

You're of no earthly value unless you're...

# Heavenly Minded

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## BIG DEAL

*At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.*

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He was a BIG man or so he thought, a BIG shot. And his goal in life was to get BIGGER. In his culture, the mantra was BIGGER is BETTER and BIGGEST is BEST. He was even named after a BIG man – one who stood tall above everyone else. But with all these cloaks piling up at his feet and the crowd in front, he couldn't see. Pushing some to the side, he then saw the one he wanted to die kneeling down, looking pitifully small and ... yet ... yet his face was radiant, even angelic. Saul was incensed! 'How could this little man of no reputation defy his people, his whole culture, all us BIG shots, and still die with dignity?!' Yet, that face would remain frozen in his memory and the conviction it birthed angered him – so much so, that he made it his priority to crush these little people.

From house to house, he harassed and imprisoned Christ's little lambs. He was a BIG man with soldiers at his command and a BIG job to do.

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Searching for his father's asses, another Saul in another time wandered through Mt Ephraim, Shalisha and Shaalim. With his supplies exhausted, he looked to return home lest his father begin to worry. Needing advice, he found himself face to face with God's prophet.

Samuel, led of the Spirit, invited him to a feast and said, "...on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father's house?"

Young Saul was flabbergasted. Handsome and huge in stature, he was nevertheless small in his own estimation. He replied, "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak so to me?"

Little did he know that he was called to be the first king of Israel. He couldn't imagine it. He didn't really want it. Samuel anointed him, but Saul was too small for the job – at least in his own eyes.

Shortly afterward, Samuel gathered all the tribes of Israel to announce God's choice. Out of them, he called forth the tribe of Benjamin and from these the family of Matri was taken. Drums rolled, trumpets sounded... but Saul was gone! So they sought the Lord and He answered, "Behold, he is hiding himself among the baggage."

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Saul, the persecutor of the church, became famous for his dogged pursuit of the new little sect of Judaism called the Way. However, the followers of Jesus had dispersed, and so for his mission to continue, he had to journey to

Damascus. He sought and obtained authority from the High Priest to cross the border and bring the little 'traitors' to justice or to kill them. But, along the way, something completely unexpected – someone much BIGGER than Saul intervened, and the persecutor became the prostrated.

*As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"*

*And he said, "Who are You, Lord?"*

*Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."*

*So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"*

*Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

*And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

This event initiated a BIG change in Saul. His allegiance shifted immediately from the Sanhedrin to the Son of God, but there was still a struggle with the 'old man' evident in his life. The Bible tells us in Acts chapter five, "And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. ... Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly."

Nevertheless, as he was used to doing, Saul went straight to the top – the Apostles. Barnabas brought him. Saul had been influential, after all, with the Jews, and he could be instrumental in their conversion to Christ's teachings. The Jews, however, didn't see it this way and Saul's preaching only served to create heated disputes. Finally, when the Hellenists tried to kill him, the brethren sent him back to Tarsus, his home. With his departure, the church had a measure of peace.

As with us all, Saul had some growing up and down to do. The rest of his life was spent chasing the heart of the Son of David, Jesus. Along the way, he faced amazing trials, scourging, beatings, imprisonment and even rejection from the very ones to whom he ministered -- belittling to the carnal man. He even changed his name to Paul which means little.

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Saul the King came to a turning point as well. Only two years into his reign, he faced the approach of an overwhelming hoard of Philistines against a ragtag band of skittish followers.

*...the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. And they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews*

*crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.*

*As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So Saul said, "Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me." And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him.*

*And Samuel said, "What have you done?"*

Saul's excuse was lame. His action in doing what only Samuel was to do set in motion a trend in his behavior that continued some 38 years. Soon afterward, he again took matters into his own hands and disobeyed the command of the Lord. Samuel then said to him, "When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel?"

You know the story. King Saul spent his lifetime chasing down little David. Meanwhile, in his own mind, he became 'BIGGER' and 'BIGGER' and 'BIGGER' - hugely self-important.

