

Genesis 19:1-14

The Warning to Lot

In speaking of the certainty of the wrath of God that would be poured out on false teachers, Peter wrote, “⁴For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; ⁵and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; ⁷and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men ⁸(for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), ⁹then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, ¹⁰and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority” (2 Peter 2:4-10).

It may surprise us to read of Lot being counted among the righteous. After all, he had been greedy and self-serving when his herdsmen and Abraham’s quarrelled over land and water rights. He had been short-sighted, at least, in choosing to make his home near the disreputable town of Sodom. And, as we will see in this passage, Lot struggled with being in the world without being of the world.

Though the subject of the narrative of Genesis has shifted from Abraham to Lot, the continuity of the narrative remains intact. The encounter with Abraham had taken place during “the heat of the day” (Genesis 18:1), and now it was “the evening” (Genesis 19:1). The scene has shifted from the countryside to the city. And the similarity of language of the narrative links the two accounts seamlessly. Consider,

Abraham was “was sitting at the tent door” (18:1)
Lot “was sitting in the gate of Sodom” (19:1)

Abraham “ran from the tent door to meet them” (18:2)
Lot “rose to meet them” (19:1)

Abraham “bowed himself to the earth” (18:2)
Lot “bowed down with his face to the ground” (19:1)

Abraham said, “please do not pass Your servant by” (18:3)
Lot said, “please turn aside into your servant’s house” (19:2)

The angels said, “where is Sarah your wife?” (18:9)
The Sodomites said “where are the men who came to you tonight?” (19:55)

Sarah “laughed to herself” (18:12)
Lot “appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting” (19:14)

Our narrative recounts the events of one evening. The angels have arrived after having left Abraham and God discussing Sodom's future. These same angels would destroy the city in the morning. In the intervening hours, these angelic visitors tried to save Lot and his family from the impending destruction.

The Visitors Arrive

“The two angels came to Sodom in the evening” (v. 1). Though the precise location of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah remain hidden, most scholars place them near the southern end of the Dead Sea. On the west side of the sea, the most favored site is Jebel Usdum, and on the eastern side the preferred location is Bab edh-Dhra. Each location has its proponents. Though a few scholars locate the cities farther north, the connection with Zoar (Genesis 13:10) supports a southern site, since Zoar was located in the Jordan river valley (Deuteronomy 34:3). Thus the distance from Mamre (where Abraham met God and His angels) to the northern edge of the Dead Sea is some eighteen miles, and the southern tip is about forty miles. That the messengers could cover either distance in a few hours (leaving after the meal served during the heat of the day and arriving in the evening) serves as further evidence of their angelic nature.

As the angels approached they found Lot “sitting in the gate of Sodom” (v.1). That Lot was at the gateway of the city, suggests that he is, or at least considers himself to be, among the leaders of the community. This is a clear implication of advanced social status for Lot. Scripture often affirms that the gates of the city was the place where the notable members of the community spent their time.

“¹⁸If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, ¹⁹then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown” (Deuteronomy 21:18-19).

“²Designate the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, ³that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood. ⁴He shall flee to one of these cities, and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and they shall take him into the city to them and give him a place, so that he may dwell among them” (Joshua 20:2-4).

“Now the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were sitting each on his throne, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them” (1 Kings 22:10).

Lot believed himself to be among the leaders of the town. As we will see, however, Lot's apparent social status meant little to the residents of the town.

“When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground” (v. 1). Perhaps Lot was sitting alone at the city entrance, though that seems unusual, since it would have been the main gathering place. More likely is that even here we see the lack of concern of the inhabitants of Sodom for the visitors. And Lot greeted them graciously, bowing before them. He also spoke deferentially to them saying, “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” (v. 2). He called them ‘lords’ and referred to himself as their ‘servant’ in his address.

Yet, the visitors did not immediately accept Lot’s offer, “they said however, ‘no, but we shall spend the night in the square’” (v. 2). Perhaps Lot had not been deferential enough. Perhaps they disapproved of their reception. Or they may have been wanting to stay in the square to confirm the ‘cry’ of Sodom. In either case, Lot “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” (v. 3). Lot’s insistence may be seen as either a sign of his enthusiastic hospitality or, more likely, an understanding of the people of the town and the vulnerability of the visitors if they remained unprotected in the public square.

But the meal Lot offered was a scant one. The visitors had arrived in the evening, so it was the evening meal to which they were invited. Yet it consisted only of unleavened cakes, hardly the banquet they had feasted on when they had enjoyed Abraham’s hospitality. While the unleavened bread itself was not inappropriate, it should have been accompanied by a meat dish (Judges 6:19). This could be explained by the fact that Lot was poor, but nothing else in the text suggests such a reality. And if Lot considered himself among the leaders of the community, he must have possessed some economic as well as social status.

