

Genesis 19:15-29

The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

This is yet another story from the Old Testament with which those who have been blessed to have been believers since childhood, are very familiar. It features Lot, whom we know to be the nephew of Abraham (Genesis 11:27). He was also a participant in the promise (Genesis 12:4). And he was a man blessed by God (Genesis 13:5). Finally, we know that he was someone who had suffered and been rescued (Genesis 14:12-16).

We also know that Scripture teaches that Lot was a child of God. He was described three times in only two verses as a 'righteous' man (2 Peter 2:7-8). Lot was not only considered 'righteous' but struggled to maintain that righteousness among wickedness. He was 'oppressed' and 'tormented' by what he saw around him (2 Peter 2:7-8). Yet, he lived many years in the most wicked city of his generation. Lot and Abraham separated before the incident with Abraham and Hagar, which occurred when Abraham had lived ten years in the land of Canaan (Genesis 13:11; 16:3). Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old (Genesis 17:1). Given that Abraham left for Canaan when he was seventy-five (Genesis 12:4), we can presume that Lot had lived in the cities of the valley near Sodom for at least fourteen years.

So, Lot knew of their wickedness. He knew their sin (v. 13). He knew of God's impending judgment (v. 13). He even warned others (v. 14). Yet, as we will see, Lot struggled to tear himself away from the city. As easy as it is from the comfort of our own viewpoint to judge foolish Lot, we must remember that we, too, compromise. We, too, are prone to wander the gray area of being in the world but not of it. And when it comes to finally renouncing sin, we, too, can hesitate.

Time to Leave

"When morning dawned" (v. 15), the angels prepared for Lot's salvation, for we can call it that, by insisting that he leave the city. That was where safety lay. Ironically so, for Lot had no doubt migrated to the environs of the city of Sodom because he thought he would be safer there than exposed alone in the countryside. The sun was rising. Lot and his family had probably not slept well, wondering if the crowd that had troubled them last night would return. But morning it was, and it was time to go.

Yet, there was a contest of wills. "The angels urged Lot, saying, 'up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city'" (v. 15). Lot had fallen asleep. He needed to be roused and 'urged' to flee, even though he understood full well the destruction about to overcome the city. We know that previously he had rushed out into the night to warn his sons-in-law of their impending doom if they chose to remain in the city. Now he, himself, needed to be urged to flee.

We find here yet another example of Lot's inconsistency. Remember that he had considered himself among the leaders of the town, but really had been offended by their depraved behavior. Now, though he knew the town was doomed, he could not bear to leave it. Lot struggled to tear himself away from the place and lifestyle with which he had become accustomed.

Yet, despite being urged, Lot did not get up and go. As the narrator puts it succinctly, “he hesitated” (v. 16). But why did Lot hesitate? Scripture gives us no explicit answer. We can recall that Lot was a worldly thinker (Genesis 13:8-10). When given the opportunity to choose where to live, he saw what was good for his flocks, not his soul. He saw the temporary advantages of a fertile land, and ignored the long-term effects of a spiritual desert.

Remember that when the abundance of their blessing and Abraham’s graciousness offered Lot the opportunity to decide where to live, he chose by sight, not by faith (Genesis 13:9-10). There was no mention of him praying and seeking God’s will. There was no mention of his asking the older, more mature Abraham, for counsel. He simply looked and chose. He thought only of this life, not the next. Lot was a short-term thinker.

Second, it seems apparent that Lot mingled with sinners for the wrong reasons (Genesis 13:12, 14:12). He began on the outskirts and ended in the city. Did his wife (who may have been from Sodom and certainly was no saint) urge the move into the city? Was it better for him to have opportunity to marry his daughters? Was it simply financially better to have more connections for marketing his flocks and herds? We are not told, but we may safely assume it was not a command of God, for we find no evidence of Lot’s work in Sodom as a missionary.

