

Debased Sodom

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I am motivated today by a quote from Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, who says, among many other things, "If you really want to understand something, the best way is to try and explain it to someone else." So whether you know this or not, I am going to explain it to you. The Bible narrative of Sodom contains more than first meets the eye. People seldom teach the subject of Sodom anymore, and it occurs very little in media these days. While it used to be mentioned in Vacation Bible School and Sunday school, and honestly even in my kindergarten class, most kids of this age seldom go to these things anymore, and when they do, the purpose is to give their parents a break, or maybe the subject will be inclusion or coloring rainbows.

When I asked AI to list Bible events that are best known to the whole world, well, you know what probably comes up on top, and this is what it produced: Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, Adam and Eve, and even in the top 10, Sodom and Gomorrah did not crack the list. The top 10 list includes primarily those frequently referenced in movies, books, idioms, and holidays. A movie was made in 1962 called "Sodom and Gomorrah." It is a little ways back. I do not remember it. I do not think I saw it, but it was a box office failure. The critics claimed it was too much about salt mining with not enough debauchery and lust. That pretty much sums up the state of the movie industry, even back then.

Today, people view the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah as politically incorrect, and the subject has become taboo. I want to cover three things. 1) Expose Sodom's real problem at its core. Sodom had been given over to a debased mind, a mind turned upside down, subpar, warped by sin to the point that it is incapable of reasonable self-reflection. 2) We will explore what debased truly means and why it matters. And 3) We live in a world where many people are already in that state. We will look at that.

In Genesis 18 to 19, we can find the narrative of Sodom, and rather than me reading you two chapters, I am going to give you a little narrative. Abraham sat relaxing under terebinth trees on a ridge overlooking the Siddim Valley. Below him, on the other side of the Jordan River slicing the lush plain, Sodom nestled wickedly. Three men appeared. Abraham discerned that they were not ordinary travelers, but two angels and the Lord. Abraham encouraged them to stay for a morsel, but instead he prepared a feast.

Abraham stood nearby, watchful. After deliberation, the Lord decided to tell Abraham that outcry against Sodom had reached His ears, and He would go verify whether it was true. Abraham pleaded with the Lord to spare the city if 10 righteous men could be found there. As you can see, I am leaving out some details. God listened.

The two angels arrived in the late afternoon in Sodom. Lot, sitting in the city gate, recognized something holy in them and urgently pressed them to stay in his house. They relented. As darkness fell, all the men of the city surrounded Lot's house, demanding to have their way with these two strangers. Then they grabbed for Lot as well. The angels struck while they barred the door. They blinded all the men in the street.

The two angels insisted that Lot and his family get out of town immediately and do not look back, because Sodom will be destroyed. By dawn, Lot reluctantly makes it to a small town nearby called Zoar. Then the sky opened. Fire and burning sulfur rained down on all of the valley before them, so Lot and his family now flee toward a cave in the mountains. On the way, his wife looked back and immediately turned into a pillar of salt.

In the long nights that followed, the two daughters reviewed the desolation in the valley below them, and believing that their family line would die in this lonely cave up on the mountains, they devised a plan. On two successive nights, they made their father drink wine until he was senseless, lay with him, and each conceived a son.

Beyond the actual events, the Bible is not silent about Sodom. Sodom or Lot are addressed in 24 different places in the Bible, and it is used as symbolism, much like Babylon, for godlessness, oppression, sexual deviance, and ultimate judgment, and it is used to convict other offenders. While the

narrative of Sodom is in Genesis 18 to 19, we can trace its roots even before the Flood.

Genesis 6:5 God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of His heart was only [negative] continually.

You recognize that quote, maybe not where it is from. All of civilization was of a debased mind at that time. The Flood was prescribed because of this problem.

Let us turn now to one of the earliest details. I am going to look at Genesis 9:20, one of the earliest details we are given after the Flood. Actually, I am going to read 20 to 21, and also 24. And I will fill in some of the pronouns where it is appropriate.

Genesis 9:20-21 Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent.

