Genesis 18:16-19:29 // The Good News of God's Judgement and Mercy

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[0:00] This evening is from Genesis chapter 18, beginning at verse 16, which conveniently is on page 18 of the church Bibles.

! So that's page 18, chapter 18, beginning at verse 16. When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.
Then the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.
For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.
Then the Lord said, The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sins so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.
[1:27] If not, I will know. The men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord.

Then Abraham approached him and said, Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?
What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?
Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?
Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike.
Far be it from you. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? The Lord said, If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.
Then Abraham spoke up again. Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty?
[2:43] Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people? If I find forty-five there, he said, I will not destroy it.

Once again he spoke to him, What if only forty are found there? He said, For the sake of forty, I will not do it.
Then he said, May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?
He answered, I will not do it if I find thirty there. Abraham said, Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?
He said, For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it. Then he said, May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more.
[3:47] What if only ten can be found there? He answered, For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.
When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

Thanks be to God for his word. Genesis chapter 19, at verse 1, which again conveniently is on page 19.
So that's page 19, Genesis 19, beginning at verse 1. The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city.
When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. My lords, he said, please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night, and then go on your way early in the morning.
No, they answered, we will spend the night in the square. But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house.

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[5:02] He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom, both young and old, surrounded the house.

They called to Lot, where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them. Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, no, my friends, don't do this wicked thing.
Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.
Get out of our way, they replied. This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge. We'll treat you worse than them.
They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door. But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door.
[6:23] Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness, so that they could not find the door. The two men said to Lot, do you have anyone else here, sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you?

Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.
So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city.
But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, hurry, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.
When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand, and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters, and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them.
[7:51] As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, flee for your lives, don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain.

Flee to the mountains, or you will be swept away. But Lot said to them, no, my lords, please. Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can't flee to the mountains. This disaster will overtake me, and I'll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small.
Let me flee to it. It is very small, isn't it? Then my life will be spared. He said to him, very well, I will grant this request to.
I will not overthrow the town you speak of, but flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it. That is why the town was called Zuwar.
[8:56] By the time Lot reached Zuwar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens.

Thus he overthrew those cities, and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities, and also the vegetation in the land.
But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Early the next morning, Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord.
He looked down, but towards Sodom and Gomorrah, towards all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.
So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.
[10:08] Thanks be to God for his words. Well, thank you very much, Jack, for reading so helpfully for us.

And it'd be a great help to me if you keep your Bibles open at pages 18 and 13. This, of course, is a very dark passage indeed in the Scriptures.
Let us ask God for his help as we come to think about what it means for us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, it's not easy to listen to a passage like this so heavy as it is with the theme of judgment. Grant that we would not harden our hearts, but that your Holy Spirit would apply these truths deeply to our hearts and minds. Help us to see the good news of the rescue you offer.
Would you impress on us the urgency of these things and our need for a Savior and draw those who are stumbling in darkness into the light of your word?

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[11:26] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I remember quite vividly about 20 years ago being down at the State Bar in Holland Street.

And we'd often head down there after the Friday afternoon guest lecture at the art school to continue our conversation over a drink with the guest lecturer.
And on this particular occasion, it was a well-known Scottish architect. He'd recently designed a major church extension in Edinburgh, and he had gone along, he was telling us, to the Sunday services there as part of his research.
And he'd been quite amused by what he'd encountered. He described the minister as a real fire and brimstone preacher. Scared the hell out of me, he said rather mockingly.
I remember thinking, hang on, I know that minister. He's a friend of a family. Hardly somebody I'd describe as a fire and brimstone preacher. A faithful minister of God's word.
[12:37] And just in case any of you here are wondering about this guy standing up here, speaking to you just now. Am I a fire and brimstone preacher? Well, you can decide for yourselves by the end of the service.

And you can keep your opinions to yourself. Thank you very much. But that phrase, brimstone and fire, actually comes from an older translation of chapter 19, verse 24.
It's a picture of God's judgment, fire and sulfur raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah. And it's become a rather dismissive expression in our culture.
A fire and brimstone preacher is someone to kind of be ignored and laughed at, someone whose message can be safely disregarded. And yet what's interesting when you think about it, we don't actually have a problem as a society with the idea of judgment.
Just to turn on the news this week, we want abusers to be held accountable. We want those who exploit, vulnerable to face justice. We want evil to be exposed and punished.
[13:45] So why are we so uncomfortable when the Bible tells us that God will judge the world? Well, perhaps it's because we like the idea of justice when it means other people being held to account.