Though we are not told why he hesitated, we do know that he did. And at the most inopportune time. For example, when the Israelites fled Egypt,

“³⁷The sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. ³⁸A mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock. ³⁹They baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread. For it had not become leavened, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves” (Exodus 12:37-39).

The Israelites knew they had to flee, and to flee quickly. The Egyptian army was pursuing them. There was no time for delay or they would be captured and either killed on the spot or returned to slavery. Unlike Lot, they did not hesitate. They fled their destruction that awaited them if they lingered.

Optimistically, some commentators have suggested that Lot was simply paralyzed with fear, and that was why he hesitated. I think that explanation gives him too much credit. It seems more likely that Lot still struggled with being in and not of the world. He had grown too comfortable in the city, and could not give it up easily.

Whatever his reasons for hesitating, since he did so, the angels force him to move. “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” (v. 16). The night before the angels had dragged Lot back to safety within his house as the crowd pressed on the door. Now, the angels literally dragged Lot and his family out of Sodom. Note that in both cases in this passage where the

members of the family are listed, it mentions only the wife and daughters. His sons-in-law were, apparently, doomed.

Having taken Lot and his family outside the city gates, the angels insisted that he be on his way immediately. "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away" (v. 17). The angel's rapid-fire instructions are clear and concise. There was no time for Lot to respond. These were not suggestions. The angels were not offering counsel. These were commands. "Escape . . . do not look behind . . . do not stay anywhere in the valley . . . escape."

Mountains were typically a sanctuary or place of refuge.

When Rahab protected the spies, she advised, "¹⁵then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall. ¹⁶She said to them, 'go to the hill country, so that the pursuers will not happen upon you, and hide yourselves there for three days until the pursuers return. Then afterward you may go on your way'" (Joshua 2:15-16).

And it worked. "They departed and came to the hill country, and remained there for three days until the pursuers returned. Now the pursuers had sought them all along the road, but had not found them" (Joshua 2:22).

When David fled from Saul, he "departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it, they went down there to him" (1 Samuel 22:1).

So impactful was this experience, that David wrote about it eloquently,

"In the Lord I take refuge;

How can you say to my soul, 'flee as a bird to your mountain'" (Psalm 11:1).

But these mountains were no metaphor. The hill country was the only safe place from the destruction the Lord was about to pour out upon the cities of the valley. We must understand that the area to be destroyed was not Sodom alone. The entire area of the valley was to fall under God's wrath. This area was extensive indeed, and was the same beautiful area that was poetically spoken of when it had first attracted Lot. "Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere - this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah - like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar" (Genesis 13:10).

Bargaining and Concession

Astonishingly, Lot hesitated yet again as he bargained for a different refuge.

“¹⁸Lot said to them, ‘oh no, my lords! ¹⁹Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your lovingkindness, which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, for the disaster will overtake me and I will die; ²⁰now 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” (v. 18-20).

Lot seemed to think he could not safely make it to the mountains. So he began to bargain with the angels in a way that was reminiscent of Abraham and the Lord bargaining over the destruction of Sodom itself. But in this case, Lot’s motives were self-serving. He was concerned not about the inhabitants of the city, but about himself and, we hope, his family. He had gone from being reluctant to flee, to fearing he could not flee far enough. Again Lot’s vacillation was evident. First he did not want to leave, now he was not sure he could get far enough away.

Graciously the angels conceded to Lot’s request, though not without making the point (with some irritation, I believe) that time was of the essence. “²¹He said to him, ‘behold, I grant you this request also, not to overthrow the town of which you have spoken. ²²Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there.’” Therefore the name of the town was called Zoar” (v. 21-22).

Lot had based his request upon the insignificance of the town. Surely, Lot presumed, this little town was of no consequence. Surely, it can be spared for my sake. Again we are reminded of the logic of Abraham, who argued that only a few righteous ought to allow the entire city of Sodom to be spared.