Israelite law promoted protection and provision for travelers. This was not surprising since Israel as a people had been sojourners throughout its history.

“Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:10).

“If an alien sojourns among you and observes the Passover to the Lord, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its ordinance, so he shall do; you shall have one statute, both for the alien and for the native of the land” (Numbers 9:14).

“Then I charged your judges at that time, saying, ‘hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him’” (Deuteronomy 1:16).

Thus those who were in a foreign land were to be protected economically, spiritually, and legally. Lot was compelled by his culture to care for those whom he had greeted. That he did so sparingly may be due to the fact that Lot was simply being ungenerous.

Lot Tries to Save the Angels

Usually after the evening meal, people retired for the night. However in this case, “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” (v. 4). The cause of the commotion was quickly made apparent. “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’” (v. 5). The particular sin of Sodom was here revealed. Before, they had been called

“wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord” (Genesis 13:13), but here the nature of that wickedness and sin was declared unequivocally.

The text is clear and emphasizes the extent of the depravity in Sodom. Phrases such as “both young and old” call attention to the fact that these practices were generational. “All the people” and “from every quarter” add evidence to the argument that this was not the act of a few deviants, but rather the common practice of their society. Their sin was pervasive. The actions of the Sodomites toward the visitors amplified the depth of their depravity.

The question the crowd had asked was rhetorical. They knew precisely where the men were. That was why they had come to Lot’s home. They simply wanted the men brought out so they might take advantage of them sexually. There are those who have argued that sexual sin is implied rather than directly stated. The Hebrew verb translated “have relations” can also mean “to know” and is used nearly one thousand times in the Old Testament. And in only some fifteen of those instances does it refer to sexual acts.

Therefore, some contend that the sin of the Sodomites was their taking offense at Lot for inviting the strangers into his home. According to this argument, the Sodomites were angered that a mere sojourner such as Lot would take it upon himself to entertain the visitors, when that privilege should have belonged to the more illustrious men of the city. The men outside Lot’s door wanted to ‘know’ the men in the sense of getting to know them and resented Lot’s monopolizing their attention.

Such an argument, though, I think is naive and not consistent with the narrative. Though the phrase is rarely used to denote sexual activity, the fact that Lot’s response to the men was to offer his own daughters as sexual slaves drives home the point that Lot knew exactly what the men intended. They wanted sexual partners for the evening and not simply good conversation with the dignified visitors.

So knowing full well the danger his guests were in, Lot tried to mediate the situation. “⁶Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, ⁷and said, ‘please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. ⁸Now 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” (v. 6-8). Notice that Lot did not try to convince the men that their actions were wicked. He must have known all too well that such an argument would be ineffective. This was not a group wanting to reform their evil ways.

Lot did, however, plead with them to not act upon their sinful inclinations, “do not act wickedly” (v. 7). He referred to them as “my brothers” which may be no more than a polite form of reasoning, or it may indicate that Lot was trying to present himself as one of them. One of the tensions in this narrative is that Lot seems to think himself a reputable member of the community, though the men of the city certainly do not see him as such.

When his pleas went unheeded, Lot’s second course of action was to offer his daughters in lieu of the visitors. He plainly stated, “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” (v. 8). That Lot offered his daughters to the men seems unimaginable to the modern reader. Despite his need to provide hospitality for his guests, such an act seems beyond reason. Yet, we have seen Abraham do much the same thing when traveling in Egypt.

Finally, Lot made the argument for hospitality, arguing that the guests should be left alone “inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof” (v. 8). Thus, some have argued that Lot was compelled to keep his guests safe according to the social customs prevalent at the time. He was faced with a terrible dilemma. Either he must sacrifice his guests to the awaiting crown and thus violate the laws regarding the protection of strangers that have come under his roof, or he must sacrifice his own daughters to be violated. It reminds the reader of the story of Iphigenia.

Within one paragraph, Mosaic Law stated that,

“Do not profane your daughter by making her a harlot, so that the land will not fall to harlotry and the land become full of lewdness” (Leviticus 19:29).

“³³When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Despite the seemingly unsolvable problem presented to Lot in this situation, there is no way to excuse Lot’s behavior. Just as the actions of Abraham in Egypt were reprehensible, so too is this act by Lot. His concern over his own reputation as a gracious host superseded his concern for the welfare of his daughters. This lack of concern about appropriate sexual relations was not lost on the daughters. As we will see in a later narrative, Lot’s daughters proved none too particular about sexual sin themselves, as they would get their father drunk in order to have sexual relations with him so that they might keep their family name alive.

Thankfully, the offer of his own daughters was rejected by the men outside. “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” (v. 9). The men had no respect for Lot or for his opinions. Despite his own pretensions, Lot was not a leader among them. He was not even a resident. He was merely an alien, an outsider.