But the Bible, in fact, chapter 18, verse 25, this evening tells us that God is the judge of all the earth. And none of us is exempt.
None of us gets to stand outside God's courthouse. And that's what makes these chapters so important. Sodom and Gomorrah, alongside the flood in Noah's day, are the Old Testament's two great pictures of divine judgment.
But they're not simply stories about the wicked being punished. They're also about whether anyone can be rescued when God's judgment comes.
And the New Testament tells us that these events point beyond themselves to the day when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead.
[14:56] So here's what I want us to see this evening. God's judgment isn't something that we're to be embarrassed about. Properly understood, it's actually very good news.

news. Because a world in which God never judges evil is not a world in which justice will ultimately prevail.
So let's look at what happens when the judge of all the earth comes to deal with human evil. And firstly, we're to take seriously the judgment and mercy of God.
And one of the things that we're confronted by in this passage is the extraordinary patience of the Lord. Last time, a couple of weeks ago, when Robbie was preaching for us, we saw Abraham with three visitors.
And as we discovered, one was the Lord himself and the other two were angels. And now the Lord lets Abraham in on the reason for their visit.
[15:59] So chapter 18, verse 20. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sins so grievous that I will go down and see if it's as bad as the outcry sounds.

Now notice that word, outcry. It takes us right back to Genesis chapter 4 where the Lord says to Cain, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.
Now it's a similar idea here. The evil and injustice of Sodom has reached such a point that as though the city itself, the walls of the city themselves are crying out for justice.
And the good news is that the Lord hears. He doesn't turn a blind eye to evil. He doesn't shrug his shoulders to injustice.

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He hears the cries of those who are being abused and exploited. And he will put things right. So if you're here this evening and you care deeply about injustice in the world, perhaps because you or somebody you love has been badly wronged, then this is very good news.
[17:16] The Lord sees your pain, sees your trauma, hears the silent cries of your heart. We have a God who cares about evil and injustice far more than we do.

And he won't let it have the final words. But notice too the care with which the Lord approaches this judgment.
He says he will go down and see. And the point of these two witnesses being sent to investigate is to underline for us that judgment is never arbitrary or impulsive.
No snap judgments from the Lord. No knee-jerk reactions. No trial by social media. So then we come to this extraordinary conversation between the Lord and Abraham.
The Lord tells Abraham what he intends to do, deliberately drawing him into the conversation, inviting him to respond. And Abraham does just that. He pleads for the people of Sodom.
[18:27] And Abraham's argument is essentially this, verse 24. Lord, what if there are 50 righteous people in this city? Surely you wouldn't destroy the righteous along with the wicked.

And then comes the question that right at the heart of this conversation, verse 25, end of the verse, will not the judge of all the earth do what is right?
And the Lord agrees. If he finds 50 righteous people, he will spare the whole city. But Abraham keeps pressing. What about 45?
40? 30? 20? Even 10? And every time the Lord agrees. And so what's so striking about this conversation, it isn't really a negotiation.
The Lord isn't trying to do a hard bargain with Abraham. He's initiated the conversation in the first place. He keeps giving Abraham room to ask for more.
[19:28] And it's as though he's inviting Abraham to discover just how far his mercy will extend. So before we even arrive in Sodom, we're learning something vital about the God we're dealing with here.

He hears the cries of those who suffer. He judges evil and injustice and he is extraordinarily patient and willing to show mercy.
He is both perfectly just and profoundly merciful. And we're going to see both of those things in action as the drama continues to unfold.
So let's keep going with the story. Chapter 19, the two angels make their way to Sodom and we're asking the same question that we're asking at the end of chapter 18, what are they going to find? How many righteous people are they going to find in this city?
And at first, things look quite promising. They bump into Lot, Abraham's nephew, who insists that they stay under his roof rather than crashing on a bench in the town square.
[20:35] Well, hospitality was hugely important back in those days. They didn't have any travel lodges or anything like that. Travelers were vulnerable and dependent on the goodwill and protection of those around them.