Genesis 9:24 Noah awoke from his wine and knew what [Ham's] younger son [Canaan] had done to him.

For this, Noah cursed Canaan in Genesis 9:25-27.

Now, uncovered nakedness is sort of the key phrase here. It is a biblical euphemism. Actually, it has not been translated that way in the New King James or the King James, but it is in the original Hebrew, and it means sexual deviance. You should remember that it is also kind of a reference to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when they recognized their nakedness. So it is described at length in Leviticus 18:6-19, a long section of "thou shalt nots" about uncovering nakedness of yourself and others.

We might think that debased behavior was eradicated by the Flood, but it is one of the first fresh details after the earth has barely dried up. The table of nations in Genesis 10 lists the territory of Canaan, the son of Ham, and it includes the city of Sodom. It was a pretty good-sized city even at that time.

With that background, we can dig into the geography and archaeology of Sodom.

A little bit of color here: Sodom is not named because of sodomy, but the other way around. Sodomy, the word, is an eponym, a word that is derived from a proper noun, the proper noun being the city of Sodom. The name Sodom is from an ancient root meaning to scorch. The name is somewhat prophetic in that Sodom was eventually scorched out of existence, as you know.

Sodom actually sits on a number of fault lines in the earth's crust. Deep currents in the magma of the earth are pushing the land mass apart along these fault lines, and it is right under the Dead Sea. This explains the asphalt pits that run up the entire west side of the Dead Sea, and it also explains why the Dead Sea is the lowest point on the surface of the earth. The exact location of Sodom has been established, debated, relocated, and re-debated for 4,000 years.

The text in Genesis 14 indicates that when Abraham and Lot discussed splitting up, Lot was looking down, but both of them were looking down at the exit of the Jordan River aquifer. And by the way, I will point that out, that Abraham said, "If you go north, I'll go south, and if you go south, I'll go north." But Lot went straight ahead into the valley, following neither instruction. Anyway, this Jordan River aquifer opens into a fertile plain where the Jordan spread out and emptied into the Dead Sea on the north. This was an area called the Valley of Siddim. Here the land was lush, and the Jordan River ran down the middle much like the Nile, flooding periodically, probably once a year, and making all the land fertile.

In this location, in the present day, there are a number of mounds or tells being excavated from the Middle Bronze Age. Archaeologists studying these digs describe a burnt layer five feet thick across whole areas that contain melted pottery, melted bricks, and melted minerals. Some of those papers by the archaeologists have been produced in the last two years.

In Genesis 14, the marauding of King Chedorlaomer, you remember him (I call him the cheese king), is useful in showing the locations of cities around the Dead Sea. He traveled in a giant U-shaped path. He comes down the

King's Highway on the east side of the Dead Sea, attacking the Rephaim, that is, the giants, and then the Zuzim, and then the Emim, and then the Horites. Then he returns on the west side of the Dead Sea, attacking the Amalekites and the Amorites, and on their way back to the north, they stop and attack the Canaanites in the five cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar. Then they headed north to Dan, and that is where Abraham chased them to recover his nephew Lot.

But more important than the location of Sodom is to know something about the culture and lifestyle. Sodom was situated in a fertile valley filled with grains, fruits, and vegetables, all well-watered. There were also resources like salt and asphalt, whose trade probably contributed to Sodom becoming wealthy. A couple of things: in Roman times, there were lumps of asphalt floating on the Dead Sea the size of horse carts. They were harvested and transported to the coast of the Mediterranean for export, pretty much all over the Roman Empire.

Another valuable commodity was salt. Even now there are great evaporation ponds at the south end of the Dead Sea. I can imagine caravans of hundreds of camels arriving from Egypt and Mesopotamia along the trade routes that intersect at Sodom. The people of Sodom were likely a blended mix on the crossroads of trade, travel, and empire—a giant melting pot. Sound familiar? Just like Corinth or Rome, San Francisco, New York, and probably much of North America right now. For more research, there is a three-part series by Richard Ritenbaugh called "Leaving Sodom," or that is the title of one of them, and you will find the other two.

