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THE TRAGEDY OF WORLDLY BELIEVERS

Genesis 19:1-29

By

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Genesis Lesson 40

The Tragedy Of Worldly Believers Genesis 19:1-29

Pastor John MacArthur tells of reading a book that told of a pastor who had been sent to prison for robbing 14 banks to finance his numerous engagements with prostitutes. The author of the book was convinced that the man was a true Christian. MacArthur writes, "Call me old-fashioned, but I think it is fair to raise the question of whether someone who regularly robs banks to pay for illicit sex is truly saved!" (*Faith Works* [Word], p. 127.)

As you read the story of Lot in Genesis 19, the same question arises: Was Lot truly saved? If all we had to go on was the Genesis record, I would vote no. But, the Apostle Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, calls him a righteous man, "oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men," whose "righteous soul" was "tormented day after day with their lawless deeds" (2 Pet. 2:7, 8). God, who alone knows the hearts of every person, knew that Lot had been justified by faith (as Abraham was, Gen. 15:6). Even though he was greatly tainted by Sodom's wickedness, he did not participate in it. Apparently Lot's conscience troubled him at what he saw around him, although not enough to cause him to flee on his own. He tried to restrain the evil men from their intended sin against the heavenly visitors. Although he had to be dragged from the city to escape its destruction, he did obey by not looking back. But he suffered tragic consequences for his conformity to this evil world. Lot's life teaches us that ...

When believers live in conformity to this corrupt world, tragic consequences result.

Lot had moved to Sodom to pursue the good life (Gen. 13:10). He had done well financially. He had a house in a prosperous city (Ezek. 16:49). He may have had a seat on the city council, as seen in his sitting in the gate (comparable to city hall). But he ends up escaping with the clothes on his back, losing his wife, and hiding in a cave with his two daughters who make him drunk and commit incest with him so that they can have children. Lot is a sad

picture of a man who sought to gain his life, but lost it. He was saved by the grace of God, but saved so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:15)--singed, stripped of every-thing, traumatized by the severe discipline of the Lord.

I fear that there are many believers in our day who are vainly trying, like Lot, to live for the best of both worlds. They have been told by modern evangelists what Jesus will do for them in the here and now: He will help you overcome your personal problems, reach your goals, succeed in business, in marriage, and all of life. They also throw in heaven as an added bonus, although it doesn't sell as well as the lure of success. So people sign up for success with Jesus, not realizing that He promised trials and hardships in this life. In the Bible, the main reason for trusting in Christ is that He delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10), of which God's judgment on Sodom is mild by comparison. If we would see the world for what it is, we might not be so quick to live for the vain things it offers.

1. The world is thoroughly corrupt.

Sodom shows us the world without God. On one level, it is an ugly, repulsive picture. It was a city where it wasn't safe to be on the streets after dark, where not only the young men, but even the old (19:4) were living to satisfy their lusts, even if it meant homosexually raping two visitors. But on another level, Sodom, like our society, had its attractive side. It was sophisticated and prosperous. "She and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, ..." (Ezek. 16:49). The apostle John says that the world entices us with "the craze for sex, the ambition to buy everything that appeals to you, and the pride that comes from wealth and importance" (1 John 2:16, *Living Bible*). So even though we know from the Bible that the world is corrupt and under God's judgment, it still has its appeal.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah condemn Israel for acting like Sodom, in that they not only indulged in evil, but they openly encouraged it and didn't even try to conceal it (Isa. 3:9; Jer. 23:14). When a society openly flaunts sin, it has become thoroughly corrupt. When it openly accepts and practices homosexuality, it is a sign that God has given that society over to degrading passions (Rom. 1:26-27). It is in the final stages of corruption. Even when

the angels struck them blind (the Hebrew word means a temporary, confused daze), instead of repenting, they wearied themselves stupidly trying to persist in their sin (19:11). They remind me of our wicked society which, when struck by the AIDS plague, encourages everyone to have safe sex, but continues full bore in its sin without a thought of God or repentance.

What we need to keep in mind is that though this corrupt world has its enticing side, it is doomed for destruction even as Sodom was. Lot was living in and was conformed to this corrupt world. But before we point our finger at Lot, we need to realize that ...

2. Many Christians live in conformity to our corrupt world.

Like Lot, much of the American church has moved into downtown Sodom. We're so surrounded by its stench that we don't notice it any more. W. H. Griffith Thomas observes, "A ship in the water is perfectly right, but water in the ship would be perfectly wrong. The Christian in the world is right and necessary, but the world in the Christian is wrong and disastrous" (*Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* [Eerdmans], p. 174.)

The solution is to recognize the signs of corruption and "don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within" (Rom. 12:2, Phillips). To recognize and resist the signs of corruption and to be renewed in our minds, we've got to saturate ourselves with God's Word. While there are many marks of conformity to the world, our text reveals six. You can test yourself, to see how much water you've let into your ship, perhaps without even knowing it.

