

THE WASTED YEARS

by Ray C. Stedman

The 19th chapter of Genesis is one of the most fascinating in the Word of God, and yet it is a grim and fateful story. The world has always had a morbid interest in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hollywood has seized upon this theme, and made several films; it has all they are looking for.

In relatively recent times, science has taken a new interest in the Sodom and Gomorrah. The discovery of ruins lying under the waters of the Dead Sea are felt by many experts to be the submerged remains of these cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and the villages that clustered around them in the southern part of the Dead Sea plains. Rather than volcanic activity, some scientists have suggested that the cities were destroyed by lightning which set fire to the tar pits that saturated the area. That explanation would certainly serve this account in Genesis.

When we last looked together at the life of Abraham, we found him moved by the Spirit interceding for Lot in the city up on the side of the valley overlooking the Dead Sea region. The two angels that had accompanied the Lord on his visit to Abraham have gone on to accomplish the destruction of the cities and Abraham and the Lord were left alone there for that solemn soliloquy.

Now we pick up the story as the two angels come into the city of Sodom in the evening hours. They enter looking like ordinary men, with no wings or other identifying features. Although this chapter is rather long, there are really only two things to note about it. The first part gives us a view of Lot in the city of Sodom, and the rest of the chapter reveals how much of Sodom was in Lot.

First, we see Lot in Sodom:

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening; and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed himself with his face to the earth, and said, "My lords, turn aside, I pray you, to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise up early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the street." But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. (Gen. 19:1-3 {RSV})

The expression we find at the beginning of this account, "Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom," is an eastern expression which needs to be understood. This does not mean he was simply passing the time of day in the gate, watching strangers come into the city. This is a technical phrase which means he was the chief magistrate of the city of Sodom. His job was not only to give an official welcome to visitors of the city but to investigate the nature of any strangers who might come, and also to administer justice concerning any quarrels within the city. The nearest equivalent we have today would be the office of mayor. So this account opens with the picture of Lot as the mayor of Sodom, the chief magistrate of the city.

This is most interesting when we remember what we have read of Lot from time to time. Here is the success story of the Old Testament, the old familiar pattern of the immigrant boy from the foreign country who makes good in the big city. This is rags to riches, poverty to power, the local yokel making good in the big town. You can imagine the biographies being circulated through the city, autographed personally by Lot.

We first met Lot when he left Ur of the Chaldeans and moved to the city of Haran with Abraham. Although he was always subservient to Abraham, it seems very likely that Lot made a genuine response of faith to God on his own. Then, when Abraham came into the land of Canaan, Lot went with him. When Abraham went down to Egypt, Lot went down with him, and they came back wealthy men, although their time in Egypt was a time of great spiritual poverty and distress of heart for both.

When they returned to the land of Canaan, the first thing that happened was the quarrel between Lot's herdsmen and Abraham's herdsmen over the pasture rights. Abraham, though he had the right of first choice as the elder, gave up his right to Lot. That significant choice was the beginning of Lot's downfall. He looked out and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well-watered like the "garden of the Lord" and "the land of Egypt." It looked like both to him, and those two little phrases indicate the nature of Lot's choice. He had just come from Egypt, the place of materialism and commercialism -- easy wealth -- and this looked like such a place to him. In addition, it looked like the garden of the Lord.

Now the garden of the Lord is always indicative in the Scriptures of a place of divine fellowship -- as Adam and God walked together in the garden of Eden -- the place where there was peace of heart and fellowship with God. Lot looked at the city of Sodom and the plain and he thought this was the place where he could have both. He could make an easy living, advance himself, have all the cultural advantages of the city and still have fellowship with God. And he wanted it all. So we read, "he chose for himself"; that is, he excluded everything but his own desire. On that basis, he arranged his priorities -- to obtain wealth and to have fellowship with God.

In doing this, Lot disregarded the principle that runs all the way through Scripture and through human life. This is expressed by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," (cf, Matt 6:33a). The promise that goes with that is that all these other material things will be added. But we are to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Lot did exactly the opposite, placing materialism first. His first priority was to find a place where he could make a good living and advance his family's material advantages. With that, however, he wanted to have the kingdom of God and fellowship with him. We read the result as we trace this story through.

So he pitched his tent toward Sodom. He was not in the city yet, but he was near it. He was still in his tent; he was a sojourner in the land, and the tent marks his pilgrim character. But he pitched it just outside the city of Sodom in order to take advantage of all the cultural pursuits of the city. Then, in Chapter 14, we read that he was dwelling in Sodom. By the time of the invasion of the five kings, he had moved right into the city. And now, in Chapter 19, we find that he is the mayor of the town.