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At the end of his life, Paul's perspective of his Lord was so huge that he saw Him as being "all in all" (see 1 Cor 15:28 and Eph 1:23), filling all things. Though he esteemed himself as the chief – it was now as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Full of faith, he looked forward to a crown of glory.

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At the end of his life, King Saul's perspective of the Lord was so small that "...when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not" so he sought advice from a medium instead. Shortly afterward, he committed suicide and His crown passed to another.

Do you see the pattern? One man at first esteemed himself greatly but upon yielding his life to Christ, gradually became small in his own eyes. As a consequence, his legacy and fruitfulness was/is HUGE. The other man esteemed himself lightly to begin with and yet because he resisted and rebelled against God's Spirit, came to think of himself and his own interests as paramount. As a result, his legacy and fruitfulness is INSIGNIFICANT. The first man found grace and glory, the second found a grave. What a contrast!

You see, in a certain fashion, how we perceive ourselves is an inverse reflection of how we perceive God. That is, the 'smaller' we are, the 'bigger' He is in comparison and vice versa. This is an important understanding in today's Christian culture. The 'bigness' we're conditioned to value simply strokes the ego. It serves up very spiritual sounding justifications while subverting the very foundations of meaningful spiritual goals and growth.

Too many of us are convinced we've got to make it BIG or be a part of something BIG – musicians, pastors, missionaries as well as folks in the pews – in fact, the modern church is obsessed with bigness as a measure of God's

blessing. In our culture, it is easy to forget, "...that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence." God chooses 'little' over 'big' every time because it glorifies Him.

What bigness generally means for the church is that ministry is significantly less effective on an individual level. Consequently, too many church attendees have no meaningful relationship with a pastor. Many simply rotate in and out of churches like trying a buffet. In effect, the individual is lost in favor of the multitude.

Fundamentally, the western church of today is behaving more like Saul than like Paul. As a result, the worldly culture it is meant to change is instead changing it.

Jesus did not minister this way nor did His apostles. He said, "Do not fear, *little flock*, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." He could say that because He kept the focus of His pastoral ministry limited to the number of individuals He could disciple effectively. Check it out, throughout history as well as today, the church has done best spiritually when it was 'small' in its own eyes because it depended on God for

everything. When the church has erred or become inconsequential, it has accompanied a worldly pursuit of 'bigness'. It should sober us that the last days Laodicean church is said to think of itself as being in need of nothing, not even God.

Jesus said in His parable, "Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very *little*, have authority over ten cities." Clearly, He's saying that if we are faithful with the 'little' now, the big responsibilities will come when He returns. So why are we so intent on getting the BIG stuff now? If we're preaching to the lost, then, to be sure, sometimes big crowds are just part of the deal, but the church itself is best tended and cared for when it is literally a 'little flock'.

Jesus said, "Let the *little children* come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." For the individual believer, this whole sense of being little in your own eyes is a key part of what heaven is all about.

Let's consider Jesus – why did He emphasize searching for and finding the one lost lamb and the one lost coin? Why did He limit the scope of His own discipleship? Why did the apostles do likewise? When He said that His followers would do "greater things" than He had done, did He really mean all that we have today? May the love of Christ compel us to minister effectively but without regard for earthly values. (See Phil 2:3-8) His ways are not our ways. As we embrace what Jesus said in Mat 11:29, the bride He returns for will be truly pleasing to Him. Selah.

## DEATH OF THE DEBT COLLECTOR

*Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."*

*Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes.*

*But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"*

*She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."*

*Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"*

*She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away."*

*Jesus said to her, "Mary!"*

*She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher).*

*Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.""*

*Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her. (John 20:1-18)*

This is the big one. This is the sign of all signs for all time. Yet, Jesus said it was to be given to a perhaps unexpected group. He said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Mat 12: 39,40)

All the previous signs in the book of John were recorded to encourage the believers to increase their faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah (Jn 20:30,31). But, the sign of the resurrection was specifically said by Christ to be for an evil and adulterous generation of sign seekers. Now, the resurrection of

Jesus is the most blessed event in all the history of mankind. It is the fundamental belief required for salvation. The Bible says, "...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus (that is, who He is and what He did for you on Calvary's cross) and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom 10:9) Now, over the centuries, many Christians and 'Christian' cults have added to these simple requirements, but there are no other requirements for salvation – no additional belief(s) or mandatory 'merit badges'.

