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Doom and Deliverance in the Valley of Decision (Genesis 19:23-29)

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This morning, I want us to return to the plain of the Jordan River in order to get another look at what took place on that fateful day when that lush green valley was turned into a raging inferno, as God rained fire and brimstone from heaven upon four exceedingly wicked cities that were located on that fertile plain-- the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim.

Last week, I described the destruction of these cities as a "milestone moment" in history because of the divine revelation that came through that event. God destroyed those cities in the way that He did in order to reveal His nature as a God of righteousness, so that the fear of God might be instilled in people of future generations as a deterrent to ungodliness. By reducing Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, says Peter, God "condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly" (2 Peter 2:6). The apostle Jude, likewise, affirm that God visited judgment on those cities to set them forth as a negative example of how not to live; moreover, he affirms that the judgment God visited on the rebellious inhabitants of Sodom was not only a temporal, but an eternal judgment. He says that "Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them . . . having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7). Notice the expression "eternal fire." What this means is that the earthly fire which fell on those cities was not the full extent of the judgment God exercised on that occasion; it was the prelude to a more enduring judgment beyond this present life in the eternal fire of hell.

You hear very little said about hell from pulpits these days; and that is really inexcusable, because Jesus spoke with regularity and straightforwardness about the reality of hell. If He did, then so should those who claim to preach His Word. I can only assume that the reason you don't hear hell mentioned by some preachers is because they don't believe in it, or they are afraid of losing the popularity or offending people with what they fear will be perceived as a 'negative message.' Geoff Thomas rightly describes such preachers when he says that they "are fearful of preaching the whole Word of God; they've become intimidated by political correctness. They have a morbid fear of what they call 'extreme views.' They are filled with a dread of offending anyone

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in the congregation. They preach bland sermons; the world has succeeded in binding such preachers hand foot."

As I see it, the calling of anyone who stands in the pulpit must always be to preach the whole counsel of God without adding to it, or taking away from it. And when it comes to the subject of hell, the Bible is crystal clear that there is indeed a place of judgment beyond this present life to which those who die impenitent and hardened in their sins will suffer eternally for their sins. If a preacher refuses to speak about hell; if he refrains from ever exhorting sinners to "flee the wrath to come," then he is being unfaithful to God and failing to love his hearers as he ought. It is because God loves sinners that He warns them with great earnestness to flee the wrath to come, that they might not fall into the same condemnation as the people of Sodom.

Well, there are two other events that took place on that fateful day that merit our attention, besides the destruction of Sodom itself. Those are the doom of Lot's wife, and the deliverance of Lot himself from destruction. These two events highlight very important truths that we must keep ever before us as we prepare to stand some day before the judgment seat of Christ. If we keep ever before these two events, we will receive from them the necessary warning and encouragement we need to persevere steadfastly in faith until we reach our goal.

I. The Doom of Lot's Wife-- I want us to begin this morning by remembering first of all, the doom of Lot's wife. You will remember that after Lot and his family were led by the two angels out of Sodom, they were given clear instructions about the need to flee for their lives. God gave them a solemn warning not even to look back toward the city from which they were fleeing: "Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain," He said. "Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed."

There are several reasons God may have given such a stern warning. Some have suggested that God did not want them to look back in order to hide His work of judgment from their eyes. It would simply be too horrifying a spectacle for them to witness, given the fact they had friends and relatives in that city. I think it more likely; however, that God told them not to look back as a test of their loyalty and as a safeguard against temptation. If they looked back and beheld the beautiful skyline of Sodom shining radiant in the morning sunlight, they might be tempted to think of all the things they had left there. They might also be tempted to doubt Sodom's destruction was really imminent, and so they might be tempted to return-- if only to gather a few more items before leaving. In other words, if they looked back, they would be in danger of going back.

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That seems to be the reason that Jesus refused to let the would be disciple in Luke 9 go home to his family before following Him as a disciple. The man had said to Jesus, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus refused to grant that request. Why so? Because He knew that man's heart. He knew that it would be dangerous for him to go home, since his priorities were not yet firmly established. If he interacted with his family, his resolve to follow the Lord might be weakened. He might be tempted to abandon the path of discipleship altogether. That's why Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Jesus knew this young man was too "wishy-washy" to stand up to family pressure; that's why he told him not to go home. Since he had resolved to follow Jesus, he must do so without vacillation.

