



THE END OF COMPROMISE

SERIES: *THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS*

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 Genesis 18:16-19:38
 Twelfth Message
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The last episode that we considered in the life of Abraham took place in the idyllic setting of Ancient Near Eastern hospitality, when the patriarch served a banquet to strangers as if they were divine. To his surprise, he would discover that they were in fact divine visitors. In the after-dinner conversation, Abraham learned that the real purpose of their visit was not that Abraham serve them, but that they serve him, specifically Sarah. In the process, Sarah, who was barren, received the gift of fertility at the age of ninety, through the divine word. Though she could not believe it, God promised that within a year's time her laughter of unbelief would be transformed into unadulterated joy. Now that the mysterious guests have delivered the goods, they rise as if to leave, but on their way out they tell Abraham some disastrous news. The town where his beloved nephew Lot settled has been marked for divine destruction.

Judgment is not a popular subject among modern preachers and theologians. It doesn't draw the crowds, swell the offering plates, or pamper sinful hearts. But the reluctance to speak candidly about judgment cheapens the cross, robs salvation of its power, and dilutes the love of God. I am not eager to preach on it either, but I am bound by the God who wrote the text. Our passage today devotes more space to the destruction of Sodom than any other twenty-four hour period in the life of Abraham. The importance of this event cannot be underestimated. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah shaped the lives of the early Israelites (Dt 29:23). It became the paradigm for the prophets for future judgments on Israel and the nations (Is 1:9; 13:19; Lam 4:6; Zeph 2:9), and was understood by Jesus (Mt 10:15; 11:23) and the apostles as the type for God's final judgement (2 Pet 3:5-15). In our own day, where there are no sacred boundaries, where every TV and Internet connection makes the ancient city accessible within virtually every home, this text could not be more relevant. It serves up a fearful warning about the dissolute destiny of compromise, and exhorts us to walk in the faithful footsteps of our father Abraham.

The story has three scenes. First, Abraham intercedes for the city (18:16-33); second, Lot's rescue by the angels and the subsequent destruction of Sodom (19:1-29); and third, in the aftermath of destruction, the lewd tale of a drunken Lot, sexually seduced by his own daughters (19:30-38).

I. Abraham Intercedes for Sodom (Gen 18:16-33)

A. God's Soliloquy (18:16-19)

Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. And the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? "For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (Gen 18:16-19, NASB)

Abraham's three guests, angels in disguise, rise from dinner, but before leaving they take a long look down onto the eastern plain toward Sodom. Their ominous gaze is a clue that the narrator is going to depart from the plot of anticipating a newborn son to take us on a long detour, to a place we never wished to go, but which God wants us to see. It is, in Conrad's terms, "the heart of darkness."

Before departing, we are privileged to enter into the private thoughts of God, as if we were part of some heavenly council. Because of who Abraham is as God's elect, and the purpose for which God chose him to walk in God's ways, he is now elevated to the esteemed role of prophet. He will hear things future prophets will be privileged to hear in order to play a significant role in bringing about God's righteous rule upon the earth. After contemplating his intention to invite Abraham into this very select arena, God speaks.

B. God to Abraham (18:20-22)

And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. (18:20-22)

God now declares his intentions to Abraham. Here we discover that God's sensitive ears hear the tormented outcries of the oppressed. The sexual misconduct that had gone on for some time has resulted in countless victims in Sodom. This should cut us to the quick if we dare believe that "consenting adults" can do as they please and no one is hurt. The cries from Sodom have set off a formal investigation. God's judgement is never arbitrary, nor is it ever based on hearsay. If his reluctant hands are forced to do the unthinkable, he makes a thorough, firsthand inquiry. He dispatches two of his angels to "go down" to gather evidence concerning the reports that have invaded heaven.

Following their departure, Abraham is left alone with God. How God's terrible words must have weighed upon his soul.