SIGNS OF CONFORMITY TO THE WORLD:

(1) *You're living for the same goals as the world.* Lot moved to Sodom for the same reason other people moved to Sodom: to get ahead financially. He didn't go there to reach Sodom for God. He went there to get rich just like everyone else. But Paul warned: "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:9). Wrong goals!

Tom Sine has observed that often the only difference between Christians and their pagan neighbors is that we hang around church

buildings a little more. We've reduced Christianity "to little more than a spiritual crutch to help us through the minefields of the upwardly mobile life. God is there to help us get our promotions, our house in the suburbs, and our bills paid. Somehow God has become a co-conspirator in our agendas instead of our becoming a co-conspirator in His" (*Christianity Today* [3/17/89], p. 52). Each of us needs to ask, "How are my goals in life different than those of the guy next door who doesn't know Jesus Christ?" The Lord said that unbelievers eagerly seek for material prosperity, but His followers are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:31-33).

So check out your goals. If, like everybody else in the world, you're just living to become financially secure, to make a comfortable living, you're being conformed to the world. If you're living for the world's goals, sooner or later you'll be tainted by the world's moral corruption.

(2) *You're expedient in morals.* At first, it looks as if Lot has avoided the moral pollution of Sodom. When the men of the city try to force the two visitors outside, Lot goes out and says, "Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly" (19:7). But what he says next is unbelievable: He offers them his two virgin daughters to rape as they please (19:8)! He was trying to prevent one awful sin by suggesting another! He was setting aside morality because of a pressing emergency. He wouldn't normally sacrifice his daughters, but what else could he do? His daughters learned from him (19:31-38); once they saw their situation in the cave as an emergency, then getting their father drunk and getting pregnant by him was not a moral problem. What else could they do in such a predicament?

It's easy to have moral standards when the pressure is off. But what about when the pressure is on? Then it's easy to make up excuses for why what formerly was wrong is now O.K. What is wrong for everyone else is all right for you, because of your unique situation. Look out! If you change your morals to adapt to the situation, you're blending in with the world!

(3) *You're more concerned for your status than for your family.* Lot was willing to sacrifice his daughters to save his guests because there was a strong social custom which said that you had to protect those who came under your roof as guests. But in Sodom, there wasn't

much social stigma connected with sexual immorality. So to protect his status in the community, Lot tried to protect his guests at the expense of his daughters.

I'm sure none of us would do what Lot did, but we often do other things to protect our status at the expense of our families. We work long hours to try to succeed financially, even though it means neglecting the family. Why do we do that? We want the status that comes from success. What do you think of when you hear that someone is successful? That he raised his family to fear the Lord or that he made it financially? Success with your family just doesn't carry the same weight in our culture as financial success. When we buy into that view of status, we're being conformed to the world.

(4) You're not respected by the world for your beliefs. In all these years that Lot had lived in Sodom, there may have been a few times when he had tried to tell them about God. But now when he weakly tries to tell the Sodomites they're wrong, they don't respect him (19:9). He doesn't even have any credibility with his future sons-in-law, who think he's joking about God judging Sodom (19:14). The reason they didn't believe him was that it was so out of character for him to get alarmed about spiritual matters. For years he had lived quietly in Sodom, pursuing the same goals as everyone else. So when he "gets religion," nobody believes him.

Of course, there always will be mockers in the world. No committed Christian will win a popularity contest on the job. But there's a difference between being liked and being respected. When the world doesn't respect you for your Christian stand, it may be because you've lived like them for so long that it seems out of character for you to suddenly be so concerned about God and morality. The world may not like your viewpoint, but if you live consistently before them, usually they will respect you.

(5) You're not sure you want to give up the world, even when it's going to cost you your life. Lot had to flee so that he wouldn't be destroyed with that wicked city. And yet he hesitated (19:15- 16)! He couldn't have saved anything if he had remained behind. He would have lost even his own life; and yet he hesitated. It reminds me of the gag Jack Benny used to do, where a robber sticks a gun in his face and

says, "Your money or your life!" Jack hesitates. The gunman snarls, "Well?" Jack says, "Don't rush me! I'm thinking about it."

Why did Lot hesitate? Because, as Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). Your heart always follows your treasure. If your treasure is in your things, then you won't want to give them up, even if it costs you your life to hang on to them. The doctor may tell you that if you keep working at the pace you're going at now, you'll have a heart attack. But you're not sure you want to slow down, even though it will cost you your life, because you want all the things you can get with your money. That's a sign of conformity to the world.

(6) You attempt to keep a little bit of sin in your life, even when God is dealing severely with you. Lot and his wife and two daughters reluctantly leave Sodom, dragged out by the two angels. The angels urgently tell him to flee for his life, and incredibly, Lot wants to barter with them to keep a bit of his old way of life intact. He thanks them for their mercy in saving him, but then he protests that he can't flee to the mountains as they tell him to do. That would be just a bit too much. Instead, he wants permission to go to a small town nearby, the implication being that since the town was small (Zoar means "small"), its sins won't be too bad. Derek Kidner observes, "Not even brimstone will make a pilgrim of him: he must have his little Sodom again if life is to be supportable" (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 135). Note that God didn't prevent him. The Lord will let you hang onto your sinful way if you insist on it.

It's easy to do as Lot did. You become a Christian, and God begins to confront you with things in your life that have to go if you want to follow Him. You can find yourself scrambling to preserve as much of the old life as possible, even while God is in the process of stripping you of it: "Lord, I'll go to church on Sunday morning; just let me spend the rest of my week as I choose. I'll even give 10 percent, just so I can spend 90 percent as I please. I'll be outwardly moral; just let me indulge in my mental sins. I'll give up Sodom; just let me move to Zoar."

What happens when believers live like the world?

3. When believers live in conformity with the world, it takes a terrible toll.

Who can say what would have happened if Lot had moved to Sodom with a missionary mind-set instead of with a monetary mind-set? Perhaps God would have worked a revival and many in Sodom could have been saved (Matt. 11:23). But as it was, Sodom was destroyed. Lot lost everything he had been working for--his house, his flocks, and his wealth all was destroyed in an instant. Not only that, he lost his wife. Probably she lingered behind, her heart not ready to let go of the good life in Sodom. Overcome by the fumes, she was instantly encrusted with the mineral deposits that fell from the sky, much like the people of Pompeii were entombed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

It is possible that Lot lost other sons and daughters who did not follow him out of the city. The two daughters who were dragged out by the angels had been irreparably tainted by Sodom's moral corruption, as seen by their incestuous degradation with their father. So Lot, who tried to gain it all, lost it all. By the grace of God and by the skin of his teeth, Lot was saved. But his life and his family's lives were wasted from an eternal point of view.

This section of the story ends with a poignant scene. Abraham returns to the place where he had pled with the Lord. He looks down and silently gazes on the smoke rising from Sodom's destruction. We aren't told what he thought as he looked. Except for the fact that the story of Lot is in the Bible, we don't know whether Abraham ever found out whether his prayers for his wayward nephew were answered, so that Lot was rescued before destruction fell. But as Abraham stood there and looked at this once-prosperous city laid waste by the just judgment of God, he must have thought, "What a waste!"

Conclusion

A Presbyterian pastor reported that he was talking with a colleague about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. She said, "Well, if that's the way God really is, then I'm not going to believe in Him!" That's strange logic! If God is a holy God who pours out His wrath on unbelieving sinners, then we had better believe in Him!

You may not like the idea of a holy God who judges unrepentant sinners. But your not liking it doesn't change who God is!

The fact is, you cannot believe in Jesus Christ, even as merely a good teacher, and not believe in the awful terrors of hell, because Jesus spoke often and plainly about it. In fact, Jesus used this story of Sodom's destruction, which overtook them as they went about their daily routines, to warn us of God's final judgment. He said, "But on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.... Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:29-30, 32).

Jonathan Edwards, in a sermon on the text, "Remember Lot's wife," points out the numerous descriptions of hell given in Scripture: blackness of darkness, a never-dying worm, a furnace of fire, a lake of fire and brimstone, etc. He explains that the reason so many metaphors are used is because none of them are sufficient to represent the awful misery of that place. He then states,

You have therefore much more need to make haste in your escape, and not to look behind you, than Lot and his wife had when they fled out of Sodom; for you are every day and every moment in danger of a thousand times more dreadful storm coming on your heads, than that which came on Sodom, when the Lord rained brimstone and fire ... out of heaven upon them; so that it will be vastly more sottish in you to look back than it was in Lot's wife. (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:66.)

There were probably many in Sodom who said, "If that hypocrite Lot is a believer, then I don't want any part of it." They perished in their sin. Perhaps others thought, "I'm a better person than that phony Lot," and maybe they were better. But they perished that awful day. Others said, "I believe in a God of love, not a God of judgment." They found out that their belief didn't change who God is. They perished. The only ones who were saved were those who were the objects of God's compassion (19:16), who heeded the urgent warning of the angels and fled for their lives.

I once preached a funeral service where the family had printed on the memorial bulletin John 3:16. But it was printed as follows: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life." But they left out some crucial words: "whoever believes in Him *should not perish*,

but have eternal life." Either you have eternal life through faith in Jesus or you shall perish! I urge you as the angels urged Lot, "Escape for your life!" Flee to Jesus Christ and you will not perish in the day of God's judgment!

Discussion Questions

1. Is it wrong to pursue wealth (consider 1 Tim. 6:9)? How should a Christian balance seeking career success with Matthew 6:33?
2. Should Christians seek to move from an especially wicked city? How can we raise godly children in our corrupt society?
3. Are there two classes of believers, the "carnal Christian" and the spiritual? What errors have resulted from this teaching?
4. Should we warn unbelievers of hell when we tell them of the gospel? How urgent should we be in our appeal to them?
5. Can a worldly Christian have assurance of salvation?

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