That is the reason, I believe, why God told Lot and his family to flee Sodom without looking back. If they looked back, they would be in peril of turning back, for the sight of the city might stir up in them such feelings of nostalgia, they might find it impossible to resist the temptation to return. This was a serious warning, therefore, and it was given with such a sense of urgency that you would think they would not have dared to disobey it. You would think that a sense of awe and fear would keep them moving forward without the slightest thought of looking back.

But Lot's wife did look back. The text indicates that she was following her husband at a distance behind him, perhaps mulling over in her mind the things she had left behind in Sodom. Eventually, the temptation to look back overwhelmed her, and she yielded to it. Immediately, God's judgment fell upon her, as we read 26: "But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt." This may seem like a very severe judgment for what appears to be a relatively minor offense, but in fact, her sin was great, so the judgment that came upon her was also great. She perished before the Lord, and her very body became a monument to the danger of double-mindedness with respect to following the Lord.

Several questions arise as we consider what happened to Lot's wife.

A. What exactly happened to Lot's wife? The text says that when she looked back, she "became a pillar of salt." Some writers have sought to explain how Lot's wife became a pillar of salt by relating this act of divine judgment to the judgment which fell on Sodom. They point out that in the plain of the Jordan River, where Sodom was located, there is a great deal of salt in in all the rocky terrain around the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea itself is full of salt, which is why no fish can live in it. If God's judgment on Sodom involved an earthquake that brought up large masses of rock salt from below the earth, exploding gases might have sent this rock salt into the air, which being dissolved by

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the intense heat of the flames and sulphuric gases which filled the plain, would then fall back down to earth in the form of a salty rain.

Consequently, these commentators suggest that what may have happened to Lot's wife is the following. Torn apart by her strong desire to remain in Sodom, she lingered far behind her husband, debating what to do. Since Lot refused to look behind him, he did not realize how far behind him his wife was until he reached the city of Zoar. By then, however, it was too late for Lot's wife to be saved. As she turned around and looked on the city she had left, she was caught up in the raging tempest of fiery gases that threw fire, brimstone and rock salt high into the air. Overcome by the fumes, she suffocated and her body was then encrusted with the salt that fell to earth. She became a pillar of salt by being encrusted or enclosed with salt which rained down upon her and enveloped her lifeless cadaver.

In support of this view, the writer Matthew Poole cites Deuteronomy 29:23, which indicates that the brimstone which fell on Sodom was mixed with salt: "The whole land is brimstone, salt, and burning; it is not sown, nor does it bear, nor does grass grow there, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and wrath."

Others writers take a different view, and believe that what happened to Lot's wife cannot be explained in terms of any natural phenomena at all, but was a wholly miraculous act by God. That is to say, Lot's wife was not merely encrusted or covered over with salt raining down upon her; rather, she was miraculously transformed in her body into a pillar or statue made out of salt. John Calvin takes this view, and he defends it by pointing to the infinite power of God. He writes, "Since God created men out of nothing, why may he not, if he sees fit, reduce them again to nothing? If this is granted, as it must be; why, if he should please, may he not turn them into stones?" Calvin then asks why it should be thought strange that God would change a woman into a pillar of salt, if we believe that He will restore to life dead bodies that have crumbled into dust on the day of resurrection.

By whatever means God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, it is certain that He executed the terrible judgment her recorded, and it is just as certain that this judgment was well-deserved. Why so?

B. Why was her judgment well-deserved? What made her sin of looking back to Sodom so heinous? It was heinous for two reasons: first, because of the spiritual privileges that she enjoyed; second, because of the spiritual attitude that she expressed by this look.