C. Abraham to God (18:23-33)

And Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you indeed sweep [it] away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." And Abraham answered and said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the LORD, although I am but dust and ashes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will you destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." And he spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose forty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty." Then he said, "Oh may the LORD not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." And he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the LORD; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty." Then he said, "Oh may the LORD not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten." And as soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed; and Abraham returned to his place. (18:23-33)

Alone with God now, Abraham bravely steps forward to initiate a conversation. This is the first time in Scripture that a man initiates conversation with God. The patriarch is driven by his sense of "justice." He is horrified at the thought that God might not distinguish between the fate of the righteous and the wicked (cf. Ps 146:8-9). He makes this point three times in his opening plea. And yet, consider the irony of attempting to be a legal advocate for justice when the accused is the "Judge of the whole earth." It is a very difficult balancing act. Thus Abraham draws out every rhetorical device he can think of to delicately make his points, without at the same time offending the One from whom he has received his "sense" of justice.

Once God accepts Abraham's logic, and says he will "spare" the city if but fifty righteous are found in it, Abraham plays the role of the "bargainer" in the marketplace. After a conciliatory opening, "I am but dust and ashes," he carefully ratchets the number down by a mere five, "Well, what about forty-five?" Once that number is secure, he repeats the process again. The third time he gets even bolder and drops it by ten: "How about thirty?" Throughout the bargaining we can feel the tension rise and fall as Abraham pushes the envelope of divine justice further and further. Finally, when he reaches ten, he feels that he has reached the absolute limit. He asks God not to be angry, for this is his final request. God condescends that he will not bring ruin if there are but ten righteous in Sodom. ("Ten" will later become the minimal number of men to constitute a community in Israel's life.) As God departs, Abraham has no idea of what God will do, for there are far less than ten righteous left in Sodom.

Following God's departure, Abraham returns to his place "in the nomadic, uncorrupted existence in the land of promise (*in contrast to*) Lot's location in one of the doomed cities of the plain."¹

II. Angels Rescue Lot and Destroy Sodom

(Gen 19:1-29)

A. The Angels Arrive In Sodom (19:1-3)

Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. And he said, "Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way." They said however, "No, but we shall spend the night in the square." Yet he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. (19:1-3)

The two angels arrive at the city gate, the place where elders of the city conduct their business and attend to legal matters. Lot's presence there may indicate that he is a well-respected member of this community. He is the only one to greet these messengers and offer them hospitality. Sodom is a very cold place. There are many similarities between Lot's treatment of these strangers and Abraham's. He rushes to meet them, greets them like royalty, and offers his home as lodging before they go on their way. Further, he promises them they can leave without delay. Surprisingly, they seem reluctant to spend the night in Lot's home, and they refuse his offer. Their refusal invites all kinds of questions, but through Lot's forceful urging they give in. It is likely that his passionate pleas were motivated by the danger he knew lurked in the dark streets of Sodom.

After they arrive at his home, Lot prepares a sumptuous feast for them. It does not have the fanfare of Abraham's hospitality, yet it still commends Lot as a generous host. But, it is not long before this atmosphere of warmth and hospitality is rudely interrupted.

B. The Assault On Lot and His Visitors (19:4-11)

Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them." But

Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, "Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Stand aside." Furthermore, they said, "This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them." So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway. (19:4-11)

Now we come to Sodom's "heart of darkness," the men of the city. News of the arrival of these visitors travels fast, and men from every quarter descend like vultures upon Lot's home. The narrator is quick to relate the extent of perversion in this town. Everyone has been infected. Even young people could not grow up in playful innocence. It is clear there is no one righteous in Sodom, except Lot, and he is an immigrant. So aggressive is their evil they consider no boundaries as sacred. People did not have to go looking for evil in this town; evil found them. Though clearly prohibited in the Old Testament (Lev 18:22; 20:13), homosexuality was permitted by some cultures. But no culture permitted homosexual gang rape, the very thing this mob is proposing to Lot, for it violated the very essence of oriental hospitality. The crowd doesn't even blush in their request. They beat on Lot's door, demanding that he break his sacred commitment to his guests and deliver them over to feed their perverted appetites.