Now I want to be fair with this man Lot; I believe he meant to do the right thing. It is clear from the whole story of his life that though he wanted to get something out of Sodom, he also expected to put something into Sodom. He probably thought to himself, "Well I may do these people good. I may be able to win some of them from evil to faith. I can make money faster here than anywhere else, that's true, but I also may help clean up the city a little bit. It's a wicked place, and perhaps I can improve its moral life." When Lot moved into Sodom, this is undoubtedly what he had in mind. But before long he becomes the mayor of the town, the most respected man in the city, the leader of its civic life. This is where the angels found him when they came into the city on that eventful evening.

I would like to ask this successful man four questions. I think they will reveal to us how much there is of Sodom in Lot, how much the life of the city had affected him. The rest of the chapter will give us the answers to these questions. "Lot, you made a great success out of your life. You've won your way from a nobody to the mayor of the city. You entered as an unknown, a foreigner and you've achieved both wealth and honor here in the city of Sodom. My first question is this, 'How has your choice of life in Sodom affected your own inner life? You wanted both the personal advantages of the city life and fellowship with God. Have you found it?' The second question is 'How much have you influenced the city for good, Lot? How effective has your life been in changing the city's evils?' The third question is: 'How much money did you make there? How much material advantage was it to you to live there?' And the fourth question: 'What influence did the city's life have on your own family?'"

Now I think you will agree these are fair questions to ask a man who only wants to gain the best he can from the world and live a life of fellowship with God. The answers are all here in this chapter.

The first question is: "Lot how about your own heart and mind in the midst of that city: what effect did Sodom have on your spiritual life?" Here are the answers:

But before they lay down [that is, the angel visitors] the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please: only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door. But the men put forth their hands and brought Lot into the house to them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves groping for the door. (Gen 19:4-11 {RSV})

Notice the extent of the evil of this city. This is the reason God visited it in judgment. In Verse 4 it says that all the men of the city both young and old, all the people to the last man surrounded the house. Though the language is veiled here in order to make possible a public discussion of the hideous sin, nevertheless homosexuality is what all the people of Sodom were involved in. As you read this account you can see that Lot's reaction is disgust and shame. And this is no isolated instance; this was just a common ordinary event in Sodom. In the second letter of Peter in the New Testament, we have Lot's reaction to life in Sodom:

... righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds), (2 Pet 2:7b-8 {RSV})

That is a picture of discontent, of bafflement, of frustration. His soul was continuously vexed. He had tasted enough of the higher things of fellowship with God that he could never, never be satisfied with these sordid, ugly obscene and lewd things of Sodom. Where is rest and peace and quietness of heart? It is up there with Abraham in his tent under the oak tree. But here in the city of Sodom is this man Lot. What good is it to have luxuries and wealth and every material gain if the heart is continually filled with a great hunger that cannot be fed or satisfied? Lot's answer to that first question must be that his own life is grievously thwarted and blighted by the life of the city of Sodom.

How about question two: "Lot what did you do for Sodom? When you moved into the city you intended to influence the city, and you did; you became the mayor, the chief magistrate. Now, Lot, in that place of great political influence how many did you win? How many did you turn from evil to faith?"

Then the men said to Lot, "Have you any one else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or any one you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up, get out of this place; for the Lord is about to destroy the city." But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting. (Gen. 19:12-14 {RSV})

What a statement that is! With his very own sons-in-law he had no influence whatsoever. When Abraham had pleaded with God for divine mercy, there needed to be found only ten righteous men in this city for the whole city to be spared. But when Lot went out beginning with his own family, he could find none. His political power was great, but his spiritual influence was absolutely nil.

Let us come to the meanest question of them all: "Lot how much did you make while you were in Sodom? What do you have to show for your years there?" Here is the record:

When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city." But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him forth and set him outside the city. And when they had brought them forth, they said, "Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley; flee to the hills, lest you be consumed." And Lot said to

them, "Oh, no, my lords; behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me, and I die. Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there -- is it not a little one? -- and my life will be saved!" He said to him, "Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. Make haste, escape there; for I can do nothing till you arrive there." Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar [which means "little"]. The sun had risen on 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 Lot's wife behind him looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. And Abraham went early in the morning 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 behold, and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace. So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt. (Gen 19:15-29 {RSV})

If you want to know how much Lot made in Sodom, I suggest you make a trip to the Holy Land. Go and stand by the shore of the Dead Sea and look out over that lifeless, brackish, waste, the lowest and most desolate spot on the face of the earth, 1,300 feet below sea level, and listen to the lifeless waves lap the beach in an unending monotone of death. Nothing grows there, nothing lives, nothing moves in all that forsaken valley. How much did Lot win? He lost it all, everything. Here is the disastrous failure of this man. He was a good man who wanted to do right, but chose his own way and lost his peace, and his influence, and all that he had. Still, he longs for a city, even a little one. The life of the city has so gripped hold of his own heart that he has to have a city.

