

The Danger of Hearsay Evidence

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By Lenny Cacchio

LEE’S SUMMIT, Mo.—Theophany. That’s a theological word that means a manifestation of God in a way that is tangible to the human senses. The theophany referred to in this article is found in Genesis 18, where God and two other beings paid a visit to Abraham.

This encounter is a prologue to the well-known story of Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. There are a number of curiosities in this account.

- God appeared as a wayfaring traveler in the desert with two companions.
- God had dust gather on his feet.
- Abraham offered to wash off the dust.
- God sat down for a sumptuous meal.

The curiosity that interests me the most is found in verses 20 and 21:

Genesis 18:20-21: Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”

Read this for what it says and it looks like the LORD (Yahweh Himself) didn’t think He had the complete story based upon reports He was receiving, and therefore was unable to make a valid judgment about what was going on in those two cities.

The text says what it says, and it has to provide some interesting fodder for discussion among theologians—are there things that God doesn’t know?

But the point I want to pursue here is a more-practical lesson. It jumps out of the passage about how God does things, a lesson that we should take to heart.

Most of us have played a game called telephone. The game involves several people. The first person whispers a short story or phrase to the second per-

son in line. The second person's task is to retell the story to the next person in line, who then relays it to the next person, and so on. The person at the end of the line then recites the story or phrase to the entire group.

Every time I have seen this game played, the story at the end of the line is nothing like the story as recited by the first person in line.

This is why "hearsay evidence" is of questionable value in a court of law. "Somebody told me that somebody said" is hardly any evidence of anything. It's also how gossip, slander and character assassination wiggle their way into our relationships.

We can have all kinds of theological discussion about why God didn't seem to know exactly what was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah and why He felt a need to check things out for himself.

I would love to pursue that bit of theology someday. But the practical lesson we should take from this is the example He set.

Don't rush to judgment. Get the facts. Don't believe chatter you hear without verification. Be skeptical. Don't pass on what you hear on the telephone because it ain't necessarily so.