Showing some semblance of courage, Lot throws his own life before the unruly mob. He closes the door behind him, giving himself virtually no possibility of escape. His polite address grants them more dignity than they deserve, but after a few moments before this hungry crowd, he knows that mere talk will not satisfy them. Then Lot does the unthinkable. To preserve his sacred bond of protection to his guests, he offers the mob his two virgin daughters to satisfy their lusts. His offer shocks us, as it probably did the early Israelite readers. It shows the importance of hospitality in that ancient world, and how Lot considered his daughters the only cards he had to play.

But his plea falls on deaf ears. The crowd's forceful tones quickly turn abusive and violent. Ironically, in the process of confrontation they unmask Lot's true identity. They accuse him of being an alien in their world. The man who wanted to quietly live the good life in the compromise of Sodom is now unmasked as an alien who has the capacity to judge righteously. With his cover gone and his life in jeopardy, the crowd crushes him against the door of his own home. But suddenly, a divine hand from within the house snatches Lot safely inside and smites the crowd with blindness, an apt symbol of their moral condition. Rather than repenting in the face of divine judgment, so strong is their sensual appetite, they continue to grope in the darkness, hoping to satisfy their depraved lusts. What a pitiful sight. They are acting like an alcoholic, teetering on the precipice of hell, reaching for just one last drink before falling into the abyss. They are blind men, ignoring their blindness, groping for an opening they cannot find.

C. Destruction On Sodom Announced By the Angels (19:12-13)

Then the men said to Lot, "Whom else have you here? A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has sent us to destroy it." (19:12-13)

The attempted gang rape has forced the angels to drop their cover. Now that their identity is known, they immediately give orders to Lot to gather his extended family under their protection before they carry out their divine mandate. Following the mob

scene at the front door, they need no further evidence to destroy this town. But, just as in the days of Noah, Lot and his family find grace in the eyes of God. They will be escorted out before the destruction.

Yet what follows shows the sad spiritual state of Lot's family.

D. Lot's Sons-in-law Laugh (19:14)

And Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, and said, "Up, get out of this place, for the LORD will destroy the city." But he appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting. (19:14)

Lot immediately sets out to find his two future sons-in-law to warn them of the impending doom. The house is on fire; it's time to get out. Yet, as citizens of Sodom, these young men have no fear of the name Yahweh. They have no moral seriousness, no sense of righteous judgement. Did they even know of the events of that night at Lot's home? In any case, Lot cannot convince them. To them he appears to be merely joking (laughing). They go back to sleep, none the wiser, never to awaken again.

E. Departure From Sodom (19:15-16)

And when 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." But he hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters, for the compassion of the LORD was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city. (19:15-16)

It's amazing that Lot too went back to bed that night. How could he sleep, given the events of the evening? On the very night that the light of heaven confronts the heart of darkness in his own city, Lot goes back to bed. The angels have to reappear to rouse him. Even then, he still dallies. Like an old man preparing to go on a cruise, he delays, making sure everything is packed. He certainly doesn't act like a man who has just been told his house is on fire. Exasperated, the two angels take matters into their own hands. They grab Lot, his wife and two daughters and drag them out of the city to safety. Why did these heavenly creatures put up with such foolish behavior? The answer is given in the text, "*the compassion of the LORD was upon him.*" Why was the compassion of the Lord upon Lot? It was because Abraham interceded for him. How many of us have escaped destruction, not because of our own spiritual sensitivity, but solely because someone prayed for us?

Following this angelic rescue, Lot still continues to presume upon God's patience.