And Lot's willingness to take these strangers in is significant. It's indicative, I think, of an outworking of his faith. But then things take a very dark turn indeed, verse 4.
Before they'd gone to bed, all the men of Sodom surrounded the house. They called to Lot, where are the men who came to you tonight?
Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them. We're meant to be horrified by this scene. The whole male population seems to have turned out, young and old, from every part of the city, from every walk of life. And they're demanding that these visitors be handed over to them to be sexually assaulted.
[21:48] Gang raped, to put it bluntly. And we shouldn't imagine that these are young guys drunk from the wrong part of the city.

Think of the recent case in France of Giselle Pelico. Among the men convicted of abusing her were professionals, firemen, nurses, a journalist, a city councillor alongside labourers and workmen, men of different ages and backgrounds.
That's the uncomfortable reality of human sin. It isn't confined to some particular class of people.
And Lot's insistence, his insistence that they don't spend the night in the square, well what does that tell us?

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It suggests that this wasn't an isolated occurrence. So notice Lot's response. He dares to confront them.
He dares to go outside and meet them, shuts the door behind them and said, no my friends, don't do this wicked thing. And so we see the distinction between them, the men of the city, and Lot.
[23:13] Lot at least recognises this, that what they're proposing is abhorrent. He knows it's wrong. And that's an important reminder for us, because just because something is normalised in society, accepted, tolerated, even celebrated, it doesn't make it right in the eyes of the Lord.

But then Lot makes a truly, truly despicable decision. Look, he says, I have two daughters who've never slept with a man.
You can have them. Do what you want with them. Well, it's a desperate and deeply disturbing moment.
Lot, of course, is trying to protect his guests, but his response itself is utterly, utterly, utterly wrong. His moral judgment is badly clouded.
And the men reject him and turn on Lot. At that point, the angels intervene, they pull Lot back inside and strike the men with blindness. But the point of the episode is unmistakable. This is a city in the grip of sin, so deeply entrenched in wickedness that even when confronted with the evil of what they're doing, they refuse to turn back.
[24:40] So when God judges Sodom, we're not being asked to question whether that judgment is deserved. There's no two ways about it. The judge of all the earth will definitely do what is right.

And that is good news. Evil in our world around us will not have the final word. There will be an accounting. But the story also keeps showing us God's mercy.
In verse 12, the angels ask Lot whether he has anyone else in the city, anyone who belongs to him, and tell him to get them out. So even now, the offer of a rescue extends beyond Lot himself.
So verse 14, Lot goes to his sons-in-law, he says, hurry and get out of this place because the Lord is about to destroy the city. But they think he's joking, they hear the warning and dismiss it as laughable.
They carry on playing their playstations as though nothing is happening. It's very contemporary, isn't it? People around us, I dare see, scoff at the idea of a God who judges.
[25:51] Jesus himself draws attention to this warning in Matthew chapter 11. Jesus says, it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for the towns that witnessed his miracles in his time and still refuse to repent.

Now the principle is clear. the greater the light that we've been given, the greater the revelation, the greater the responsibility that we have to respond to the other.
That should make us stop and think, shouldn't it? Because we have the word of God in our own language. We have churches up and down our city that are preaching faithfully the gospel about Jesus.
just by being here tonight, just by being here, hearing God's word, hearing about the Lord Jesus, we have the opportunity to respond just by being here.
And if we therefore hear all that and dismiss the opportunity, still refuse the opportunity to escape God's judgment, then we're behaving, I'm afraid, with even greater folly than Lot's sons-in-laws.
[27:10] Those privileges that we have demand a response. But there's one more extraordinary moment of mercy, verse 15.

As dawn breaks, the angels urge Lot to take his wife and daughters and get out before the city is destroyed. But verse 16, when he hesitated, just think about that.
The warning has been given, the danger is imminent, and still Lot hesitates, he lingers. So the men have to grasp Lot's hand on the hands of his wife and daughters and lead them safely out of the city.
Why? For the Lord was merciful to them. Did you catch that? The angels practically have to drag them to safety, and the explanation isn't that Lot has finally got his act together, showed some remarkable strength of faith.
It's simply this, the Lord was merciful to them. What a wonderful picture of who God is. Even when Lot struggles to respond, the Lord doesn't abandon him.
[28:25] He reaches out, takes him by the hand, drags him by the scruff of the neck, as it were, and brings him to safety. But that mercy stands in stark contrast to what happens next.