The last and most terrible question, then, is this: "Lot, what about your family? When you turned your back on the tent and went to live in Sodom, what happened to your children?" We have just seen how Lot lost his wife. Her heart was knit to the lusts and pleasures of the city and she looked back. Doubtless she was caught by the flames and burned where she stood. Her body was later encrusted with the salt as the winds blew across her and she became just a pillar of salt as described here. The Lord Jesus looked back on this incident and in a solemn passage of warning, he said, "Remember Lot's wife," (Luke 17:32). And now we have this account of how the filthy way of the city had become part of his daughters' thinking. The dreadful story is recorded in Verses 30-38:

Now Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; so he dwelt in a cave with his two daughters. And 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 all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night; and the first-born went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. And on the next day, 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 offspring 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. The first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites to this day. {Gen 19:30-38 RSV}

These two girls were virgins in body, but they were already debauched in mind. They had long since grown accustomed to obscenity and unrestrained luridness, so, up in the cave on the mountainside, they seized the thinnest tissue of excuses and the story ends in a foul orgy of drunkenness and incest. Lot had nothing but heartbreak and grief to show for the years in Sodom. The Lord said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it," (Matt 16:25a {RSV}). So Lot, trying to get the best out of both worlds, lost all and has become for all

time the picture of the Christian who is saved, "but only as through fire," (1 Cor 3:15b {RSV}). He has nothing but wasted years to look back on and eternity ahead.

I am sure you have seen many lessons in this story, but let me press just two of them home to you:

The first lesson I see is this: The hour of danger is when you first begin to choose. Young people, especially, often feel the pull to be like the world, wanting to be popular, and to have what everyone else has, and do what everyone else does. They want to be welcomed by their crowd and to be Christians as well. They desire fellowship with Christ, and a life of joy and power. Thus, many try to do exactly what Lot tried to do -- compromise, so as to have both -- and, like Lot, they have chosen for themselves, putting popularity and self first. Some young people, teenagers from Christian homes, are drinking, gambling, stealing, and lying about it at home. They are playing with sex as far as they dare to go, and sometimes further. They do it all because they want to be accepted and popular at school. At the same time they want also to be in church to find the Lord, have his blessing and fellowship.

The whole story of life and the Scriptures is that you cannot do both. No man can serve two masters. No man can walk down two dividing roads at the same time. If you are trying to live this way, surely, as you have chosen your own desires first, you will lose it all, just as Lot did. Unless you change your mind, and begin to actually put God first, before all else, you will continue in the very pattern that is traced out here, until you awaken one day to find it has all gone by. As Lord Byron wrote at the age of 29, after he had tried everything that life offered,

My days are yellow in the leaf;
The flower of the fruit of life is gone.
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone.

It is quite possible to fight your way to the top of the heap and then look back on a burned-out life, on empty, wasted, barren years. The hour of choosing is now, in youth, when you are young, when you are setting the direction of life.

The second lesson I get from this is that when you attempt to gain the best of both worlds, you destroy others besides yourself. What was the greatest pang in Lot's heart when he awoke there in the cave in the mountains and learned all that had happened? Do you think it was grief over his lost wealth, his vanished honor, his troubled mind? Do you not think that the greatest, deepest wound of all in that man's heart was the recognition of what he had done to his loved ones in Sodom, his little girls, his wife?

You who are parents are being watched by your children, and they see your outward respectability, your desire to be right and to do good. But they also see, in some of you, that the deepest thing in your life is to get gain or to enjoy pleasure. They see that you will quickly sacrifice a prayer meeting for a night out, that you are always willing to take a bigger salary, regardless of what it may do to the family in terms of new conditions or new circles of friends. They see that the things you sacrifice for, and are willing to skimp and save for, are not missions, or the church, or the work of God, but a new car, or a color television set, or nicer furniture, or a longer vacation, or a pretentious home. They are watching and they see all this.

Bit by bit they lose interest in the Bible, Sunday School, and church. They resolve to get ahead in the world and win the respect of Sodom no matter what moral restraint they have to throw overboard to do it. This is why we see the tragedy of Christian homes in which children are turning from God. And the sorrow you will carry to your grave, the deepest sorrow of your heart will be that, though you still have your own faith, yet because of your compromise, you have lost your children. This tragic story of Lot is taking place right here and now, in the modern Sodom and Gomorrah in which we live.

Remember, it does not have to be so. Yonder on the hill is Abraham whose whole life principle was to let God choose and to be satisfied with that choice though it meant a tent all his days. His first question was never, "How much will I make? but, "Will it destroy my tent and my altar? Those are the precious things in my life and I want nothing to do with anything which destroys my sense of pilgrimage, my sense of not belonging

here, and my fellowship with the living God." In the end, Abraham gained the whole land, and all that Lot possessed, and more besides, and he shall inherit the earth, according to the Scriptures, "for he looked for a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God," {cf, Heb 11:10}.

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