It's the one key. It's the narrow way. It's the doorway to eternal life. So, of course, it's for the evil and adulterous – that's you and me, not just the Pharisee. The resurrection is the underpinning for our entire faith – no resurrection, no Christianity. Paul wrote, "...if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty... And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." (1 Cor 15:14,17,18)

From the earliest times of Biblical history, this has been the creed. In what is probably the oldest book of the scriptures, a weary, tested yet confident Job declared, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25 – 27) A dead redeemer wouldn't do it; it was the living Redeemer upon whom he fixed his faith.

The critics of Christ rarely debate His motives or death. They are quick, however, to try to dismiss His resurrection.

Wasn't the cross enough?? Can't we just believe that Christ died for our sins? What's so critical about believing the witnesses to His resurrection? To answer this, we must follow the Apostle John so to speak into the realm of the spirit. In the book of Revelation, he recorded, "And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?' And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it."

"So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.'"

"And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne." (Rev 5:1-7)

Here, the Lamb of God who had been slain and was yet alive came and took the scroll with the seven seals. He was the only One who could look at it, hold it and open it. Note that John, when at first it

appeared that no one could take the scroll from God the Father, wept much. The scene was obviously tearing him up, rending his heart.

All men die. Some men have died for good or noble reasons. A few have died heroically. Yet none were found worthy to take the scroll. Why is this, and what's this scroll anyway?

When mankind represented by Adam and Eve opened the door to sin and death, humanity began to build an enormous, unimaginably huge debt. Recall Jesus taught us to pray, "And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors." (Mat 6:12) The Bible says that all men are born in sin. As a consequence, we have a sin nature. The old saying is we're not sinners because we sin; we sin because we're sinners. (See e.g. Rom 3:23) In addition, the right to rule this world which was given originally by God to man passed to Satan, "the god of this world". We know this as Jesus did not contest the devil's claim during His wilderness temptation. Luke recorded that, "The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours." (Luke 4:5-7)

Now, in Leviticus 25, the Lord specified that the earth is His and therefore any debt incurred on the land if not redeemed would nevertheless be cancelled during the year of Jubilee (every 50<sup>th</sup> year). However, that which pertained to man, that which man established, that is, his kingdoms, walled cities

and such – the stuff of which man is quite proud – if it fell into a debt situation and was not redeemed, it remained forever indebted. Sin creates a debt and its 'collector' is death which was the power of Satan (Heb 2:14).

In John's day, it was common to have scrolls representing a form of ownership such as a deed or an inheritance. If a debt was incurred against the property represented by the scroll, it would be sealed and the debt recorded on the outside. Only when the debt(s) were paid could the scroll be surrendered and opened. With this in mind, I suggest that the scroll seen by John in the heavenly scene was representative of mankind. The earth, though it is under a curse (see Gen 3:17) belongs to the Lord. Mankind, however, had to be redeemed.

Because all men sin and die, none could ever pay the debt of sin. What was needed was someone sinless, someone perfect. This was pictured for thousands of years in the sacrifice of a spotless, i.e. perfect lamb. Enter Jesus, the one and only Man to live a sinless life. In taking upon Himself the entirety of our sin at Calvary, He satisfied the debt and destroyed the debt collector. He and He alone is worthy to take the scroll – to look upon it and open it. Mankind is now His. If He had not paid the debt with His life, John knew that all of us would forever be obligated to die.

