

LOT.

2 PETER II. 7, 8.

It is almost impossible to read these words, without an accent of surprise. "*Just Lot*"! *Lot* a "righteous man" with a "righteous soul"! That is hardly the verdict we should have passed upon him. It is a verdict which we find it hard to accept, although it has been passed upon him by the voice of Inspiration itself. To us it seems that, from the moment in which he separated himself from Abraham and took his fate into his own hands, the life of Lot became unrighteous, that it degenerated and depraved.

As we read these words, then, we have to mark, first of all, the magnanimity, the generosity, of Holy Writ in recognizing the righteous soul under that unrighteous-looking life. For this generous magnanimity is a characteristic of the Bible verdicts. Again and again, in reading the chronicles of the Hebrew kings, we meet with this summary of the life and reign of men in whom we can see many faults and sins: "He walked before the Lord with a perfect heart." And even when so much cannot be said of them with any show of reason, even when they had fallen into open and heinous crimes, we often meet with this gracious, though qualified, sentence upon them: "He walked before the Lord, but not with a perfect heart, as did his father David." Nor does this kindly allowance for the faults and infirmities of men spring from moral weakness and indecision. The Bible is not incapable of branding men as open and notorious sinners when they deserve it; for, again and again, it takes leave of them with a sentence which has always seemed to me one of the most terrible in the Old Testament: "He walked in the ways of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, *who caused Israel to sin.*"

We may be sure, then, that when the Bible accords the praise of righteousness to any man, there was "a righteous soul" in him, however it may have been obscured, a soul leaning decisively, if not energetically, toward righteousness; we may be sure that there was "a soul of goodness" in him, would we "observingly distil it out," though it may need to be distilled, to be cleared from much scum and filth which have blended with it and marred its quality. And we may be equally sure that the God who judged the men of past ages so generously, looking on them with larger kinder eyes than ours, will make "large allowance for us all." If the righteous soul be in us, although it be much cumbered and concealed by many infirmities, many faults, many sins, He will both recognize it and seek to confirm it in the love and pursuit of righteousness.

In judging Lot we must not forget that "men are as the time is"; we must take into account the conditions of his age and clime and race. It would be as much a mistake as an injustice to judge him by the standards by which we judge ourselves or, at least, one another. He lived in a very different world to ours, and before the ethical standard had been rectified and determined, whether by the experience of men or by direct revelation from Heaven. He had not Abraham's largeness of soul—very few men have—nor *his* devotion to unworldly and spiritual ends. No original inspiration was vouchsafed him, no immediate communion with God; and that, probably, because he was incapable of receiving them. For such an one as he, in such an age as his, it was much that he should believe in the inspiration vouchsafed to Abraham; much that he could be so influenced by a great mind and a noble example as to give up his clan traditions and ancestral home, and follow whither he was led. So far as we know, he was the only free member of his clan who voluntarily "left all" to follow Abraham, to devote himself to the

faith and service of the only wise and true God. In taking this grave and heroic step, he may have been moved mainly by his respect and affection for his great kinsman. Still that affection was an avenue through which a sincere trust in God reached his soul. As the years passed, and no possession was granted him in the land of promise, no, not so much as to set his foot on, he may have been wearied by the greatness and difficulty of the way. The utter unworldliness of Abraham, his contempt for ease and wealth, his lofty faith in unseen realities, may have palled a little on the inferior spirit of Lot. He may have grown weary of always looking for what never came, always bracing himself for efforts which brought none but an inward reward. The love of ease and the love of gain, for a time subordinated and controlled by a high affection, may have revived, they seem to have revived within him, and to have grown by what they fed upon; until, to secure gain and ease, he was content to dwell among the wicked, and to let his righteous soul be vexed from day to day by the constant spectacle of their unlawful deeds. If it were so, we must make allowance for him, as for other timid and halting souls who have been called to share in the toils of some great and heroic spirit without sharing in his greatness—a class much to be pitied and to whom much should be forgiven, though it hardly ever meets with half the consideration it deserves. The wives, children, and other dependents of a man exceptionally great have but a sorry fate. We expect as much of them as of him, and make demands on them which we ourselves could not meet. Had Lot refused, to the end, to mix with wicked men and follow worldly aims, he would have been well nigh as great as Abraham himself, and need not have been daily vexed with their lusts and crimes. But, not being so great, it speaks well for him that, to the end, he *was* vexed with them: for the love of righteousness is not dead in any

