

Don't Look Back!

In the words we read this morning from Genesis, there is one message that bleeds through the words on the page. It screams at us just as it did at Lot. The angels said: 'get out, don't look behind you, leave, run, flee.' But, as we read these words we ask the question 'why'? *Why* are these angels telling Lot to leave? *Why* is there such urgency in their voices? In chapter 18 the LORD says: *"The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that 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 NIV)

Notice the power and shock behind these words. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah are so wicked that God has to go down to see if it really is as bad as the rumors he has heard. This way of speaking is an *anthropomorphism*. This is a figure of speech in which God takes on a human characteristic. The God who knows all and sees all has to go down to get an eye-witness testimony—not because he doesn't already fully know what is going on—but for Abraham, and for us. He does this so that we will share in his pain and share in his shock. He does this so that we would ask the question: 'can it really be this bad?'

The LORD sends three angels into Sodom. And what do they see when they arrive? Lot takes them into his home. Then, all of the men, from young to old gather around Lot's house. They threaten Lot. They tell Lot to surrender the men who are with them so that can have sex with them. And if he doesn't, they will kill him. Notice here how shocking these words are. When the LORD asks the question: 'can it really be this bad?', what's the answer? It's worse than we could have imagined. Here in this town we have men who have abandoned their women and are bent on killing. And there is Lot, living in the middle of all of this everyday!

Now, does it make sense? Now do you see the urgency and desperation in the angel's voices? They tell Lot: *"Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished"* (Genesis 19:15 NIV). There is only one solution to this problem, just as there is only one solution to cancer. You have to kill it before it spreads.

But, here's the dilemma: How do you kill the cancer without killing the person? How do you destroy these wicked, unbelieving men without killing the believers along with them? Listen to the LORD's solution: *"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!"*" (Genesis 19:16–17 NIV)

The angels were urgent. The angels pleaded with Lot! You would think that Lot would be willing. You would think that he would have been ready. But, in this verse, what do we read about him? It says: 'but Lot delayed.' Lot's faith had been so weakened by living among these wicked men that even though he knew what the right and necessary action to take was, nevertheless, he hesitated. He delayed. He waited. Finally, the angels were done talking. They grabbed onto the arms of Lot, his wife and his daughters. And they dragged them out of town. They left them with three final warnings and pleas: 1) flee for your lives! 2) don't look back! 3) Do not stand around! Then we read these words: *"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."* (Genesis 19:23–26 NIV)

Here they are, running for their lives. They have no reason to look back and every reason to focus on what is ahead of them. But, as they are running away, Lot and his wife are together. She looks over at Lot, who was a little behind him. And over his shoulders she saw her life. She saw all she had left behind. And she yearned with all that was inside of her to have it all back. And since her heart yearned to be back at home, in judgement against her, and in protection for Lot, the LORD turned her into salt, so that she would stay in the same valley where her life, her heart, her faith was.

The angels told Lot: 'don't look back!' And they tell us the same today. For, our world will be destroyed by fire, just as Lot's did. And these words speak a powerful warning to us today: Don't look back! Always be ready to let go. Always be ready to let go of the things we have in this life. There is no possession you have now that is worth

holding onto on Judgement Day. But, here is where our sin shows its great strength. We like our things. Even though our LORD promises to us bigger, better gifts in heaven, we still like our things.

Be ready to let go of your possessions. But, even more importantly, don't look back at the people in your life. Just as you have to be ready to let go of your possessions, you also will have to let go of the people in your life. And here is where Satan is where the sinful world is so very active. In one of the churches I served in there was a woman who hadn't been to church in a long time. Finally, when we talked to her, she said that religion should not divide families. Church and all the people in her church were making her life difficult. She had a choice. She could not go to church and have the members of her family happy with her. Or, she could go to church and have them angry with her.

You see, it isn't just that we are tempted to like the people in our lives more than our LORD. It's that they slowly, secretly try to keep us from realizing that they are second. Yes, they are second compared to our LORD. Your wife is second, when compared to your LORD. Your husband is second compared to your LORD. Your parents, your friends, your children—they are all second in comparison to your LORD. Lot's wife never learned this lesson. Her husband beside her and her LORD above was not as important as whatever she was looking back at in that town.

Don't look back! Always be ready to let go of all you have so that you can cling to Christ. And here is where I falter. For, I know my own sinful heart. I know the hold it has on me. I know that if it were up to me on that dusty, rocky plain, I would have been a pillar of salt too. But, instead of being a pillar of salt several miles away from Sodom, I would have been a pillar of salt a stone's throw outside Sodom. But, I gain strength, courage and hope from the words which follow: *"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."* (Genesis 19:27–29 NIV)

The LORD remembered Abraham. Now, here again, we find an *anthropomorphism*. Does the LORD forget? Is he only *partly* omniscient? This is a figure of speech. Whenever we find these in the Old Testament, we learn that this is Moses' way of telling us that God was going to *do* something. The LORD remember Abraham.

And what was the amazing thing he was about to do? He answered Abraham's prayer. In the previous chapter, the LORD shared with Abraham his shock and grief at how sinfully the men of Sodom were acting, how twisted and evil their hearts had become. And Abraham was concerned for his nephew, Lot. So, he courageously went to his LORD in prayer. He asked, he begged that the LORD would preserve the life of Lot and his family. And the LORD told him that he would spare the city if there were ten believers in it. The LORD remembered Abraham's prayer and his concern for Lot. And he had mercy on them both.

This is very important for us to remember today. For, just as there were believers praying for Lot, there are believers praying for you. And the LORD will *remember* their prayers. And what do I mean by that? He will *act*. He will do something with their prayers. He will either give them what they want. Or, as in the case of Abraham's prayer, he will give them something better.

The LORD answers their prayers by getting you ready to let go of this world. He does this in two ways. First, he brings you pain and suffering. None of us wants pain. None of us prays for it. But, our LORD uses it. He uses it to cause us to both see that this world is pain and brings nothing but pain.

And when we realize this. When we realize that this world has nothing we want to cling to anyway, he then gently and graciously show us how much he has loved us. He shows us that he takes away our sin and all our unrighteousness—even our sins when we cling to this world more tightly than we do to him.

So, my brothers and sisters, with all this in mind, don't look back. Focus on your heavenly finish line. Always be willing and ready to say 'good-bye' to everything and everyone here. For there's nothing behind you that would compare to what God has waiting ahead of you. Amen.