

(Quoting the following memorized section...)

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.¹

This selection I just quoted is from Jonathan Edward's famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. It is arguably the most famous sermon ever written in the English language. I first read it in literature class in a secular college. For most people, it is the only thing from the pen of Jonathan Edwards that they have ever read. It also happens to be the stereotypical "hell, fire and brimstone" type sermon. We all know sermons like this and preachers like this who proclaim hell, fire and brimstone messages and are usually caricatured as an old-timey, surly Southern Baptist pastor. This morning I am going to be one of those pastors—not because I want to imitate them for some strange reason, but because the text before us is the only time in all of Scripture where the Lord *literally* rained down fire and brimstone from heaven. Furthermore, this storm of

fire and brimstone is intended to be a picture of the actual eternal flames of hell. Therefore, I am compelled by Scripture to preach this fiery message that is before us.

(From the ESV)

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth² and said, “My lords, please turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the town square.”³ But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. ⁵ And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” ⁹ But they said, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door down. ¹⁰ But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the entrance of the house, both small and great, so that they wore themselves out groping for the door.

¹² Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city, bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” ¹⁴ So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up! Get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

¹⁵ As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶ But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city. ¹⁷ And as they brought them out, one said, “Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.” ¹⁸ And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords. ¹⁹ Behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. ²⁰ Behold, this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!” ²¹ He said to him, “Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²² Escape there quickly, for I can do nothing till you arrive there.” Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar.

²³ The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar. ²⁴ Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. ²⁵ And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶ But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

²⁷ *And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD.* ²⁸ *And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.*

²⁹ *So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived.*

This story picks up where the one in chapter eighteen left off. The three men who had visited Abraham were actually the Lord and two angels. If you remember, the Lord stayed with Abraham and the two angels went down to Sodom. Chapter nineteen picks up at their arrival in the city. Most of us are quite familiar with this chapter in Genesis but possibly for the wrong reasons. It is the section of Scripture that is used most often to condemn the sinful behavior of homosexuality. So pervasive is this passage that certain behaviors are called sodomy and those who do them are referred to as sodomites. It is for this reason that at first I hesitated to preach on the chapter because I did preach two messages on homosexuality when we were talking about the foundations of marriage in Genesis chapter three. In nine years those were the only two messages I had ever preached on the topic and even though that was a year ago, I wondered if I could be accused of spending too much time on the topic, because Christians are sometimes guilty of doing so. Obviously you know my initial hesitation was removed and I am preaching on this passage, and while I agree that it is certainly a condemnation of homosexual behavior, it is about much more than that. It is not less than this, but it is much more.

But since there are some who claim that this passage is not relevant to the topic of homosexuality, I will cover that first and then move beyond it. You may wonder how so many Christians and Christian denominations conclude that homosexual behavior is *not* a sin. Many of those who vigorously deny it have a very low view of the Bible. The easiest way to explain away texts like this is to make the claim that the Bible is just an ancient book of stories written by men. Therefore they are neither authoritative nor relevant to today's culture, especially if following Scriptures like this one causes us to discriminate against gays and lesbians. As I said, that is the easiest way to explain away the texts, but others will start with a higher view of Scripture and attempt to muddy the waters to the degree that we cannot see clearly. Since these are common beliefs, I think it is important that we are able to recognize them when we see them.

The first smoke screen relates to verse five. *And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them."* The supporters of homosexuality claim that the word "know" here is merely an expression of a desire to become acquainted with the two guests. You may recall that I mentioned this word two weeks ago from chapter eighteen when the Lord said in 18:19, "For I have known him." The word for "know" was the Hebrew word *yada*, which when spoken by God concerning Abraham, was a personal knowing that is best translated as "chosen." The exact same word, *yada*, is used in verse five—*Bring them out to us, that we may know them*. In other words, this view states that the townspeople did not mean any harm, they were just very friendly kind of people. This is the sloppiest argument these people have because a simple reading of the context will clearly show that this cannot be true.

The other kind of argument against this passage uses a description of Sodom from Ezekiel 16.

Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen. I first encountered this from a pastor in Madison. It's a bit tricky because at first glance it would appear that Sodom's sin was not homosexual behavior, but rather arrogance, overindulgence and injustice. What makes it tricky is because, like the pastor I originally received this from, most people who put it forth have a low view of the Bible. In other words, they don't really care what Ezekiel said about Sodom but they know that evangelicals care what Ezekiel said. Therefore, if they can use the Bible to prove that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexual behavior, then they have won the day. It would be similar to me using the Quran to prove to a Muslim that Allah is an uncaring and capricious god. You see, I don't care what the Quran actually says. I don't have any faith in the Quran, but if I can use their own words against them, it will have the greatest effect. This is tricky because they are actually liberals but they argue like evangelicals.