heart to which unrighteousness is hateful and the sight of it a constant distress. And though Lot was weak enough to ally himself with the men of Sodom, they could not persuade him to stifle or disobey the clear voice of Heaven. When the angels called him, he *must* go, however reluctantly. Though he saw his wife and children degenerating under the evil infections of the corruptest city in the land, and had not strength and courage to remove them from it, yet even *they* could not draw him into an open and conscious compliance with its vices: they must make him "drunk" before they could get their wicked will of him.

It is both easy and instructive to trace the process of his degeneracy. The motive which induced Lot to break off from his fellowship with Abraham, the man of God, and to ally himself with the sinners of Sodom, was a very common one,—the love of ease and wealth. On the day on which he made his fatal choice, he stood with Abraham on the lofty but barren hills of Bethel. Compelled to withdraw from each other a little space by the strifes of their herdmen and shepherds, they looked round them to determine the sites to be occupied by their several camps. With his usual large-mindedness, Abraham bade Lot take which he would—the pastures of the north or of the south, of the hills or of the valley. The scene spread out before them was one hardly to be paralleled. They stood on a commanding eminence from which they could see, on the one hand, irregular chains of hills stretching from Jerusalem, by Bethel, down to Mamre; hills, or mountains, which, rising from two to four thousand feet above the level of the sea, were swept by a keen bracing air, and clothed with downs which are the haunts of shepherds to this day. And, on the other hand, they looked down on a rich and fertile plain, to the south, where the deep swift stream of the Jordan runs into the sea,—a plain some ten or twelve miles in breadth, sheltered and shut

in by surrounding hills, and plentifully watered by the affluents of the Jordan. This plain, which lay some four thousand feet below the level of Jerusalem, was studded with little towns whose inhabitants were a proverb of lawless wickedness. But, under its semi-tropical climate, its fields and pastures were the richest in the land; its soil so fertile that the ancient chronicler (Gen. xiii. 10) compares it to the garden of Eden and to the banks of the Nile. Its climate as compared with that of the adjacent hills is as that of Italy to that of England. Many plants and fruits grow and thrive in the hollow basin of the Plain which would perish on the hills; and the crops and flowers which are common to them both are a month or two earlier in the valley than in the hill country which overlooks it.

This rich plain, then, where life would be so easy and wealth so sure, drew the eye and the heart of Lot. Its enervating luxury was more attractive to him than the bracing and healthy rigour of the hills. And so, while Abraham continued to wander with his flocks along the lofty downs, as high above the level of the Plain as the Snowdon range above the level of the sea, Lot went down into the hot steaming valley, exposing himself and his family not only to its enervating climate, but also to the still more enervating infection of its filthy and abominable licentiousness. At first, no doubt, he intended to remain a nomad and a shepherd even on the plain; for he "*pitched his tent*" outside the walls of Sodom. But he had not left his father's house to search for richer pastures; he had left it that he might serve the God of Abraham and do his will. Even had he remained a shepherd and a nomad, therefore, it would have been a fatal mistake for him to think more of rich pastures and multiplying flocks than of an unbroken fellowship with Abraham and Abraham's God. But we soon find him, no longer outside the walls of the city, but within them; no longer wandering at the

word of God, but settled, and in influence and repute, among the enemies of God. Within a few years he allies himself wholly with them. He "sits in the gate" among the elders, and dispenses the hospitality of the city. He marries and betroths his daughters to men of Sodom. The city is stormed by the Kings of the East, and Lot, as one of the principal inhabitants, is carried off a prisoner. Delivered by Abraham, even this sharp warning takes no effect, or no due effect, upon him. He continues to associate with men who were "wicked exceedingly" more closely than with "the friend of God."

