goes on being fulfilled. But here in this text, that personal obedience of Abraham is to be passed on by teaching to his whole community. They will become a model community, taught by the model of Abraham himself.

Another way to make this clear is to approach the missional logic of Genesis 18:19 from either end of the verse. Either way you read the verse, ethics stands in the middle.

Reading from the end:

- *What is God's ultimate mission?* To bring about the blessing of the nations, as he promised Abraham (**mission**).
- *How will that be achieved?* By the existence in the world of a community that will be taught to live according to the way of the Lord in righteousness and justice (**ethics**).
- *But how will such a community come into existence?* Because God chose Abraham to be its founding father (**election**).

Or reading from the beginning:

- *Who is Abraham?* The one whom God has chosen and come to know in personal friendship (**election**).
- *Why did God choose Abraham?* To initiate a people who would be committed to the way of the Lord and his righteousness and justice, in a world going the way of Sodom (**ethics**).
- *For what purpose should the people of Abraham live according to that high ethical standard?* So that God can fulfill his mission of bringing blessing to the nations (**mission**).

Here, then, is another passage that shows us the important link, in our biblical theology, between our ecclesiology and our missiology. We have already pointed out how important it is to see the missional reason for the very existence of the church as the people of God. In this age, the church is missional or it is not church.

But now we see more clearly that this link between church and mission is also *ethical*. The community God seeks for the sake of his mission is to be a community

shaped by his own ethical character, with specific attention to righteousness and justice in a world filled with oppression and injustice. Only such a community can be a blessing to the nations.

With such a strong biblical link, it is not surprising that Jesus spent so much time training his community of disciples in what it meant to follow him in all the demanding ethical choices of life—turning away from the ways of their surrounding culture (repentance), exercising faith in him and obeying his teaching. Thus, when he sent them out to the nations, it was with the same emphasis on the *obedience* of discipleship: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Mission to the nations is ethical at its core, for it demands lives committed to obedience to the Lord, which become self-replicating through the work of evangelism (baptism) and discipling (teaching).

The combined missional and ethical thrust of the Great Commission is entirely consistent with what we have seen in this single verse in Genesis. According to Genesis 18:19, *the ethical quality of life of the people of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission*. God’s intention to bless the nations is inseparable from God’s ethical demand on the people he has created to be the agent of that blessing.

*There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics.*

## SUMMARY

There would be nothing new in complaining about the state of the church around the world. Everybody does. We are all painfully aware that Christians everywhere, and institutional forms of Christianity worldwide, fall far short even of our own ideals, let alone the requirements of God. But what the exegesis and standards of this text make even more painfully plain for us to see is that it is the moral state of those who claim to be God’s people that is a major hindrance to the mission we claim to have on his behalf.

While I lived in India, I was frequently told by Indian Christians themselves that the greatest obstacle to the evangelization of India was not the state of the nation or the resistance of Hinduism, but the state of the church itself.

Our text tells us that God judged Sodom. Yes, and we can see the marks of Sodom all around us still. But God called Abraham and his people to be *different*, to live by different standards, to reflect the God who is radically different from all the flawed gods of the nations. Our problem is that so often the church is *no different* from the world, and in some respects even worse.

A divided, split and fighting church has nothing to say or to give to a divided, broken and violent world. An immoral church has nothing to say to an immoral world. A church riddled with corruption, caste discrimination and other forms of social, ethnic, or gender oppression has nothing to say to the world where such things

are rampant. A church with leaders seemingly obsessed with wealth and power has nothing to say to a world of greedy tyrants. A church that is bad news in such ways has no good news to share. Or at least, it has, but its words are drowned out by its life.

This is what makes it so important to take seriously what God said to Abraham in the first Great Commission and what Jesus said to his disciples in his later version. God's people must be taught and must pass on that teaching, about what it means to walk in God's ways and demonstrate righteousness and justice. There is an unavoidable ethical dimension to the mission of God's people.

This is what is at stake in all those ethical choices we have to make in life—whether at an individual level or as communities of God's people. It is always linked to the effectiveness of our mission. It is never merely a matter of me and my conscience and God. The moment we fail to walk in the way of the Lord, or fail to live lives of integrity, honesty and justice, we not only spoil our personal relationship with God, we are actually hindering God in keeping his promise to Abraham. We are no longer the people of blessing to the nations.

We cannot fit into the last line of Genesis 18:19 unless we fit into the middle line. We cannot fulfill line 1 of the Great Commission unless we also obey line 3.

This does not mean, of course (and I am not suggesting), that the church has to be morally perfect before anybody can engage in mission. If that were so, no mission would ever have happened, for even the church in the New Testament was all too human and flawed. The point is: What is our goal? Where is our heart? Are we obsessed with making converts only, or are we committed to teaching God's people to walk in his ways, so that the nations are blessed?

## RELEVANT QUESTIONS

1. What impact does Sodom's paralleling of modern society have on your sense of the need of the world?
2. How does the link between the church's mission and godly ethics challenge your own life and the life of the church?
3. Abraham was called to "teach" his household and community to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. How much does *ethical* teaching in your church connect with the church's sense of mission and calling?
4. If ethics is the middle term between our calling and our mission (in Gen. 18:19), what difference should that make as we go about our daily lives in the world—in our choices, actions, attitudes and relationships?
5. How different might the history of Christian mission have been if the church had been as concerned about the middle section of this verse (doing righteousness and justice—i.e., its own ethics) as it has been about the final section (fulfilling God's promise of blessing all the nations—i.e., its evangelism)?