The actions of the men were both verbal and physical. They insisted that he move aside to allow them in and when, apparently, he did not do so they then pushed at the door trying to force their way inside. By defending the men inside his home, Lot had identified with them as visitors and renounced any claim to being among the citizens of Sodom. However much Lot may have wanted to see himself as one of the people of the city, he clearly was not.

Finally, the comment that they “will treat you worse than them” (v. 9) suggests that while the men would not accept Lot’s daughters as sexual partners, they would accept him instead. Lot’s fear must have been intense.

The Angels Save Lot

As the door began to give way, the angelic visitors intervened. Sensing that tensions had reached their limit, “¹⁰the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹They 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” (v. 10-11).

Repeating the descriptive language of the crowd, “both small and great” were rendered blind (v. 11). The angels had acted both to save Lot and to punish the wicked men of the town. The term used in Scripture for ‘blindness’ is used only one other time in the Old Testament. In that case, as perhaps in this, it does not refer to literal blindness but rather to ignorance.

“¹⁸When they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, ‘strike this people with blindness, I pray.’ So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. ¹⁹Then Elisha said to them, ‘this is not the way, nor is this the city; follow me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.’ And he brought them to Samaria” (2 Kings 6:18-20).

In that narrative, Elisha prayed that God might strike the invading Arameans with blindness so that he could redirect their paths to Samaria. They were figuratively, not literally, blind. So, too, in this case. For example, it is unlikely that even blind men could not find a door they had been pressing on a moment before.

Surely at this point Lot must have recognized that his guests were no common travelers. And safely back inside, the angelic visitors finally revealed their purpose in visiting Lot. “¹²The two 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; ¹³for 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’” (v. 12-13). Interesting that the angels mentioned “a son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters” (v. 12) but made no specific mention of Lot’s wife.

The angels were not omniscient. They did not know all things. As a side note, it is important to remember that angels are not God. Satan, as an angel, is not an equivalent of God the Father. These angels asked about the family. They had heard mention of the daughters, but did not know who else might be in the house.

Lot Tries to Save His Sons-in-Law

Perhaps Lot’s wife, sons, and daughters had been present when the angels spoke for Lot, upon hearing the news, immediately went out to warn his sons-in-law. Apparently the crowd had disbanded, for he “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’” (v. 14). The message he relayed was accurate and to the point. No doubt he was breathless, both from the struggle with the crowd and the running he had likely done to find his soon-to-be sons-in-law. They, however, did not share his sense of urgency. Laughing at him, “he appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting” (v. 14).

Some have noticed that the reference to sons-in-law seems incongruous with the phrase “were to marry” and have wondered as to the exact nature of the relationship of these men with Lot’s family. Two options present themselves. The first is that these men are married to other daughters of Lot than the two virgin daughters already introduced in the passage. That may be the case, but more likely is the second explanation. This holds that since marriages were announced in advance of the event, these men were betrothed to the daughters of Lot but had not yet consummated the marriage. A famous parallel can be found in the relationship between Joseph and Mary and the time of the Incarnation.

Though Lot perhaps saw himself as a leader in the community, he was clearly not seen as such by the residents themselves. Indeed he was not seen as such even by his future sons-in-law. The laughter they exhibited reminds the reader of the laughter of Sarah at the announcement that she would bear a son. Both seem understandable considering the circumstances. Just as Sarah could not fathom the idea that she would become pregnant at her time of life, so these two men cannot conceive of the end of the world as they knew it.

The point seems to be that Lot lacked credibility. Whether because his sons-in-law thought Lot was simply overcome by the crowd (if they were aware of it), or perhaps because he had always been an outsider despite his efforts to fit in, in either case, his sons-in-law simply did not believe him. The message was incredible and seemed ridiculous to them. They would learn differently in the morning.

Takeaways

How do we see Lot as ‘righteous’ and ‘godly’ in light of his behavior here, and in future with his daughters? Though he chose to live among the people of Sodom, Scripture insists that he was “⁷oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men” and “⁸tormented day after day by their lawless deeds” (2 Peter 2: 7, 8). Yet he lived there still.

I believe there are very few of us who do not have areas in which we choose to compromise. We try to walk that thin line between being in the world but not of the world. Occasionally we succeed. More often we do not. World pressures and our own flesh work against our sanctification. It is difficult to remain pure the closer we are, and the more we are involved with, impurity. For most there are unavoidable obstacles - we work in the world, our neighbors are not saved, our very culture is against us. And we are not called to monasticism. We are in the world for a reason, and that reason is to proclaim and to live out the gospel of Christ for unbelievers to hear and see.

We must remember that weak faith is still saving faith, and God knows and protects those who are His. We are not to judge. Let us pray that God will give us grace and wisdom to be witnesses for Him in the world and strength to remain untarnished by it.