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Verse 23, the sun's risen, Lot has reached Zohar, and then we read, the Lord rained down burning sulfur and Sodom and Gomorrah from the Lord out of the heavens, and the cities are destroyed, the people, the buildings wiped out, razed to the ground, a terrifying scorched earth scene.
Think Mariupol in Ukraine, Aleppo in Syria, and you get a bit of the picture. This is what it looks like when God finally judges human wickedness.
So what have we seen? A city whose wickedness deserves judgment, a God who sees evil clearly and judges it rightly, and a God who even as judgment approaches shows mercy to those who belong to him.
But secondly, we're to take seriously the cost of compromise. Now, my little brother was at university in Cambridge, and one of the touristy things that we did when we went to visit him was go punting on the river Cam.
[29:54] If you get the picture up there, it's definitely not a scene on the river Clyde, is it? Well, if you've ever been, you'll know these long low boats propelled in equal measure by Pims and Lemonade and someone with a long pole pushing along the riverbed like that.

And on one of the punting websites, there's a page entitled Things Not to Do When Punting in Cambridge. And it gives this warning.
Some customers attempt to use the edge of a river as leverage to disembark. This can prove disastrous, though it can also prove funny.
And occasionally, I suppose if you're lucky, you see exactly that, a hapless tourist trying to push off with one foot on the riverbank and the other on a boat that's drifting away.
And you can see what's coming next. There you go. You can't keep both feet like that. You can't keep one foot in each place for very long.
[31:00] Something's got to give. Well, I think there's something of that warning in Lot. Lot is Abraham's nephew, but the last time we saw Lot back in chapter 13, he was heading away from Abraham.

He'd decided that he was going to go over to the well-watered plain. He'd chosen what had appeared to him at the time to be the best option. And he was seeing things really through the eyes of the world rather than seeing it through the eyes of faith.
He was distracted by what the world had to offer. And he pitched his tent near Sodom. Perhaps he thought to himself, I'm just going to head over there and hang out and live with that bunch of non-Christians and it's going to be fine.
It's not as if I'm abandoning my faith. In fact, it might even be a great opportunity to witness to them. But that kind of thinking is very often naive.
Because there's a danger, isn't there? The danger of isolating ourselves from the people and the relationships that help us keep going and following Jesus.
[32:15] Of imagining that we'll be the influence on them rather than them becoming the influence on us. Now, perhaps you know someone who's a little bit like Lot.

Perhaps you are that person. Maybe you've been around church for many years or maybe you've just brushed up against Christianity recently, experienced something of Christian community, heard the gospel, seen something of what life of Jesus might be like, but you've held something back. You've made choices that gradually have taken you in a different direction, away from Jesus and his people. And often it doesn't happen through one big dramatic decision.
It's much more gradual and imperceptible than that. Just think about Lot's trajectory. He starts off and he's in a tent near Sodom, but gradually he gets closer and closer and bit by bit more and more he becomes immersed in this godless environment until by chapter 19 verse 1 we find him sitting at the city gate.
He's settled and he's become part of the furniture almost. That's the danger of compromise. And we can become so accustomed to living alongside sin that we no longer recognize how deeply it has influenced and shaped us.
[33:49] We can get swallowed up by the culture around us. And the real tragedy is that when the warning finally comes, when the angels say, get out, the city is about to be destroyed, the effect of all this time in Sodom is Lot can't quite bring himself to leave.

And so we read those chilling words again in verse 16 that we've seen already, he hesitated, he's humming and hawing, he's perched perilously on the fence. And if it weren't for the extraordinary mercy of God, the angels whisking him out like that, Lot would have been lost.

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But the consequences of this kind of compromised faith, the consequences on his family especially are going to be devastating. His sons-in-law think it's a joke.
His wife initially leaves the city but looks back against the angels' instructions and is lost. We're not told exactly why she looked back but it certainly seems to suggest a heart that wasn't ready to leave everything behind.
The chapter ends with a deeply, deeply disturbing and distressing account of Lot's daughters playing their father with wine and sleeping with him.
[35:07] It's a horrible echo of what happened earlier in the chapter. Back in verse 8, Lot describes them as two daughters who have never slept with a man.

