

"Lot: Aiming for Higher Ground"

Two weeks ago, we learned that when Abraham was 75 years old, God spoke to him and by faith he set out to go to a land he has never seen before. And when Abraham and Sarah left their home to begin this journey, their nephew Lot came with them. This man Lot will be the subject of today's message. First let us look at what happens when we *live by only what is seen*.

At age 75, Abraham trusted and obeyed God's word and with his wife Sarah left their home in the land of Haran. When they set out, their nephew Lot also came along. They traveled together for a while until one day they were faced with a problem that forced them to part ways.

When they have reached the region of Negev, both Abraham and Lot had accumulated a great amount of wealth. Back in those days their main form of wealth was livestock, and it became increasingly difficult for both of them to distribute enough food and water for their livestock. They did not want to quarrel over this so they decided to go their separate ways. Although Abraham was the senior of the two, he allowed his nephew Lot to choose which land to dwell in and said "If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left". The following passage describes what happened afterwards:

¹⁰ Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹ So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: ¹² Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. ¹³ Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord." (Genesis 13:10-13)

Lot saw that the region of Sodom and Gomorrah was well watered and green like the Garden of Eden so he set out toward Sodom. He must have thought that the land was suitable for gaining even more wealth. At first he dwelled on the outskirts of Sodom, but as time progressed it appears that he became more involved with the people of Sodom and was allowed into the city. There he married a Sodomite woman and together they had children. At first glance this is just an ordinary story of a man who traveled to a foreign land and built a happy family. But we find a curious statement at the end of this passage: "Now

the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (Genesis 13:13).

One evening Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom (this meant that he has become an elder figure within the community), and he was met by two visitors (who were actually angels sent by God to inspect the city), and he begged the two men to spend the night at his house instead of the city square (perhaps the angels were planning to see what the city is like by spending the night in the square).

As the sun went down and night fell on the city, men both young and old came from all over the city and surrounded Lot's house and called to him saying "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them" (Genesis 19:5). Older translations of this passage use the phrase "that we may *know* them", which is a euphemism for having sexual relations, but it is clear that the men of Sodom came to rape the two guests.

The English word *sodomy* refers to any unnatural sexual activity between persons or with an animal, and the word is derived from the city of Sodom. This city was completely deprived of any moral standard and promiscuity and incest was common practice for its inhabitants. The angels witnessed firsthand the wickedness of the city, so the time has come for God to destroy Sodom.

Why then, did Lot choose to live in Sodom? It is because he "looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt" (Genesis 13:10).

What we see with our eyes often leave a lasting impression on our hearts. Our perception greatly affects the decision we make in our lives. And most of the time these decisions may be correct. As the saying goes "a picture is worth a thousand words" and seeing is an important part of our experience. But at times we fail to notice that there are hidden pitfalls. What seemed to be good at first might have problems hiding under the surface that lead to trouble. When Lot chose to go to Sodom, he saw a land that was well watered filled with lush vegetation, a perfect place to live. But Sodom turned out to be a terribly wicked city.

In Genesis it is written that when Eve saw the forbidden fruit, she "...saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (Genesis 3:6).

The fruit looked pleasing to Eve, it seemed good for food and even desirable for gaining wisdom, so she took some and ate it. We know today that this was the moment sin entered into mankind. We must remember that she ate the fruit because she *"saw that it was good"*.

We know the story of how David was chosen by God to be the second king of Israel. He was the youngest son of Jesse, so when the selection process began, he wasn't even counted as a candidate. People saw him as too young and weak to be a king. But God saw their hearts and said: "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). None of them could have ever imagined that the young David would fight and defeat Goliath, a Philistine giant who was an experienced warrior. But the Lord gave David the victory.

Jesus Christ grew up in Nazareth, a city of Galilee. Galilee was known as "the land of deep darkness" and compared to the capital Jerusalem, it was underdeveloped and lagging behind. So when the people heard that Jesus was from Nazareth they all scoffed and said, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46).

When Jesus and the disciples were leaving the temple, one of them was so captivated by the beauty of the structure and said "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" But Jesus replied: "Do you see all these great buildings? ...Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Mark 13:1-2). Jesus said that even these magnificent buildings will one day be destroyed and His prophecy was later fulfilled.

The prophet Isaiah said the following words to describe Jesus on the cross: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). But this person in whom we saw no beauty or majesty, nothing in His appearance that we desire, we know today that this person is our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we found the only way to salvation.

Many of us have had an experience where things seemed to look good, but the outcome wasn't what we expected. You thought everything was in the right place, life seemed to be going great and you couldn't have felt better. But afterwards you realize that everything wasn't so right after all and that your choice has led you into a really bad situation. Most of us have had at least one or two experiences like this.

You may have lived long enough to know that things aren't always what they appear to be. But even if we know this, we still may not know what to do about it. So the Bible recommends us a new way of living: to "...live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

As it is written here, the Bible calls us to shift towards a life that is led by faith. As believers we do not live by trusting in only what is seen, but we live by faith and fix our eyes on what is unseen.

It is often said that we are living in uncertain times. We cannot see where the world is heading. So if the very world we live in is clouded by uncertainty, there is no question that we would need the ability to see beyond the visible world. And that is exactly what is promised in the Bible, the ability to see what is not visible to the naked eye. I cannot stress how important it is to realize that we are given this *spiritual vision*.

Our prayer life and involvement in church are ways to nurture this ability to see by faith. There aren't any courses taught in school or degrees you can earn for this, but if we commit ourselves to spending time in the Word, our spiritual eyes will be nourished as a result, and we will begin to notice its effect on our daily lives. This ability to see beyond will give us great strength when we are at an important stage in our life or find ourselves in life or death situations. Life will continue to bring many things before us, some happy and some sad. But instead of letting these things control us, let us be able to see beyond what is seen and fix our eyes on what is unseen.