Having allowed Lot to retreat to Zoar, the angels could then begin the process of overthrowing the cities of the valley. This concept “to overthrow” is often used in Scripture as implying total destruction.

“The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
But the house of the righteous will stand” (Proverbs 12:7).

This overthrow of the cities of the valley became emblematic of God’s judgment.

“²²Now the generation to come, your sons who rise up after you and the foreigner who comes from a distant land, when they see the plagues of the land and the diseases with which the Lord has afflicted it, will say, ²³‘all its land is brimstone and salt, a burning waste, unsown and unproductive, and no grass grows in it, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath’” (Deuteronomy 29:22-23).

“For the iniquity of the daughter of my people
Is greater than the sin of Sodom,
Which was overthrown as in a moment,
And no hands were turned toward her.” (Lamentations 4:6).

“¹¹I overthrew you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,
And you were like a firebrand snatched from a blaze;
Yet you have not returned to Me,” declares the Lord.
¹²Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;
Because I will do this to you,
Prepare to meet your God, O Israel” (Amos 4:11-12).

What was about to occur was simple act of divine judgment. This was catastrophic. This act of God would be remembered for generations.

God’s Destruction of Sodom

When Lot finally reached Zoar, the destruction could begin.

“²³The sun had risen over the earth when Lot came to Zoar. ²⁴Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, ²⁵and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt” (v. 23-26).

The destruction began after sunrise, but Scripture is silent on how long it lasted. And the description offered for such a cataclysmic event is brief. There are no details given. There is no count of the people destroyed. The emphasis of Scripture is not on Sodom, but rather on the divine nature of the judgment. Scripture makes clear the point that the event was caused “from the Lord out of heaven” (v. 24).

The language used reminds the reader of the Flood narrative. The Lord ‘rained’ from “out of heaven” on “all the inhabitants” of the plain. Thus the judgment of God upon Sodom and Gomorrah cannot be explained merely as physical forces. Perhaps an earthquake was involved, but that cannot be all. This was not a matter of lightning from heaven igniting the natural tar and oil deposits in the region, as some sceptical scientists and archaeologists have suggested. The emphasis of Scripture is on the Lord as the cause of the destruction, and that destruction coming from heaven precludes merely natural phenomena alone as the cause of the devastation.

The description of the elements of destruction are “brimstone and fire” (v. 24). Scripture informs us that the region was “full of tar pits (Genesis 14:10). So it is not difficult to imagine that God used the natural resources in the area as part of His method of destroying the cities. But such an assumption takes nothing away from the divine character of the judgment. The greater irony was that now the region was utterly destroyed. Not only the people and the buildings but even “what grew on the ground” (v. 25) was ruined. The totality of destruction is emphasized. The beautiful valley that had attracted Lot so many years before was now an uninhabitable wasteland.

As Scripture makes clear, the destruction of Sodom was sudden, and that, too became an important part of the narrative. Jesus, Himself, prompted His listeners that there will come another time when men, ²⁷were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; ²⁹but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:27-30).

In the cities of the valley that morning women were preparing breakfast, children were waking to play, men were being roused from their slumber to begin the day’s chores. Perhaps a wedding had been planned for that day. Perhaps a funeral was to be held. Perhaps a mother was in labor. The routines of life were going on as they had been for decades, with no more thought of the end of the world than the day before. It is chilling to consider the destiny of the wicked.

As they fled, Lot’s wife could not resist the temptation to look back. Thus, she too was destroyed in the judgment. Like Lot’s hesitation, Scripture gives no reason for her decision to look back. Perhaps she was from the city and turned to look at the destruction of her friends and family. Perhaps she did so out of affection for her home and belongings. In any case she directly disobeyed the commands of the angels, and these angels spoke for God. Thus she was without excuse, and she received the judgment due her.