Now let us turn to Romans 1. I am switching to more of a theological framework here. With the physical context behind us, we can switch to looking at debased. I am going to go to verses 18 through 32. And what better person than Paul to give us the straight scoop. Here he describes a chain reaction, a slippery slope from righteousness to unrighteousness. And where does it start?

I think, rather than reading it all, I am going to paraphrase this, but I will give you the verses. Verses 18 and 19 show that rejection of God, despite clear revelation, is the cause. Verses 20 to 23, rejection of God leads to idolatry. Verses 24 to 25, idolatry leads to lust, dishonoring the body. Then

verses 26 to 27, lust leads to sexual perversion. Verse 28, God gives them over to a debased mind. And in verses 29 to 31, it lists 23 attributes of a debased mind.

I am not going to read all 23 attributes, but:

Romans 1:29-32 Being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

It is a pretty vicious list. As a sidebar, we might expect to see law or sin mentioned when discussing unrighteousness to the point of death. So, no mention of law or sin in Romans 1. This may be because Paul is addressing Gentiles, and he says so specifically in Romans 11:13.

But turn with me to Romans 2, verse 12. Here we find Paul mentioning both for the first time in the book of Romans.

Romans 2:12 For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law.

Paul states that those without knowledge of the law of the Jews are still accountable to moral law and natural law as well. So what he is saying applies to the Sodomites as well. Let me take a minute to describe this. There is actually, as I see it, a five-tier understanding of the law.

At the highest level:

Matthew 22:37 "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment."

Two, faith, grace, and the commandments of the New Covenant written on our hearts, as described in Matthew 5 and 7 by Jesus Christ. Three, spiritual, civil, ceremonial laws. Four, moral law or reason. This is the law on which the US Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are based, basically tapping into Roman philosophy or Greek philosophy. And then five, God's created order observable in nature. Even if we are unable to reason, we still experience the laws of the creation around us. They are impossible to ignore.

These are gravity, how trees grow, how the eyeball grows and how it stops growing. Can you imagine? These are like animals mating with like kind, or men and women attracted to one another. In a normal person, these marvelous things express God's character and point to a Creator, even without knowing the Ten Commandments. As it says in Romans 1:19, which we kind of zipped past there,

Romans 1:19 Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

At the basest of the levels, there are still no excuses for debased behavior. Cause and effect apply in every layer. In biblical usage, there are several concepts that show the exact same sentiment of cause and effect. For example, Psalm 14:1 describes a fool:

Psalm 14:1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God [there is your cause]." They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good [there is your effect].

Ephesians 5, verse 18 describes dissipation, a wasteful, self-indulgent lifestyle:

Ephesians 5:18 And do not be drunk with wine [there is your cause], in which is dissipation [the effect].

Psalm 73—all of the psalm—Asaph is discouraged by the prosperity of the wicked, but in verse 18, halfway through, is a transition, and he says... In a debased condition, a person has become blind to his own sins. Once we turn our back on God and lose this self-evaluation, it becomes the proverbial slippery slope.

Let us turn to Ezekiel 16, and we are going to start talking specifically about Sodom, basically the cause and effect. You may wish to turn there for reference, but I am going to paraphrase it. It is a chapter of exquisite prose. Ezekiel describes three sisters who are allegories for three nations. One is Sodom, representing the Canaanites—it is a city long gone and now just a cautionary tale of a debased and sinful people. Two, Samaria, representing the northern tribes of Israel—it is also gone, punished for their idolatry. Three, Jerusalem is Judah and the southern tribes, now in captivity in Babylon.

Everyone in this list is dead, dispersed, or captive at the time of Ezekiel. So this book is specifically for the benefit of us later readers. Ezekiel opens with a tearjerker. Jerusalem is a weary, weak, small baby girl found in a field, abandoned by her mother, still attached to her umbilical cord. This baby is saved and lovingly cared for by God, and as she grows, she becomes beautiful, mature, and protected royalty. When she realizes how beautiful she is, she becomes thankless, proud, and haughty. She turns her back on her Savior and becomes sexually deviant, the first step toward the debased mind.