The second thing we learn from the story of Lot is that we must *aim for higher ground*. As we read earlier, the angels who visited Sodom witnessed how corrupt the city has become. So it was time for God to destroy Sodom:

¹⁴ So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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!". (Genesis 19:14-17)

Lot had two sons-in-law who were going to marry his daughters. But they thought the warning of Sodom's destruction was a joke. So when morning came and it was time for the city to be destroyed, the angels grabbed Lot, his wife, and his two daughters by the hand and led them out of the city. We can tell from this passage that Lot was hesitant at first and

seemed unwilling to listen to the angels. As far as we can tell they had to leave with only the clothes on their backs. Perhaps even Lot thought it was some kind of joke. Or maybe he wasn't prepared to leave all the wealth he has acquired in Sodom.

The angels took them by the hand and led them out of the city. But why did they go to such lengths to save Lot, his wife, and his daughters? It says that "...the men grasped [their hands] and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them" (Genesis 19:16). The Bible says here that it was because "the Lord was merciful to them". Acting in accordance with the Lord's mercy towards Lot and his family, the angels worked to save them despite their hesitation. So why was God so merciful towards them that He would go this far to save them?

Once the Lord spoke to Lot's uncle Abraham and said to him ²⁰..."The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know" (Genesis 18:20-21).

When Abraham heard this he prayed earnestly and asked God not to destroy the people of Sodom. He petitioned God six times in a row asking that God will be merciful and not destroy Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33). Lot and his family must have been the first thing on his mind as he was praying. And there is no doubt that God knew how heavily it weighed on Abraham's heart.

God saw how much Abraham loved his nephew, and for this reason He showed mercy toward Lot and his family. It's hard to find any other passage in the Bible where angels are taking hesitant people by the hand to save them from destruction.

So the angels led them out of the city and as soon as they brought them out, one of the angels 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!" (Genesis 19:17).

Once they were outside the city, the angel told them to flee for their own lives, don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plains, but flee to the mountains (to a higher place), or else they would be swept away. And as we know, after this warning, God rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities were completely destroyed. The force of the destruction was so great that they would not have survived if they were to stay in the low plains.

We must see here that it was their responsibility to flee and save their lives. The angels didn't stick behind them to forcefully prevent them from turning back. God heard

Abraham's prayer and was merciful to Lot and his family, so the angels took them by the hand and brought them outside the city; but now it was up to them to heed the warning and save their lives. The angel gave them all the directions they needed to be saved. They had to "flee", "not look back", and "go to the mountains (to higher ground)". Now it was up to them to follow these directions.

If we have ever felt the Lord's protection in our darkest moments, or have been led out of a destructive lifestyle and are now living with the peace He gives us, it must be because there was someone like Abraham that was praying for us. Just as Lot and his family received God's mercy through Abraham's intercession, although we may be unaware of it, we are here today because someone was praying on our behalf. This is nothing but God's mercy. But after God lifts us up, He instructs us not to stay in the low plains but to use our own feet to walk toward higher ground.

So Lot and his family listened to these instructions and began walking toward the mountains. But Lot's wife looked back. What could have been on her mind at that moment? We can only imagine what was going through her mind. Perhaps she was thinking about her sons-in-law who thought this was all a joke, about all the wealth they left behind, or maybe about the breakfast she was in the middle of cooking.

It is written that when she looked back, she was turned into a pillar of salt. Today in the region where the city of Sodom once stood, there is a pillar of salt named "Lot's wife". It is very unlikely that this is actually Lot's wife. The real thing must have already dissolved a long time ago. But the pillar of salt standing on that rocky mountain is a sufficient reminder of the tragic story of a person who looked back.

There may be some of you who really needed to hear the words "don't look back". Maybe you are being held back by memories of a glorious past or by your past failures. And there are some of you who need to stop staying in the low plains and start aiming for higher ground. You know very well what it's like to be in the low plains, but you just can't take that first step out of there, or if you're to look at it from a psychological standpoint, you are bound by a codependency that keeps you going back to that place where you know you shouldn't be. So let us listen to God when He says "don't look back, don't stop there in the low plains" and let us start walking toward that higher ground.

As a pastor I get to meet many different types of people and they would share about their life. Sometimes I would ask about issues they are facing at the moment and what their past has been like, though it is not possible to know everything in just an hour or two. But as I listen to them speak, I would sometimes notice people who seem to be controlled by

something in their past. If they stay stuck in the past, problems will rain on them like the burning sulfur of Sodom, but they still can't move beyond that low plain. And even if they were able to start walking toward a higher plain, there are those who go back after a while and some will keep going back and forth.

The fact that these individuals came to church leads me to believe that there must have been somebody that was praying for them. Perhaps there was an angel who took their hand and brought them here. But once you reach a certain point, God says that you have to make your own decision. What happens next is determined by your response. As intersecting threads are woven together to form a piece of fabric, the fabric of our life is formed when our own decisions are woven into God's plan for us.

As believers living in a world of uncertainty, let us not live only by what is seen, but by the power that is given us through faith. There is no doubt that this faith will help us in the years ahead. Let us say goodbye to a life of always looking back and not being able to move forward. Let us not stay in the low plains for the rest of our lives, but let us set out towards a higher place. There may be some of you who have never even thought of aiming any higher. Since the moment we were born, God has been calling us to aim for higher ground. If you sense that God is calling you to walk toward that higher plain, there is no better time to start than now. It is up to us to make that decision and act upon His call. Let us pray.

Translated by Keita Machida