And yet, strange to say, he holds fast his allegiance to God. Even in the ancient Chronicle we read that the men of Sodom cast this honourable reproach at him:¹ "This fellow came to sojourn among us, and yet he is for ever playing the judge over us,"—a reproach which St. Peter's words explain. For, doubtless, the man whose righteous soul was vexed with their filthy "conversation" and deeds often rebuked them, and seemed to them much more disposed to play the part of a judge and censor than that of a stranger and a suppliant. This reproach, however, is the most honourable thing recorded of him in the Old Testament, since it shews that he did not give in to the unrighteous and impure habits of the place, that he kept that sure mark of a manly and righteous mind—an unaffected loathing of all that is unclean. But in the New Testament much more is said for him than this. It affirms that the filthy habits and lawless deeds on which he daily looked were a daily penance, a deep vexation, to him, rousing him to indignation, filling him with inward strife and distress.

That they did not vex him enough to drive him from the ease and security of the city, and to carry him back to his old wandering life of faith, must be admitted; and therefore it must be admitted that they did not rouse and sting him as

¹ Gen. xix. 9 (Heb.).

they should have done. But before we condemn the Bible for not condemning him, or for pronouncing a too lenient verdict upon him—and there are many who are forward to complain that the Old Testament impairs the sanctions of morality by speaking of very imperfect men as righteous, or even as men “after God’s own heart”—let us consider both what God’s treatment of Lot really was, and what hope there would be for us if none but faultless men were to be accounted righteous with Him.

Lot sinned, sinned grievously and heinously, although the Bible pronounces him “a just man.” But, despite his righteous soul, or because of it, was he not daily and deeply punished for his sins? He saw his whole family ruined by his sins. The very life-blood of his descendants was poisoned by his sins. By and for his sins he himself was driven out, in his old age, from the easy indolence and security of his city life, to wander on the hills he had forsaken, to dwell in caves of the earth, to close his course in the lurid and disastrous eclipse of an involuntary crime almost unparalleled before or after. God is merciful. He makes large allowance for us all. But God is just—both in recognizing the righteous soul even when it breathes painfully under a load of faults and sins, and in punishing, that it may remove, the faults and sins which oppress it. Lot was “saved” because, despite his sins, he had a genuine love of righteousness; but he was “saved so as by fire,” the righteous indignation of God burning hotly against his sins, all the more hotly because they were the sins of a righteous man. And he must be dull indeed who can read the story of Lot, and find in it any indifference to moral distinctions, any weak indulgence for sin; nay, he must be a little wilfully dull who, as he considers this story, does not feel that, if the way of transgressors is hard, the way of a righteous man who sins against his own higher nature is harder still.

And can *we* afford to complain that the Bible judges Lot too leniently? Ought we not, rather, to rejoice in the Justice and Mercy which recognized what was really good in the man amid so much that was evil and came to an evil end? If we consider ourselves in the light of his story, may we not find in it both a warning and a hope that we sorely need?

When we are young we find it comparatively easy to devote ourselves to the service of truth and righteousness. We make sacrifices, we risk losses, we undertake labours and adventures cheerfully, in order that we may walk by faith and not by sight. We admit that this world cannot satisfy us, that it is not our home, that we are but learning to handle the tools with which our real work is to be done. We feel that we are but serving an apprenticeship, that we are in what the Germans call our "wandering-years," that we are but fitting ourselves for our true work. A fair ideal of life and conduct shines before us; and, that we may approach and realize it, we are willing to run some risks, to endure much discipline and many toils. But who does not know how our ideal fades and sinks as the years pass, how the ardour of our pursuit declines, how easily we are diverted from it, how costly and painful risk and sacrifice become to us, how constantly and strongly we are tempted to grudge, if not to forego, the labours in which we once took delight?