The details of her destruction are not given. Perhaps she became trapped in the devastation from heaven as she lingered, much like those who died in the volcanic eruption of Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD 79. Yet we must not mistake the lack of detail for vagueness. This is neither myth nor allegory. Among other writers, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, written in the first century AD, the great Jewish historian Josephus claimed,

“Lot’s wife continually turning back to view the city, as she went from it; and being too nicely inquisitive what would become of it, although God had forbidden her so to do; was changed into a pillar of salt. For I have seen it, and it remains at this day” *Antiquities, Book 1, Chapter 11*.

Abraham Reflects

Finally, the narrative returns full circle to Abraham.

²⁷Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the Lord; ²⁸and 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. ²⁹Thus 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” (v. 27-29).

The smoke was real, but it was also a frequent term used in Scripture to record divine judgment.

“Smoke went up out of His nostrils,
Fire from His mouth devoured;
Coals were kindled by it” (2 Samuel 22:9).

“He opened the bottomless pit, and smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit” (Revelation 9:2).

Abraham stood where he had stood the day before. As before, he looked down on the valley in the distance. This time, however, instead of seeing a verdant landscape, he saw smoke. The flames were apparently not visible from such a distance in the daylight, but the smoke made it clear that not even ten righteous had been found in Sodom.

Scripture does not record any words of Abraham. Perhaps he was alone and had no one with whom to share his thoughts. Nevertheless, we can imagine his sorrow and disappointment. He knew God would have honored His promise to spare the city if the ten could be found. Thus, Abraham could not know if Lot had been saved. The scene, even from such a distance must have looked like the total destruction that it was, and unlike the time when Lot had been captured by the invading armies under the four kings, there was nothing Abraham could do to save him.

But we know that Lot was saved. And Lot was saved because of the intercession of Abraham. Poignantly, Scripture states that “God remembered Abraham” (v. 29). It reminds us when “God remembered Noah” (Genesis 8:1) during the time of the Flood. God’s grace toward Lot was the result of God’s commitment to Abraham.

Takeaways

There are many lessons to take away from this very familiar narrative. First, we can appreciate that God will ultimately judge sin and that God’s divine timetable for this divine judgment includes the preservation of all whom He has chosen to save. Like the angels, God is waiting for all whom He has purposed to come to faith in Him to do so before He unleashes His destruction upon the earth. The cities of the valley have been lost to history, either swept under the Dead Sea or disintegrated by time, but this narrative remains as testimonial both to the surety of God’s wrath and judgment of sin, and to His preservation of those whom He has chosen to save.

This lesson also offers a great lesson in the way sin works. Just as Lot began to live in the valley, he then moved to the city of Sodom, and eventually found it difficult to leave its comforts. The illustration is clear. If once we begin to make room for sin, our spiritual eyes become cloudy and our spiritual sense become calloused. Soon we excuse what we would have condemned. We become comfortable with what we previously would not have tolerated. As the demon Screwtape advised his nephew Wormwood, “the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts” C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

Finally, we must also remark on the consequences of Lot's choice to live in the cities of the valley. With every decision we make, we must consider not just the worldly advantages and disadvantages, but how that decision will situate us for continuing our required work in the kingdom of God. Lot's move there did no good for those in Sodom. He lived there years, it seems, without any positive influence. Not one of his neighbors, not one of the people with whom he did business, not one of his servants came to faith in God. It also did no good for those in his family. His future sons-in-law mocked him (19:14) His wife was unconvinced (19:26). His daughters were immoral and untouched by his weak faith. (19:32). We can take heed from Lot's example, of the importance of impacting those around us for the kingdom of God. Lot failed to do so because he compromised, and thus not only were the cities of the plain destroyed, but he lost everything in the bargain.

May we pray diligently for God's grace to remain steadfast in our faith despite living in a fallen world and among fallen people. May God bless us with wisdom and discernment, and allow us to further His kingdom by example. May God give us grace to "let [our] light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16). May we live in such a way that the only explanation for our behavior, words, and attitudes is the work of God in us.