Now, back to our original question – what is it about the resurrection that makes it the key to eternal life. After all, couldn't Jesus just have gone on to heaven in as a purely spirit-being? Why come back in a physical (albeit more powerful)



body? Here's why -- the resurrection is the one sign for evil and adulterous sign seekers because it shows that God, as the final Judge, accepted the payment for our evil and adulterous ways as being made in full. None of the debt remains; past, present and future sin – it's all paid for. The resurrection is our guarantee that we indeed have eternal life in Christ Jesus if we will simply believe and accept it. Without the resurrection, we would have at best been left guessing. Because of it, we can be 100% sure -- since our Savior emerged from that tomb, we will never see death either. We who believe will simply one day pass from a temporal life to eternal life in a moment.

"Max Lucado, in his book, Six Hours One Friday, tells the story of a missionary in Brazil who discovered a tribe of Indians in a remote part of the jungle. They lived near a large river. The tribe was in need of medical attention. A contagious disease was ravaging the population. People were dying daily."

"A hospital was not too terribly far away—across the river, but the Indians would not cross it because they believed it was inhabited by evil spirits. To enter the water would mean certain death. The missionary explained how he had crossed the river and was unharmed. They were not impressed. He then took them to the bank and placed his hand in the water. They still wouldn't go in. He walked into the water up to his waist and splashed water on his face. It didn't matter. They were still afraid to enter the river. Finally, he dove into the river, swam beneath the

surface until he emerged on the other side. He punched a triumphant fist into the air. He had entered the water and escaped. It was then that the Indians broke out into a cheer and followed him across."

"That's exactly what Jesus did! He told the people of His day that they need not fear the river of death, but they wouldn't believe. He touched a dead boy and called him back to life. They still didn't believe. He whispered life into the body of a dead girl and got the same result. He let a dead man spend 4 days in a tomb and then called him out and the people still didn't believe Him. Finally, He entered the river of death and came out on the other side. No wonder we celebrate the Resurrection!" (Bruce Howell)

On a final note, it's fascinating that Jesus referred to His resurrection as being the sign of the prophet Jonah for he was the only prophet who was specifically sent to preach to the gentiles. You'll recall that it was after Jonah's 'resurrection' out of the belly of the great fish that the message of repentance was taken to the gentile nation. And they received it! They repented and were saved from judgment. So it has been with the message of the gospel. It was taken to the gentiles and they have received it as well.

Simply put, Christ's death on Calvary reconciled us to God and His resurrection brought us life, that is, saved us from death. Paul wrote, "*For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*" (Rom 5:10)

Receive the sign of Jonah. Believe the resurrection and live!

## THE WASTED YEARS

Gen 19:1-38

By Ray C. Stedman

*The two angels came to Sodom in the evening; and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed himself with his face to the earth, and said, "My lords, turn aside, I pray you, to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise up early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the street." But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. (Gen. 19:1-3 {RSV})*

The expression we find at the beginning of this account, "Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom," is an eastern expression which needs to be understood. This does not mean he was simply passing the time of day in the gate, watching strangers come into the city. This is a technical phrase which means he was the chief magistrate of the city of Sodom. His job was not only to give an official welcome to visitors of the city but to investigate the nature of any strangers who might come, and also to administer justice concerning any quarrels within the city. The nearest equivalent we have today would be the office of mayor. So this account opens with the picture of Lot as the mayor of Sodom, the chief magistrate of the city.

This is most interesting when we remember what we have read of Lot from time to time. Here is the success story of the Old Testament, the old familiar pattern of the immigrant boy from the foreign country who makes good in the big city. This is rags to riches, poverty to power, the local yokel making good in the big town.

You can imagine the biographies being circulated through the city, autographed personally by Lot.

We first met Lot when he left Ur of the Chaldeans and moved to the city of Haran with Abraham. Although he was always subservient to Abraham, it seems very likely that Lot made a genuine response of faith to God on his own. Then, when Abraham came into the land of Canaan, Lot went with him. When Abraham went down to Egypt, Lot went down with him, and they came back wealthy men, although their time in Egypt was a time of great spiritual poverty and distress of heart for both.