But now, by verse 36, those same daughters have slept with their own father and become pregnant by him. It's a grim and shameful ending to the story of a family rescued from divine judgment.
moment. Now, we shouldn't imagine that every detail of this tragedy is the inevitable consequence of one decision Lot made back in chapter 13.
But the overall trajectory is unmistakable. He moved toward Sodom. He settled in Sodom. And the influence of this godless culture that he's immersed in became deeply embedded in his family and in his life.
That surely is a cautionary tale for all of us here. If we try to build our home too much in this world, if we become too immersed in the godless culture around us, with one foot in the world and one foot in God's kingdom, wisdom, we shouldn't be surprised when it comes at a cost to ourselves or our family.
[36:36] We may not abandon Jesus overnight, but bit by bit we can drift from Christian fellowship, can become increasingly comfortable with the things that God calls us to turn away from.

And more than we realize, we can become pressed into the mold of the world. So take seriously the cost of compromise.
Don't imagine that you can keep one foot in Sodom or one foot in Glasgow and one foot out indefinitely. Finally, we're to take seriously the good news of our Savior.
And one of the things that really strikes me about this passage is just how many echoes there are of Noah and the flood. Two very similar accounts.
Someone will be up in the slides in a little bit more detail in the service sheet. Really just scratching the surface of how many correspondences there are between the two passages. Two very similar accounts.
[37:43] Two cataclysmic acts of divine judgment upon scandalously sinful communities. And in both cases, God rains down, same word, rains down his judgment from the heavens.

In both cases, a door is shut to keep those being rescued safely inside. And in both cases, the rescue is followed by a dark episode involving drunkenness and profound shame within the family.
But alongside those striking and very deliberate parallels, there are two really significant contrasts.
And the first is that after the flood, God makes a promise.
He gives Noah the sign of a rainbow and he promises never again to destroy all life by a flood of water. But there's no such promise after Sodom.
In fact, the New Testament tells us that the judgment on Sodom points forward to the far greater judgment still to come. The destruction of Sodom is really a pale forecast of what is to come.
[39:00] But there's a second, a second big contrast that's particularly important. One of the key moments in the flood account is when the Lord remembers Noah.

Noah. And in chapter 8 of Genesis we read that God remembered Noah and acts to preserve him.
Well, there's an equivalent moment here in Genesis chapter 19.
Just have a look at verse 29. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered. He remembered who? Abraham and brought Lot out of the catastrophe.
Now that's interesting, isn't it? You might expect it to say that God remembered Lot. After all, Lot is the one who's being rescued.
But the narrator takes us back to Abraham, the man who pleaded with God that the righteous would not be swept away with the wicked. And Lot is rescued. Not because of his own impressive faith or obedience.
[40:10] You've just seen how compromised he is. But because God remembers Abraham. And I think that gives us just a little glimpse.

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No more than that. But a little glimpse of something that becomes much clearer as the Bible's storyline unfolds. See, our hope of salvation doesn't ultimately rest on our own obedience or performance, but on the obedience and intercession of another.
And that takes us to the Lord Jesus. Because Jesus is the righteous one who does what Abraham could never do.
He doesn't simply plead for the righteous to be spared. He gives himself to bear the judgment. but the guilty deserve.
So that as Paul puts it in Romans chapter 3, God can be both just, he can be both fair, and the one who justifies, makes right before him those who have faith in Jesus.
[41:21] At Sodom, the wicked are judged and the righteous are rescued. rescued. But at the cross, the righteous one is judged so that the wicked can be rescued.

Now, Jesus repeatedly warns us that judgment is real, judgment is coming. One day he will return and the whole world will stand before him.
but he also offers an amazing rescue. And if we're trusting in him, no matter who we are, no matter what we've done, if we're trusting in the Lord Jesus, we can face that day with confidence, not because of our own performance, not because of any merit that we might have in ourselves, but because Jesus has taken the judgment that we rightly deserve.
He's taken that upon himself so that when that day comes, we will be safe. Not because we deserve to be, but because of God's mercy secured for us through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.
And that, my friends, is very good news indeed for sinners like you and me. Let's take a moment of silence there to reflect on what we've had and respond to God in our hearts before moving straight into communion and the prayer of confession.
[43:10] Thank you.

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