Ezekiel then describes unimaginable extremes, and parents may want to sit with your kids when you go through this narrative. Look at Ezekiel 16, verses 46 through 47. Remember, we are talking about Jerusalem here. Here Ezekiel is speaking to God, and He says to Jerusalem, this baby girl gone bad:

Ezekiel 16:46-47 "Your elder sister is Samaria, who dwells with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who

dwells to the south of you, is Sodom and her daughters [daughters being the residents of the city]. You did not walk in their ways, nor act according to their abominations; but as if that were too little, you became more corrupt than they in all your ways."

Then verses 49 to 50 lists the sins of Jerusalem's younger sister Sodom:

Ezekiel 16:49-50 "Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit."

Burnt up. That is a list of six things, and I bet you there were more. Now God turns to the elder sister Samaria, capital of the northern tribes of Israel, still talking to Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 16:51-52 "Samaria did not commit half of your sins; but you have multiplied your abominations more than they, and have justified your sisters by all the abominations which you have done. You who judged your sisters, bear your own shame also, because the sins which you committed were more abominable than theirs; they are more righteous than you. Yes, be disgraced also, and bear your own shame, because you justified your sisters."

I am sure you caught that. Sodom is more righteous than Jerusalem. And by this same logic, Lot is more righteous than Sodom. From this perspective, we can more easily understand why Lot is called righteous three times by II Peter 2. By the way, sexual deviance is there in every case. It is an early symptom of turning your back on God, even before being turned over to a debased mind.

Proverbs 1 points to the same cause and effect:

Proverbs 1:25-26 Because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke [there is your cause], I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes [that is the effect].

So with these definitions in mind, the lessons to the modern world are more pronounced. The parallels between Sodom and the modern Western world are mind-boggling, particularly Americans. We Americans are proud, boastful, and haughty, wealthy beyond anyone at any time in history, even among the lower classes. Every room has a TV. Every home has a driveway. Every driveway has two or three cars, air conditioning, heating. Most of us have fully stocked pantries, groceries available, and goods delivered to our front door, gym memberships, credit cards. The list goes on.

And those things are great, by the way. But despite being able to show off vulgar excesses, there is an incessant desire for more. The excess often spills into covetousness, which is often a cause of crime. Within the last decade, crime is often motivated solely by the desire to commit crime. Many politicians and pundits in the Western world use bribes and promises to gain position and then fail to deliver. The leaders lack morality, and everyone follows.

Psalms 12:8 The wicked prowl on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.

We do not strengthen the hand of the poor. We scoff at the homeless begging on the street, assuming they are cared for by the government or NGOs, and actually we may be right. We give away our productive capacity to foreign nations, ignoring that they get cheap labor from slave wages. Then our people sit in ivory houses while they trample on the heads of the poor, as on the dust of the earth. That is in Amos. The specific parallels are too clear to ignore.

The West is ignorant of God and has been turned over to a debased mind. Our businessmen are chauffeured into the racy districts of Bangkok and Tokyo to pay for satisfaction, and our politicians and princes become

ensnared with the likes of Jeffrey Epstein. We are giving away God's wealth to the modern equivalent of Tyre and Moab for a song and satisfaction. Archaeologists refuse to accept any biblical sources for explanations of their findings. Physicists imagine fantastic theories like the Big Bang in order to avoid acknowledging the Creator. Our nominal Christian churches gain salaries from powerful boards of directors and preach what they are told to preach, or get themselves booted while the board starts doing interviews to find someone else who pleases them.

In short, Lot looks righteous compared to Sodom. Sodom looks righteous compared to Jerusalem. And Jerusalem looks righteous compared to the modern Western world.

But there is more than a warning of destruction. I want to turn to the personal parallels for us. There are several main people in this story, and the question is which one most closely represents our individual situation. So I am going to go over six individuals, that is all there are in the story.

Abraham. Abraham camps on a hilltop under some oak trees. He is a patriarch driven by his faith, carefully developed as a result of systematic analysis of available evidence. When God says He is going down to Sodom to verify, Abraham knows that there is grave potential for destruction. Abraham's nephew Lot and his family are down there in Sodom, and Abraham pleads with God for the sake of the righteous.