When they returned to the land of Canaan, the first thing that happened was the quarrel between Lot's herdsmen and Abraham's herdsmen over the pasture rights. Abraham, though he had the right of first choice as the elder, gave up his right to Lot. That significant choice was the beginning of Lot's downfall. He looked out and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well-watered like the "garden of the LORD" and "the land of Egypt" {Gen 13:10 RSV}. It looked like both to him, and those two little phrases indicate the nature of Lot's choice. He had just come from Egypt, the place of materialism and commercialism -- easy wealth -- and this looked like such a place to him. In addition, it looked like "garden of the LORD."

Now the "garden of the LORD" is always indicative in the Scriptures of a place of divine fellowship -- as Adam and God walked together in the garden of Eden -- the place where there was peace of heart and fellowship with God. Lot looked at the city of Sodom and the plain and he thought this was the place where he could have both. He could make an easy living, advance himself, have all the cultural advantages of the city and

still have fellowship with God. And he wanted it all. So we read, he "chose for himself," {Gen 13:11b RSV}, i.e., he excluded everything but his own desire. On that basis, he arranged his priorities -- to obtain wealth and to have fellowship with God.

In doing this, Lot disregarded the principle that runs all the way through Scripture and through human life. This is expressed by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," (cf, Matt 6:33a). The promise that goes with that is that all these other material things will be added. But we are to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Lot did exactly the opposite, placing materialism first. His first priority was to find a place where he could make a good living and advance his family's material advantages. With that, however, he wanted to have the kingdom of God and fellowship with him. We read the result as we trace this story through.

So he pitched his tent toward Sodom. He was not in the city yet, but he was near it. He was still in his tent; he was a sojourner in the land, and the tent marks his pilgrim character. But he pitched it just outside the city of Sodom in order to take advantage of all the cultural pursuits of the city. Then, in Chapter 14, we read that he was dwelling in Sodom. By the time of the invasion of the five kings, he had moved right into the city. And now, in Chapter 19, we find that he is the mayor of the town.

Now I want to be fair with this man, Lot; I believe he meant to do the right thing. It is clear from the whole story of his life that though he wanted to get something out of Sodom, he also expected to put something into Sodom. He probably thought to himself, "Well I may do these people good. I may be able to win some of

them from evil to faith. I can make money faster here than anywhere else, that's true, but I also may help clean up the city a little bit. It's a wicked place, and perhaps I can improve its moral life." When Lot moved into Sodom, this is undoubtedly what he had in mind. But before long he becomes the mayor of the town, the most respected man in the city, the leader of its civic life. This is where the angels found him when they came into the city on that eventful evening.

I would like to ask this successful man four questions. I think they will reveal to us how much there is of Sodom in Lot, how much the life of the city had affected him. The rest of the chapter will give us the answers to these questions:

"Lot, you made a great success out of your life. You've won your way from a nobody to the mayor of the city. You entered as an unknown, a foreigner, and you've achieved both wealth and honor here in the city of Sodom.

"My first question is this, 'How has your choice of life in Sodom affected your own inner life? You wanted both the personal advantages of the city life and fellowship with God. Have you found it?' "The second question is, 'How much have you influenced the city for good, Lot? How effective has your life been in changing the city's evils?' "The third question is: 'How much money did you make there? How much material advantage was it to you to live there?' "And the fourth question: 'What influence did the city's life have on your own family?'"

Now I think you will agree these are fair questions to ask a man who only wants to gain the best he can from the world and live a life of fellowship with God. The answers are all here in this chapter. The first question is: "Lot, how about your own heart and mind in the midst of that city; what effect did

Sodom have on your spiritual life?" Here are the answers:

*But before they lay down [that is, the angel visitors] the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please: only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door. But the men put forth their hands and brought Lot into the house to them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves groping for the door. (Gen 19:4-11 {RSV})*

Notice the extent of the evil of this city. This is the reason God visited it in judgment. In Verse 4 it says that all the men of the city both young and old, all the people to the last man surrounded the house. Though the language is veiled here in order to make possible a public discussion of the hideous sin, nevertheless homosexuality is what all the people of Sodom were involved in. As you read this account you can see that Lot's reaction is disgust and shame. And this is no isolated instance; this was just a common ordinary event in Sodom. In the second letter of Peter,

in the New Testament, we have Lot's reaction to life in Sodom:

*...righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds), (2 Pet 2:7b-8 {RSV})*

That is a picture of discontent, of bafflement, of frustration. His soul was continuously vexed. He had tasted enough of the higher things of fellowship with God that he could never, never be satisfied with these sordid, ugly obscene and lewd things of Sodom. Where is rest and peace and quietness of heart? It is up there with Abraham in his tent under the oak tree. But here in the city of Sodom is this man Lot. What good is it to have luxuries and wealth and every material gain if the heart is continually filled with a great hunger that cannot be fed or satisfied? Lot's answer to that first question must be that his own life is grievously thwarted and blighted by the life of the city of Sodom.

How about question two: "Lot what did you do for Sodom? When you moved into the city you intended to influence the city, and you did; you became the mayor, the chief magistrate. Now, Lot, in that place of great political influence how many did you win? How many did you turn from evil to faith?"

*Then the men said to Lot, "Have you any one else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or any one you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the*

city." *But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting. (Gen. 19:12-14)*

What a statement that is! With his very own sons-in-law he had no influence whatsoever. When Abraham had pleaded with God for divine mercy, there needed to be found only ten righteous men in this city for the whole city to be spared. But when Lot went out beginning with his own family, he could find none. His political power was great, but his spiritual influence was absolutely nil.

Let us come to the meanest question of them all: "Lot how much did you make while you were in Sodom? What do you have to show for your years there?" Here is the record:

*When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city." But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him forth and set him outside the city. And when they had brought them forth, they said, "Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley; flee to the hills, lest you be consumed." And Lot said to them, "Oh, no, my lords; behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me, and I die. Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there -- is it not a little one? -- and my life will be saved!" He said to him, "Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. Make haste, escape there; for I can do nothing till you arrive there." Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar [which means "little"]. The sun had*

*risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.*

*Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife behind him looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and behold, and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.*

*So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt. (Gen 19:15-29)*

If you want to know how much Lot made in Sodom, I suggest you make a trip to the Holy Land. Go and stand by the shore of the Dead Sea and look out over that lifeless, brackish, waste, the lowest and most desolate spot on the face of the earth -- 1,300 feet below sea level -- and listen to the lifeless waves lap the beach in an unending monotone of death. Nothing grows there, nothing lives, nothing moves in all that forsaken valley. How much did Lot win? He lost it all, everything. Here is the disastrous failure of this man. He was a good man who wanted to do right, but chose his own way and lost his peace, and his influence, and all that he had. Still, he longs for a city, even a little one. The life of the city has so gripped hold of his own heart that he has to have a city.

The last and most terrible question, then, is this: "Lot, what about your family? When you turned your back on the tent and went to live in Sodom, what happened to your children?" We

have just seen how Lot lost his wife. Her heart was knit to the lusts and pleasures of the city and she looked back. Doubtless she was caught by the flames and burned where she stood. Her body was later encrusted with the salt as the winds blew across her and she became just a pillar of salt as described here. The Lord Jesus looked back on this incident and in a solemn passage of warning, he said, "Remember Lot's wife."

And now we have this account of how the filthy way of the city had become part of his daughters' thinking. The dreadful story is recorded in [Gen 19:30-3]:

*Now Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; so he dwelt in a cave with his two daughters. And the first-born said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night; and the first-born went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. And on the next day, the first-born said to the younger, "Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger arose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. The first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites to this day.*

These two girls were virgins in body, but they were already debauched in mind. They had long since grown accustomed to obscenity and unrestrained luridness, so, up in the cave on the mountainside, they seized the thinnest tissue of excuses and the story ends in a foul orgy of drunkenness and incest. Lot had nothing but heartbreak and grief to show for the years in Sodom. The Lord said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it," (Matt 16:25a {RSV}). So Lot, trying to get the best out of both worlds, lost all and has become for all time the picture of the Christian who is saved, "but only as through fire," (1 Cor 3:15b). He has nothing but wasted years to look back on and eternity ahead.