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1. The Spiritual Privileges she enjoyed-- J. C. Ryle points to the fact that Lot's wife enjoyed a number of spiritual privileges as a result of her marriage to Lot. It appears from Scripture that Lot met his wife in Canaan. She may have grown up in Sodom and met Lot when he moved into the city. If that was the case, then we must say that this was a woman who had grown up in pagan darkness, but had come to know all about the true and living God through the witness of her husband.

a. She enjoyed the benefits of special revelation-- From Lot, she learned about the circumstances that brought Lot and his uncle Abraham to the land of Canaan. She learned about the character of God as the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. She learned that God was not only all-powerful, but also a God of righteousness and truth who hates sin. She learned about the promises God had made to Abraham concerning the future of Canaan and the future of the world and the way that all nations would be blessed someday through the seed of Abraham.

b. She had witnessed the power of God at work-- But not only had she learned those things about God from her husband; she had actually seen God's power at work. She saw God's power displayed when Abraham with a small band of fighting men had defeated an entire army of four powerful kings who had invaded the land of Canaan and taken many people captive. She saw Abraham rescue the people of Sodom from their captivity and from restore them to their own city. She knew that such a victory was owing solely to the blessing of Abraham's God.

c. She had a righteous man for a husband-- She also enjoyed the blessing of having a righteous man for a husband. Lot had many defects of character, but his basic heart attitude toward God was one of reverent trust. He did not join in the grossly immoral practices of the people of Sodom. In fact, his righteous soul was oppressed by the conduct of the people around him, and his wife must have seen his distress. She knew that her husband was different than the other men of Sodom. He did not join in their drunken revelries and grotesque pagan rituals or acts of violence against the innocent. Moreover, she had no doubt seen her husband pray to the Lord and call upon his name in times of difficulty. She watched how he bowed only at the altar of God and refused to serve any idols.

d. She had experienced God's intervening grace by the ministry of angels-- One other extraordinary privilege Lot's wife enjoyed was that of being ministered to by angels. When Lot brought those two men home for dinner, she did not realize at first who they were. She did not know that she was entertaining angels in her home; but when they blinded the men of the city, then she knew that they were supernatural beings sent to her household by God for their deliverance. How privileged she was to

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be rescued by the ministry of angels, who not only brought them out of the city but provided for their future safety by directing them to flee to Zoar. Yet despite all these privileges that she enjoyed, she ended up perishing along with all the other inhabitants of Sodom, because she did not appreciate the privileges that she had. She took them all for granted; and that was evident when, despite all that God had done for her, she looked back at Sodom, an action that was in direct disobedience to God's command.

2. The Spiritual Attitude She Expressed-- That backward look may seem like a small thing, but it revealed a spiritual attitude of heart that was deeply offensive to God.

First, it revealed an attitude of irreverence toward God, because it showed that she really did not fear the consequences of deliberately disobeying God. She did not tremble at the thought of offending Him, or provoking his displeasure; and that is because deep down, she did not take His Word seriously at all. In the sixty-sixth chapter of Isaiah, God describes the type of person upon whom He will look with mercy, and that is a person who embraces His Word in faith and bows to its divine authority. He says, "But on this one I will look; on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word." That was the first and fundamental problem with the attitude of Lot's wife-- she did not tremble at God's Word; she did not respond to the Word with reverent fear.

Her outlook was also marked by ingratitude. God had done so many things for her; how was she to repay Him for all the goodness He had shown her? Well, she couldn't repay him, but she could express her gratitude by making every effort to obey Him. But she didn't do that; instead, she did whatever she pleased without taking into consideration God's will at all. She wanted to go back Sodom, so she turned around and looked at it with longing. That showed not only a lack of godly fear, but a lack of gratitude.

That backward glance also revealed the fact that her priorities were misplaced. She ought to have valued the spiritual blessings God had showered upon her more than the material possessions she was leaving behind. She ought to have valued the privilege of knowing God and enjoying His favor more than anything Sodom could offer to her. Sadly, however, she seems to have valued her relationship with her pagan friends in Sodom more than she valued a relationship with God. That shows that her priorities were misplaced.