Sarah, his wife, is about to become pregnant in a tent on a hilltop under some oak trees, and when she hears news that is hard to believe, her response is only a quiet laugh. She is listed among the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, and she remains a symbol of motherhood, who bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

Lot. There are a number of danger signs. Lot lived close to Abraham for most of his life. His life even overlapped the righteous Shem, possibly for as much as 100 years, so he knew of the truth. But Lot's character is displayed in the conflict with Abraham and his herdsmen when he chooses to go into the Valley of Siddim based on sight alone. Over a period of time, he justifies

moving up against the wall of the city of Sodom. Maybe he is cutting down on the commute. Next thing we know, he is inside the city, and that is where the angels found him.

He still knew the truth, and he recognized the angels when they showed up. He also tried to persuade his sons-in-law to leave with him, so he must have had some conviction. But he lives in the thick of a society, much like our modern society, that is operating without God. He has put down roots so deep that when the angels told him to get out, he lingered. It is difficult to ignore how little he was respected—the city residents treat him like a foreigner, and even his own family thinks of him as a joker.

Lot is delivered from Sodom, and we might be tempted to accept his example, saying, "Well, at least he made it." But we have been warned with his example, and so we might not be recipients of the mercy that God gave to him. As it is, he lost everything but the clothes on his back. He narrowly escaped judgment because of the intercession of his uncle Abraham. He offered no prayers for Sodom. In the end, angels delivered him. While the Bible often contains an epitaph for men of old, Lot leaves this mortal coil without a whisper. John Ritenbaugh once said about Lot, "There is more than one way to skin a cat, but this does not look like the best one."

Lot's wife was likely well-acquainted with Abraham, and she was probably present when Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. When she was told, "Do not look back," she did anyway. This behavior has some of the same signs as Korah, and really all the Israelites in the desert. She sought to save her life and lost it. It is natural to get caught up in the mundane aspects of our own lives. All our hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears, traditions, and relationships define us, and they can be focused on the daily life of the world around us.

In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus warns, "Remember Lot's wife." He did not say remember Uzzah the Hittite or remember Nadab and Abihu. We are to remember not to look back. It is a habitual behavior we will need. Let him who is on the housetop not come down. Get out of the city. Flee. Do not look back. Do not get any of your possessions. Leave. When under severe duress, as Lot's family was, habitual obedience to God becomes life or death. We too need to remember Lot's wife.

And then I do not want to leave out Lot's two daughters, who take matters into their own hands, very self-sufficient, but they are recorded in an embarrassingly matter-of-fact way as committing one of the vilest sins in the Bible, incest.

There are many other biblical figures beyond the narrative of Sodom who are under pressure, surrounded by the people of the world, but those are the ones in the narrative. In the book *All the Men of the Bible*, Herbert Lockyer says that "there is one Abraham, one Daniel, or one Joshua, but there are thousands of Lots." So do not cast your lot with Lot or his wife, pun intended. He is everyman.

Material possessions, friends, beauty, strength will not save us. We too live in a world like Sodom, barely held in check by civil law and police enforcement—more and more so as sides take up arms and summer waxes hot (although not today). If we were to be visited by a pair of angels, we would probably not want them left out in the street in front of our house. We might feel somewhat urgent about it. We have to live in this world, but we are told to come out of her. Please do not flee to a cave in the mountains just yet, because I mentioned it. Paul says in,

I Corinthians 5:9-10 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

And I think he means completely, maybe go with Elon Musk to Mars or something. This is a spiritual admonition. We stand in a culture that closely mirrors the pride, excess, idleness, abominations, and debased condition of ancient Sodom. We are not called to isolate ourselves from the world, but we must not put down roots in it. Like Lot, we can linger too long. Like his wife, we can look back with longing. The warning is clear, and the invitation is personal.

Let us close with Revelation 18:4-5. I will read it to you.

Revelation 18:4-5 "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities."