

FORFEIT YOUR LIFE TO SAVE IT

SERIES: SEEKING FIRST THINGS FIRST

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In this series, we have been contrasting the lives of Abraham and Lot. In the first message ([Discovery Paper #4627](#)), we considered Genesis 13 and the circumstances under which the two men separated from one another. We noted that Abraham trusted God to give him what was best and that Lot unwisely trusted in his own ability to decide what was best.

In the second message (Discovery Paper #4628), we examined Genesis 18 and 19 and contrasted the heavenly visits received by Abraham and Lot. We observed that Abraham, despite his failures, had chosen to serve only one master. Lot, tragically, had two masters, and he lost everything as a result.

In this message, we will see how the story ends. Jesus said, "whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) The ones who will be saved are the ones who lose their lives for Christ, who are willing to trust in him for salvation. The reason we can't save ourselves is because we are the problem. We experience failure not because circumstances have conspired against us but because we are inadequate. Our sin nature inclines us to do wrong and harmful things to ourselves and those around us.

Paul wrote, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:18-19, 24) What a wretched man I am. I make my own problems, and all my efforts to fix them make them worse.

Now let's consider Lot's efforts to fix things, and his determination to resist the way out provided by God. We may see ourselves in this story, and it is my hope that we will be encouraged to faith by what we read. Turn to verse 15 of Genesis 19:

With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished."

When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them.

As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, "Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!"

But Lot said to them, "No, my lords, please! Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can't flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I'll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it--it is very small, isn't it? Then my life will be spared."

He said to him, "Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it." (That is why the town was called Zoar.)

By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah--from the LORD out of the heavens.

Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities--and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

Three things are apparent in this account of Lot hearing angelic instruction and his foolish response to it. We are often guilty of similar foolishness.

First of all, we resist what is urgent, as Lot did. In verse 15, the urgency is very clear. The angels insisted, without any uncertainty in their words, that it was time to go. Immediately. Now. Hurry. But Lot hesitated. He dug in his heels. Scripture tells us, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Psalm 95:7d-8b) and "...choose this day for yourselves whom you will serve..." (Joshua 24:15). The time for gathering information and weighing options is past. Too often when it is quite clear what our hearts' attitude ought to be and what our actions ought to be, we find reasons to hesitate nonetheless.

Avoidance, foot-dragging, alternatives to obedience--these are really just ways of saying no to God without the difficulty of admitting it to yourself, aren't they? Perhaps you need to go to someone whom you've hurt, to humble yourself before that person and ask for forgiveness. Today is the day to do it, but it is easier to wait. There's always tomorrow. Perhaps today is the day to start some spiritual discipline, to take up a course of prayer and Bible reading and healthy fellowship. Perhaps this is the day to share the gospel with my family or coworkers. But another day would be more convenient. Maybe next week, or next month There are always reasons to hesitate starting something that is appropriate or ending something that is inappropriate. Proverbs 24:30-34 has a picturesque way of saying this:

**I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks**

**judgment;
thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest--
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.**

Just a little bit. Small hesitations. Avoidance on a minor scale repeated many times. When the angel says, "Hurry," we hesitate, and we are left with ruined fields and a dissipated life. Many of us would jump at a chance to take advantage of some great opportunity in the stock market, but we have difficulty moving quickly in the things of God.

The second thing to note in terms of Lot's interaction with these angels is not only do we resist what is urgent, but we obscure what is clear. The angels say, "Hurry! Don't stop anywhere in the plain." Their instructions are very clear, but Lot can't believe they mean what they're saying. He is certain this will be too difficult for him, and the longer he talks, the less clear he seems to be about their instructions. "I'll go to the little city. If I go to the mountains, I'll die, but as long as I leave the big, wicked cities, I'll be saved." What happens when we obscure things that are quite clear to begin with and listen to our own voice instead is that we can't remember what the clear word was. We can create confusion in our own mind by trying to avoid the obvious.

We resist what is urgent, we obscure what is plain, and thirdly, we minimize what is important. In verse 20, Lot twice emphasizes the smallness of the city to which he wants to flee. He seems to think that Sodom is wicked because it is large and that his addictions and sin are a problem only in such a place. What he really wants is a manageable version of his problems. What he wants is a small city where he can retain control of things, where he can indulge in idolatry and wickedness on a small enough scale to keep it from being overwhelming. Righteousness demands that we take up our crosses and crucify what needs to die. It is foolish to attempt sin management in Zoar.

Scripture doesn't explicitly say why Lot's wife died, but verse 23 may give us a clue. It was dawn when the angels told Lot to flee, but Lot spent so much time dragging his feet that, by the time he reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Lot's lack of immediate obedience gave his wife time to remember and long for all the things she would be leaving behind. Lot's hesitation contributed to his wife's death because it helped intensify her attraction to the life she had in Sodom.

Let's continue now with verse 27.

Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.

So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.

Lot and his two daughters left Zoar and settled in the mountains, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar. He and his two daughters lived in a cave. One day the older daughter said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is no man around here to lie with us, as is the custom all over the earth. Let's get our father to drink wine and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father."

That night they got their father to drink wine, and the older daughter went in and lay with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up.

The next day the older daughter said to the younger, "Last night I lay with my father. Let's get him to drink wine again tonight, and you go in and lie with him so we can preserve our family line through our father." So they got their father to drink wine that night also, and the younger daughter went and lay with him. Again he was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up.

So both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their father. The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today. The younger daughter also had a son, and she named him Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.

The end of Lot's story is shocking. Most people who resist God don't end up in such obviously terrible circumstances. In fact, one of the difficulties of faith is that wickedness often seems to go unpunished. Most wicked cultures don't have fire and brimstone rain down from heaven on them. However, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed precisely to make a point, to show us God's truth and the ultimate outcome of sin. Jesus quoted the story of the destruction of Sodom as a way of talking about the end of the world and the final judgment.

The account of Lot's degradation also makes a point. He was a drunken ruin at the end of his life, despised by his daughters, whom he had offered to the men of Sodom. The once wealthy man who descended from the mountains to the cities of the plain ended up in a cave, having lost everything.

Why are his daughters so hopeless about the future? Was there nobody to whom they could have turned in their extremity? Could they not have found a husband somewhere and made a new life for themselves? Because of sin and hardness of heart, they were living in a mountain cave, physically and psychologically separated from everyone. They felt so alone and isolated that they thought their only hope for a future was through an incestuous coupling with their father.

Lot's story ends in that cave. There is no record of his death. We don't know where he died or even if he was buried. We know only that he had

two sons who became the heads of idolatrous tribes that were a thorn in the side of God's people in the generations to come. In many ways, the failure of Lot and his daughters is more sad than the quick destruction of the wicked cities of the plain.

If you try to save your life, you'll lose it. Attempts at self-rescue lead to hardened hearts. We don't know how to choose what is best for us. We imagine ourselves capable of serving two masters but are unable to do so. Over and over again, the story of Abraham and Lot tells us of our need to be dependent on God, to trust him. If he says flee to the mountains, we know he will be there with us when we get to the mountains. If he determines a radically different course than the one we have set, it is because he knows what is best for us.

Finally, let's look at the paragraph that begins with verse 27, in order to see Abraham's life as an alternative to Lot's.

Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.

So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.

We can note two points in this passage. First of all, Abraham could not save the broken culture. We read in Genesis 15 that he fought kings and rescued Lot and others, but he wasn't able to change the course of the culture. What he could do was be an influence on some lives. In the long run, that is the option that is always before us. Occasionally, some among us are given opportunities to have wide cultural influence. Usually, however, the only people we can influence are those whose lives intersect with ours. But, even within our small spheres of influence, we can do extraordinary good as those who lead others to know the Lord, as those who are beacons of light, truth-speakers amidst confusion, offerers of hope. God remembered Abraham and saved Lot. Abraham's life was a blessing, even though he had to look down and see the cities destroyed.

The second and more important point is to imagine Abraham's state of mind the morning after the destruction of the cities. As he looked down on the smoking plain, Abraham would have realized, "This God who is powerful enough to rain fire and brimstone from heaven and destroy cities that are so wicked that they can't be saved is the same God who stood here with me yesterday, who cared enough to listen to me, who offered blessing and hope to my wife and me and promised us a child by this time next year. The same God who made the mountain I am standing on is the one who stood here beside me and called me his friend."

God humbles himself to be our intimate friend, and that, I think, is the juxtaposition that we ought to leave for ourselves. We serve the same God Abraham served, a God who is terrible in his holiness, wonderful in his love, an intimate friend, one who will never leave nor forsake us, one who brings blessing to us, who hears the tiniest cry of our hearts. He is a God who could do awful things but has chosen to do beautiful things for us. Lot listened to his own voice, but Abraham preferred the voice of God. Lot was fascinated with power and wealth, but Abraham took joy in the knowledge and discovery of God. Lot died in obscurity, but Abraham is remembered as the friend of God, and it is Abraham's example, not that of the drunken cave-dweller, that can inspire us.

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