In essence, this backward look revealed a love for the world in her heart. It showed that she was attracted to the world's value system, which prizes material riches

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over spiritual riches and temporal pleasures over eternal ones. In the New Testament, believers are admonished not to love the world. That does not mean that we are to despise God's creation or reject the legitimate earthly pleasures He gives us to enjoy. "All things created by God are good and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4). When the Bible tells us not to love the world it means that we are not to love this "present world system" of evil thinking and living that is characteristic of the age in which we live-- because the world stands for everything that is against God and His truth. "Do not love the world or the things in the world," says John, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world-- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life-- is not of the Father but of the world." Lot's wife was attracted to the world's way of thinking and living. She was entranced by its sensuality, boastfulness, and pride; its appeal to human self-sufficiency without God, its heedless pursuit of pleasure without any regard to the eternal values of God's kingdom. She wanted to live as the people of Sodom lived-- that is, as a law to herself, without having to recognize the authority of God. All of this was in her heart, and that is why her backward look, though it may seem like a small thing outwardly, was offensive to God. It expressed the sinful attitude of her heart toward God. He was calling her to live a better life; but she didn't want to live a better life, she wanted to go on living the old life that was under condemnation.

C. Why does Jesus want us to remember her? I'm sure that there are many professing Christians in our day who would prefer not to have to think about Lot's wife. After all, she is such a sad figure, and the story of her death is so depressing. Surely, in this age of grace in which we are living, we don't have to think about a gloomy story like this one, do we? Surely Jesus came to reveal to us a kinder, gentler picture of who God is than the picture conveyed by these dark event recorded in Genesis 19-- isn't that right?

Well, the fact is, when we come to the New Testament, we find that Jesus Himself makes reference to Lot's wife, and His exhortation to us is that we never forget her. "Remember Lot's wife," He tells us in Luke 17:32, right in the middle of a very solemn exhortation about the need to surrender our lives to God. "Remember Lot's wife," He says. "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will save it." Jesus is telling us that if we would be saved from this perverse generation, we must surrender our lives to God without reservation. We must ask Him to deliver us from the sin of a divided heart, so that we may escape the world's corruptions and the misery of trying to serve two masters.

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That was the problem with Lot's wife. She had a divided heart. She wanted to be saved from the fire of judgment that was about to fall on the earth, but at the same time, she didn't want to give up the things associated with her past life in Sodom. She wanted her end to be like that of the righteous, but she didn't her walk to be like theirs. She wanted to go her own way and live life on her own terms, yet be safe at last in the city of refuge-- but the Word of God says that is impossibility. Why? Because no man can serve two masters-- you cannot serve God and money, or God and material possessions. We can only serve one Master, and that service requires the undivided devotion of our hearts-- which is the very thing Lot's wife lacked.

Her double-mindedness made her take lightly so many things. She took lightly the outward spiritual privileges that God had bestowed on her. She took lightly the warnings of God concerning judgment. She took lightly the gospel call to repentance and faith in the promises of God. She took lightly the need for perseverance in obeying the will of God. She took lightly the danger of apostasy. Above all, she took lightly the grace of God, for she did not value sufficiently the grace that had drawn her out of Sodom by humbly clinging to the God of grace. Instead, she put God to the test. She turned the grace of God into license, by rebelling against the clear commandment of God.

We need to remember Lot's wife, because there are many people in our day who are like her. Like Lot's wife, they enjoy many outward religious privileges. They may even profess faith in God and have an outward form of religious belief. But the religion they have is like a garment they put on and off for the sake of pleasing themselves, their friends, and relatives. They lack a vital principle of grace in their soul, ruling over their heart's affections.

The saddest thing about Lot's wife is that she came so close to being saved, but in the end, she was lost. And she was lost because, though she may have been intellectually convinced of the truth, she was never converted by it. She was taken out of Sodom, but Sodom was never taken out of her. It never ceased to rule in her heart. While she and Lot lived in Sodom, the true condition of her heart may not have been evident, even to Lot, for she put up no outward objection to his faith. In fact, she may even have even professed faith in God herself. But her religion was a only an outward form, "kept up for fashion's sake and not from feeling," as Geoff Thomas puts it. She went along passively with her husband in whatever religious exercises he observed. She kept up the religious facade until the last day of her life when the truth came out.