I am sure you have seen many lessons in this story, but let me press just two of them home to you: The first lesson I see is this: The hour of danger is when you first begin to choose.

Young people, especially, often feel the pull to be like the world, wanting to be popular, and to have what everyone else has, and do what everyone else does. They want to be welcomed by their crowd and to be Christians as well. They desire fellowship with Christ, and a life of joy and power. Thus, many try to do exactly what Lot tried to do -- compromise, so as to have both -- and, like Lot, they have chosen for themselves, putting popularity and self first. Some young people, teenagers from Christian homes, are drinking, gambling, stealing, and lying about it at home. They are playing with sex as far as they dare to go, and sometimes further. They do it all because they want to be accepted and popular at school. At the same time they want also to be in church to find the Lord, have his blessing and fellowship.

The whole story of life and the Scriptures is that you cannot do both. No man can serve two masters. No man can walk down two dividing roads at the same time. If you are trying to live this way, surely, as you have chosen your own desires first, you will lose it all, just as Lot did. Unless you change your mind, and begin to actually put God first, before all else, you will continue in the very pattern that is traced out here, until you awaken one day to find it has all gone by. As Lord Byron wrote at the age of 29, after he had tried everything that life offered,

*My days are yellow in the leaf;  
The flower of the fruit of life is gone.  
The worm, the canker, and the grief  
Are mine alone.*

It is quite possible to fight your way to the top of the heap and then look back on a burned-out life, on empty, wasted, barren years. The hour of choosing is now, in youth, when you are young, when you are setting the direction of life. The second lesson I get from this is that when you attempt to gain the best of both worlds, you destroy others besides yourself.

What was the greatest pang in Lot's heart when he awoke there in the cave in the mountains and learned all that had happened? Do you think it was grief over his lost wealth, his vanished honor, his troubled mind? Do you not think that the greatest, deepest wound of all in that man's heart was the recognition of what he had done to his loved ones in Sodom, his little girls, his wife?

You who are parents are being watched by your children, and they see your outward respectability, your desire to be right and to do good. But they also see, in some of you, that the deepest thing in your life is to get gain or to enjoy pleasure. They see that you will quickly sacrifice a prayer meeting for a night out, that you are

always willing to take a bigger salary, regardless of what it may do to the family in terms of new conditions or new circles of friends. They see that the things you sacrifice for, and are willing to skimp and save for, are not missions, or the church, or the work of God, but a new car, or a color television set, or nicer furniture, or a longer vacation, or a pretentious home. They are watching and they see all this.

Bit by bit they lose interest in the Bible, Sunday School, and church. They resolve to get ahead in the world and win the respect of Sodom no matter what moral restraint they have to throw overboard to do it. This is why we see the tragedy of Christian homes in which children are turning from God. And the sorrow you will carry to your grave, the deepest sorrow of your heart will be that, though you still have your own faith, yet because of your compromise, you have lost your children. This tragic story of Lot is taking place right here and now, in the modern Sodom and Gomorrah in which we live.

Remember, it does not have to be so. Yonder on the hill is Abraham whose whole life principle was to let God choose and to be satisfied with that choice though it meant a tent all his days. His first question was never, "How much will I make?" but, "Will it destroy my tent and my altar?" Those are the precious things in my life and I want nothing to do with anything which destroys my sense of pilgrimage, my sense of not belonging here, and my fellowship with the living God." In the end, Abraham gained the whole land, and all that Lot possessed, and more besides, and he shall inherit the earth, according to the Scriptures, "for he looked for a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God," {cf, Heb 11:10}.

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*Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.*

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