F. Lot Pleads For Zoar (19:17-22)

And it came about when they had brought them outside, that one said, "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, lest you be swept away." But Lot said to them, "Oh no, my lords! Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your loyal-love, which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, lest the disaster overtake me and I die; now behold, this town is near enough to flee to, and it is small. Please, let me escape there (is it not small?) that my life may be saved." And he said to him, "Behold, I grant you this request also, not to overthrow the town of which you have spoken. Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there." Therefore the name of the town was called Zoar. (19:17-22)

Once Lot and his family are outside the city, the angel continues, with a sense of urgency: "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, lest you be swept away." A massive conflagration is about to erupt. Any sensible person would get as far away as possible, but not Lot. He takes time to reason with these messengers as if they were mere tour guides. He appreciates all the kindness he has been shown, including the saving of his life, but could he ask just one more *small* (*mitz'ar*) favor? He flatly refuses

to go to the mountains, saying it's too far. He doubts if God can really save him. "He suggests that he escape instead to a small city nearby, which he hopes God will spare because it is small — not because it contains righteous people — so that he can survive. Out of his mouth, Lot proves himself to be fearful, selfish, and faithless."² But God is gracious. He grants Lot's final request, but he must hurry. The town became known as Zoar, a reference to its being small (*mitz'ar*).

Once Lot is safely out of the city, the angels can devote themselves to their terrible task.

G. Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed (19:23-26)

The sun had risen over the earth when Lot came to Zoar. Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife, from behind him, looked back; and she became a pillar of salt. Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace. Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived. (19:23-26)

As the sun rises that morning, with Lot safely in Zoar, destruction rains down from heaven. The verb "rained" links this text with the flood, when the whole earth was destroyed by water and Noah's family was saved. The destruction was total in terms of vegetation, inhabitants, and geography. No one escaped. The area of the Dead Sea "still reeks of sulphurous fumes, and asphalt deposits,"³ an apt reminder of the ancient event. But Lot's wife cannot resist disobeying the angelic instructions. She glances back. In that one glance, "she identified herself with the damned town"⁴ and forfeited her gift of salvation. Even more disturbing than the sight of Lot's petrified wife is her husband's silence. There is no mention of grief.

Abraham also rises early that day and returns to where he had interceded for his nephew. Looking down the valley, the terrible conflagration leaves him horrified. All that remains is a cloud of smoke rising from the incinerated cities. Now he knows that there were not ten righteous men left in Sodom. But he does not know that God has rescued his nephew because of his prayer. We can only speculate how long Abraham had to live with his grief before he learned the truth. But we need not speculate on the faithfulness of God who responds to our pleas and rescues the righteous, even against their will. "And if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men...then the LORD knows how to rescue the godly from trial and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment." (2 Pet 3:7, 9).

How will Lot and his daughters carry on after the destruction? Will the fear of God elevate their lives to a new level of purity? Will they give witness all over the land to a faithful God who judges unrighteousness and rescues those whom he loves? The story concludes with a tragic twist.

III. The Daughters Of Lot (Gen 19:30-38)

And Lot went up from Zoar, and stayed in the mountains, and his two daughters with him; for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; and he stayed in a cave, he and his two daughters. Then the first-born said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may preserve our family through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night, and the first-born went in and lay with her father; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. And it came about on the morrow, that the first-born said to the younger, "Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us

make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve our family through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. And the first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day. And as for the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi; he is the father of the sons of Ammon to this day. (19:30-38)

In the aftermath of destruction, Lot and his two daughters escape to the mountains and take refuge in a cave. Ironically, this is what the angels told Lot to do in the first place. But when he finally obeys, he is driven by fear, not obedience. Instead of living with a renewed commitment to purity, in his last recorded scene, Lot falls prey to drunkenness (much like Noah, but worse, 9:21), and is sexually overpowered by his two daughters. The daughters are just like their father. Motivated by fear, they place their trust in only what they can see. Sight sets the parameters of their world. Viewing the conflagration as a universal catastrophe, they see their father as the sole means of giving them sons to preserve the legacy of their name (and perhaps the whole race). Time is running out. Lot is old, so they must act quickly. Wenham captures the pathetic irony: "The angels have rescued Lot and his virgin daughters from the Sodom mob; now they sacrifice their virginity and their father's honor where there is no actual danger."⁵ The narrator painfully plays on his words. In this act of supreme "knowing," Lot "knew" nothing — no pleasure, no intimacy, no love. Was this a father's just punishment for his flagrant act of casting aside their virginity earlier? He had no idea of the magnitude of what he did then. Now he is the one who deflowers his daughters and doesn't even *know* it.