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Lot's wife calls each one of us to self-examination, to make sure that we have the vital principle of true religion in our hearts, which is authentic love for God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not enough to enjoy religious privileges. Many people who are born in Christian homes and raised with all the benefits of a godly Christian upbringing and example perish in the end, because they mistake the possession of privilege with salvation. Let us be sure that we are not resting in outward privileges instead of resting the whole weight of our souls on Christ for salvation. Lot's wife stands forever as a solemn testimony to the sobering truth that religious privilege in itself does not save. One can be nearly saved, yet be wholly lost in the end. So it was with Lot's wife, because the faith that lived in her husband's heart did not live in hers.

II. The Deliverance of Lot

I do not want to end the sermon this morning, however, by focusing on the doom of Lot's wife, but on the deliverance of Lot himself. And in this regard, I simply want to make the point that if, on the one hand, Lot's wife was lost through her own folly, we cannot say, on the other hand, that Lot was saved by his own wisdom. By no means! Earlier in this chapter, we have seen that Lot was a man full of personal defects. He did not exhibit the radiant fruits of faith to the same degree as his uncle Abraham. Moreover, his testimony was marred by certain glaring faults. It was so wrong of him to offer his own daughters to the men of Sodom in order to protect his visitors from harm. It was wrong of him to choose Sodom as a place to live, given the ungodly character of its inhabitants. It was wrong of him to dawdle when the angels commanded him to leave. Yet despite his spiritual immaturity and personal faults, he was nevertheless a righteous man who trusted in the Lord. He was not as a religious hypocrite, but a true believer, who feared God and trusted in the authority of his Word. His faith may have been weak, but it was nevertheless real-- and for that reason, he stood justified in the sight of God, despite his faults.

But here is the thing that I want us to see with regard to Lot's deliverance from the destruction of Sodom. When Moses speaks of the reason why Lot made it safely to the city of Zoar, he does not trace the cause of that deliverance to Lot himself, but to Abraham. Look at verse 29 and the words "God remembered Abraham." These words recall the fact that Abraham had interceded the day before for the city of Sodom. He had asked God to spare the city if ten righteous men were found within its walls, and God agreed to do so. Abraham had also expressed a concern that God make a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked by not treating them alike. "Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" he asked God. "Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You!" It was in response to that concern of

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Abraham, which amounted to a petition, that God spared the life of Lot. That's what the text means when it says "God remembered Abraham."

We might have expected the text to say "God remembered Lot," but instead it says "God remembered Abraham" to stress the divine grace that lay at the root of Lot's deliverance. As Philip Eveson says, "The substitution of 'Abraham' for 'Lot' makes a very powerful point. It emphasizes the grace of God in delivering Lot, not on account of his righteousness, but through the intercession of Abraham. Abraham's prayer had been used in God's purposes to save Lot."

What does that remind you of in terms of our own salvation, brethren? It reminds us of the fact, that with regard to our own salvation from sin, we must attribute that salvation, not to any wisdom or righteousness in ourselves, but to the intercession of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Sinners may be lost through their own folly, but they are saved solely by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. It is because God the Father hears the prayer of His Son on our behalf, that He rescues us from our sins for Jesus' sake. Thus, the doom of Lot's wife should not have the effect of making us try to save ourselves by our works. Rather, it should move us to look away from ourselves to Christ as our only hope of salvation. It is through His merits, His blood, and His faithful intercession that we are saved. It is through Christ alone that we are enabled to set our sights on heaven, to leave behind the city of destruction, and to advance perseveringly in faith without turning back, until we reach our goal, which is the eternal kingdom that God has prepared for us from before the foundation of the world.

Are you on your way to that eternal kingdom right now? Have you left behind the corrupt world system that is based on a denial of God and His saving truth/ Have you set your face like flint to move forward, without turning back? Are you being sorely tempted to turn back to the world and its corrupt ways? Take heed! Be forewarned! The Word of God tells us with all plainness that we cannot plough a straight furrow if we put our hand to the plough and keep looking back. Let us look to Christ and ask Him to give us the persevering grace we need to arrive at our goal without ever turning back, that we give everlasting praise to the God of our salvation. Amen.