We need to remember this when we have discussions with people who have a low view of the Bible. If they don't believe the Bible is inspired, reliable and authoritative, then they will never arrive at the same conclusions as people who do.

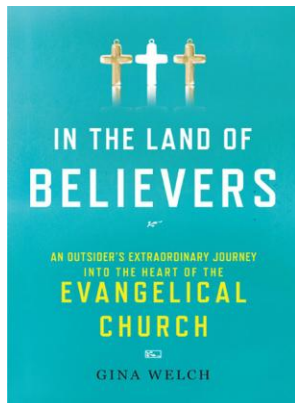
Tonight is the last of the membership classes and we have spent two out of the three weeks going over our denomination's statement of faith. We should all be encouraged by article 2—what we believe about the Bible.

We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.

With this kind of view of Scripture, we are likely to avoid major pitfalls and stay true to the gospel of Christ.

The third objection to that gay rights supporters use against this chapter is to claim that this has nothing to do with homosexual orientation or monogamous, same-gender relationships, but that it is more about a forced situation of "knowing" these visitors, that this was actually an example of homosexual rape. You might be surprised to learn that I think this objection has some merit. It is an inescapable fact that the Sodom and Gomorrah story is about sexual perversion. The context dictates it and the New Testament verifies it in Jude 7. *In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.* Nevertheless, we can't prove for certain that it wasn't merely a condemnation of a forced perversion. My point is that this story is not the best argument against homosexual behavior in the Bible. There are multiple passages that are absolutely clear, so do not think that I am waffling on my position, but if you want to make an air tight case about what the Bible says about homosexual behavior, don't start with Genesis 19.

But the problem is that this is often the place where many Christians do start and their attitude is often less than loving. There are many Christians who love the fact that God rained down fire and brimstone upon these disgusting people and we know that they deserved it because they were so incredibly perverted. We can be like James and John, the “sons of thunder” who said to Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” (Luke 9:54) It sounds like James and John were familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah! We secretly love the fact that they got what they deserved, after all, what they did is so much worse than anything we would ever do, or so we think.



This kind of attitude is what atheist and spy, Gina Welch, wrote about in her book: *In the Land of Believers—An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey into the Heart of the Evangelical Church*. For two whole years she went undercover at the Thomas Road Baptist Church, the church founded by Jerry Falwell. For all that time she pretended to be a Christian, she joined a single's ministry, went on a mission's trip and shared the gospel with others. She was truly a wolf in sheep's clothing, all of it done so she could write a best-selling book. She saw some very good sides of the church, including surprising herself when she was saddened when Falwell died suddenly. All of her atheist friends were celebrating his death, but she couldn't do that. She witnessed genuine faith, sacrifice and love, but she also saw the negative side of the church. She commented specifically on the topic of homosexuality.

The evangelical objections to homosexuality I witnessed seemed enriched by ignorance and prejudice and visceral revulsion more than biblical evidence. I think if conservative evangelical Christians had more personal experience with gays and lesbians, and listened to gay and lesbian voices, their attitudes would change considerably.²

I think what she may have seen is Christian's delighting in stories like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. “Good for them,” we reason. “We would never do anything like that.” When we succumb to this kind of thinking, we show ourselves guilty of the sins of ancient Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel also preached a sermon about Sodom and Gomorrah and one of the things he said comes later in the chapter I quoted to you earlier. *You would not even mention your sister Sodom in the day of your pride.* (Ez. 16:56) We could say that Ezekiel's readers were also “grossed out” by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. They got what was coming to them. We can't even mention sins so disgusting. But Ezekiel was laying a prophet's trap which he ensnared them with by his next words.