Their scheme works. Both girls get their wish. They become pregnant and give birth to boys. Moab ("from our father") and Ammon ("son of my kin") will be incestuous mirrors to Israel every time they look east across the river. They will grow up to become virtual enemies for their decrying lack of hospitality and their luring of Israel into harlotry (Deut 23:3,4). On that tragic note, the story comes to an end.

There is much to learn from this text, but let me conclude with four exhortations.

IV. Lessons From Sodom

A. Don't Be Fooled; There Is A Judgment

Don't be fooled. Those who flout God's holy standards and spurn his messengers will not escape judgment. We need to smell the smoke of Sodom, especially in an age that espouses but one value — "tolerance." The prophets used this event as an example to Israel and the nations of what would happen if they walked in the ways of Sodom (Isa 1:9; 13:9; Jer 49:18). But Israel did not heed the warnings. They went through the same conflagration not once but twice in their history (586 B.C., 70 A.D.). The apostles reveal that what happened with Sodom will one day be the fate of the whole earth (2 Pet 3:5-13). Don't be fooled: judgment is a certainty. Any delay is not due to God's tolerance of sin, but his patience, for he does not wish any to perish (2 Pet 3:9).

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:11-13).

B. Pray With Abraham

The second lesson of this text is that righteous people never

glory in judgment; they intercede in the face of it. The story of Lot confirms the fact that there will be many people in heaven not because their lives looked good, but because someone cared enough to pray for them. Abraham is the first one in Scripture to adopt the role of intercessor. Moses and many of the prophets will follow in his footsteps (Exod 32:11-14; 1 Sam 12:23, Amos 7:1-9; Jer 14:7-9; 15:1). People who do this take on the role of God himself, laboring within his holy council, suffering the groans of his warring emotions of compassion and justice. If you have a loved one living in Sodom, do not give up praying. You may never see the results while you are here on earth, but remember that God has much more compassion than you. Perhaps your loved one, like Lot, though he suffer loss, "himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15).

C. Love Like These Angels

Third, there may be times when we are called on to act like angels. God may send you on a rescue mission to a place you never wanted to go. But, armed with determined love, as Jude says, we are to "have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 23).

D. Linger Long With Lot

Finally, if after seeing Lot's rescue, you are tempted to say, "If I am forgiven, and heaven is guaranteed, why not compromise? What harm can a little pleasure do?" my advice is that you linger long with Lot. When we are tempted to look at the glitter of the world, the Bible takes us on a tour to the end of the matter. If you want to compromise, consider Lot, and the end of compromise. Lot was not happy to be living in Sodom. He was a tormented man who had to hide his true identity. After a brief fling with prosperity, he found the very world he had chosen encroaching on everything that was precious to him. Finally, evil became so aggressive it sought to violently overthrow his entire home. Confronted by the thought of losing the last vestiges of his own decency (being a faithful host), he became so confused he was willing to throw away his daughters, his two most precious possessions. He had no ability to do battle in the war of values. In the face of impending disaster he is deprived of all resolve to act with any kind of determination. His prayer life, in stark contrast to Abraham's, is shaped by fear, laziness and selfishness. His only request of God noted in the text is for God to compromise what he had already declared — for all the wrong reasons. Everything comes to an end in the cave of loneliness, as he is deprived of his wife, whose affections lived and died in Sodom, his home, and his community. Everything, including his passions, ends in ashes. It is ironic that a man who sought pleasure will die unable to feel anything. Lot must spend his remaining days as a grandfather constantly reminded that his grandsons were birthed through the incestuous compromise of daughters who felt nothing from their father. Do you like compromise? Then linger long with Lot. This is the end of compromise.

As we conclude, I invite you to enter into this powerful prayer of repentance, written by one of our elders.

(Poem and Literary Outline on separate sheet.)

1. Robert Alter, *Genesis Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 83.
2. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), 58.
3. Wenham, 59.
4. Wenham, 59.
5. Wenham, 61.
6. Wenham, 41.

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