*You not only walked in their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they.*⁴⁸ *As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done.*⁴⁹ *“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.*⁵⁰ *They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.*⁵¹ *Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done.*⁵² *Bear your disgrace, for you have furnished some justification for your sisters. Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they*

appear more righteous than you. So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

Could it be, that like the residents of sixth century Jerusalem, we are more guilty than the people who perished in Sodom and Gomorrah? Could it be that we have done more detestable things than they did? We are a smaller group than they, but if you took a cross section of all of our collective life sins and laid it beside the same number of those living in Sodom and Gomorrah, how would we stack up? If you would tend to think we would look pretty good next to them, then I suggest that you reread Genesis 19 and Ezekiel 16, because you are not getting the point. We are them. Without Christ, our destruction is just as deserved and just as terrible. In fact, as I said at the beginning, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not really about homosexuality, it is about hell. Before when I read Jude 7, I left off the second half of the verse. *In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. Peter said the same thing in his second letter. If he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly (2 Peter 2:6).*

This story happened and was sovereignly placed in the Bible so that we would know something of the fire and brimstone of hell. It is not here to revel in the destruction of gays and lesbians but to strike fear into our hearts so that we make certain we are in Christ. Any avoidance of hell is pure, undefiled, undeserved mercy. This is how Isaiah began his book.

*Unless the LORD Almighty
had left us some survivors,
we would have become like Sodom,
we would have been like Gomorrah. (Isaiah 9:10)*

Without Christ, we would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah

This is what Jonathan Edwards spoke about later in his famous sermon.

But the foolish children of men miserably delude themselves in their own schemes, and in confidence in their own strength and wisdom; they trust to nothing but a shadow. The greater part of those who heretofore have lived under the same means of grace, and are now dead, are undoubtedly gone to hell; and it was not because they were not as wise as those who are now alive: it was not because they did not lay out matters as well for themselves to secure their own escape. If we could speak with them, and inquire of them, one by one, whether they expected, when alive, and when they used to hear about hell, ever to be the subjects of misery: we doubtless, should hear one and another reply, "No, I never intended to come here: I had laid out matters otherwise in my mind; I thought I should contrive well for myself -- I thought my scheme good. I intended to take effectual care; but it came upon me unexpected; I did not look for it at that time, and in that manner; it came as a thief -- Death outwitted me: God's wrath was too quick for me. Oh, my cursed foolishness! I was flattering myself, and pleasing myself with vain dreams of what I would do hereafter; and when I was saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction came upon me."

What Edwards is saying is that no one plans to go to hell. Once in a while you might hear someone say, “Well, I guess I will go to hell then, won’t I?” But even such persons are really more flippant than they are serious. They really don’t believe they are going to hell or else they wouldn’t dare say such a thing.

Do not think that because you were raised in a Christian home that you are secure.

Do not think that because you have good intentions you will avoid hell.

Do not think because you prayer a prayer once in your life or were baptized and now you live however you please that you will escape the flames of wrath.

Edwards continues...

God has laid himself under no **obligation**, by any promise to keep any natural man out of hell one moment. God certainly has made no promises either of eternal life, or of any deliverance or preservation from eternal death, but what are contained in the covenant of grace.

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God.³

It’s all of grace. If we are delivered from the fire and brimstone of hell it is of grace and if we are sent there it is according to divine justice and fairness. We don’t have to “like” hell, but we do have to love the justice of the Lord that would send a person to hell. God’s justice is just as much a perfect, divine attribute as his mercy and love and if we do not love his justice, even the justice that sends to hell, then we do not love God but rather we love our own version of God.

But someone will say, “Why do we need to have all of this talk about hell? What would Jesus say? Jesus is loving and gentle and kind. Surely he would not send anyone to hell.” First of all, Jesus spoke of hell more often than all other Biblical writers combined. Second, Jesus is the one who said the following. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.* (Luke 12:4-5)

But no one need go there. I pray that not a single soul here this morning is hanging by a slender thread over the flames of divine wrath, but if you are, you can run to Christ. Run to Christ and beg his mercy. Run to Christ and confess your guilt. Run to Christ and be saved from hell and secure an eternity with him. You have an extraordinary opportunity, as Edwards said, and I implore you to take advantage of God’s mercy.

This story ends with the utter destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah but also with God’s faithfulness. Look back at verse 29. *So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived.* It doesn’t say that God remembered Lot but that “God remembered

Abraham.” God did not sweep away the righteous with the unrighteous. God was faithful in his promise to Abraham. Yes, even in eternal destruction, the judge of all the earth will always do right.

Rich Maurer
April 25, 2010

¹ Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God , Jonathan Edwards, Enfield, Connecticut, July 8, 1741.

^a Some manuscripts *them, even as Elijah did*

² Trevin Wax, [Undercover at Thomas Road: An Interview with Gina Welch](#) posted on his blog, Kingdom People: Living on Earth as Citizens of Heaven, April 13, 2010.

³ Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God , Jonathan Edwards, Enfield, Connecticut, July 8, 1741.