As Lot set out with Abraham, to serve the only true God and to acquaint himself with Him, so in our early years—if we have had a Christian rearing and are "naturally Christian"—under some potent spiritual impulse, we devote ourselves to the search for truth, to the service of righteousness. We find both truth and righteousness, and that in their most perfect forms, in Christ Jesus; and hence we consecrate ourselves to *Him*. For a while we do all we can to grow in the knowledge of his will,

or to carry the good tidings of his redeeming love to our fellows, to serve Him in serving them. We are unworldly in our motives and aims; and, like St. Paul, we think the world *well* lost if only we may know Christ and be found in Him, living his life, breathing his spirit, carrying on his work, filling up that which is behind of his affliction. But how often, as we grow older, and feel the influence and power of the world, and of the senses that crave the world, do we suffer that early zeal, that generous ardour, to decline! How often do we shrink from the toil and sacrifice of a growing fidelity to the claims of truth and righteousness and love, and fail to fulfil the bright promise of our morning hours! Like Lot, we permit the love of ease, of pleasure, of gain, to grow upon us. We come down from the hills, where the air is pure and bracing and severe, into the wealthy and inviting plains, the lower but common levels of life, where we can walk without much climbing, and enjoy ourselves without much labour. We do not intend to resign altogether the high spiritual life to which we once devoted ourselves, nor altogether to neglect our labours in the service of Christ and of his Church. We still admit that we are but pilgrims and sojourners here, as all our fathers were. But we pitch our tent nearer and nearer to the world. We are seldomer with God, and the friends of God. And, ere very long perhaps, we are no longer on the downs, or in the fields even, but in the city; no longer outside the world, much less at enmity against it, but in it and of it. The vigour of our principles and convictions is relaxed. We find it more and more difficult to render any service, to undertake any adventure, which involves toil, risk, self-denial; more and more easy to take the tone and adopt the manners of the world around us. If their "conversation" is filthy, if their vices are open and notorious, we still love

righteousness well enough to be vexed and offended, and even to drop an occasional rebuke. But we do not break away, as we should have done once, from those who habitually offend our purer and better instincts. They are necessary to our pleasures, or to our gains: in some ways we could not get on so well without them. We persuade ourselves that for business ends, or for political ends, or for social ends, we must put up with them: and we promise ourselves, but often in vain, that no familiarity with their bad habits, their coarse and vulgar tone, their self-indulgence, their greed and ostentation of wealth, shall ever lessen our repugnance to them. And so we enter on the very course in which the righteous Lot came to look so unrighteous, that we hardly like to hear him called "a just man."

I am not unmindful of the fact that, as we grow older, we inevitably grow weaker in many respects; that we cannot retain the freshness, the elasticity, the sanguine and adventurous temper of youth, any more than we can retain its physical energy and warmth. In some ways we are compelled to do less than we did—much as we may resent the compulsion, and to leave arduous and laborious enterprises to those who are still in their prime. But if, as we grow older, we grow in some ways weaker, ought we not also, if at least we have a Christian and righteous soul, to grow stronger in some ways? Ought we not at least to grow wiser, purer, kinder, and have learned how to apply our remaining strength more judiciously and effectively? Ought we to think less of the spiritual and eternal world as we get nearer to it? Ought this lower world to gain a firmer hold upon us as we are about to quit it? Should not truth and righteousness and charity be the dearer to us after our long pursuit and partial enjoyment of them? Can it be right that we should grudge to do what we are still able to do in the service of Christ

and his Church? Ought we not, on the contrary, to be the more eager to serve a Master whom we are so soon to meet, to give or risk more for Him from whom we have received so much?

These are questions which as many of us as are in middle life, or drawing towards its verge, need to press home on ourselves. And there is a warning in the history of Lot which *we* at least ought to take. It should not content us that we are "vexed" with the ignorance, the vice, the selfishness and sinfulness, of the world around us. We should strive against them with all our remaining powers. It is neither right nor safe for us, whatever our caution and experience, to mingle habitually with habitual sinners against the pure law of Christ in order to gain any ends of our own, but only that we may do them good in turning them away from their sins. For us of all men, as the ardour and enthusiasm of youth die out of us, it is requisite to refresh and renew our ideals of life and duty, to keep ourselves in vital contact with the Source of all life and virtue, that we may keep ourselves unspotted by the world. It should be our effort and aim to dwell on the hills rather than on the plain, in fellowship with God and the friends of God rather than with those who practically deny his rule and break his law. Because the time is short, we should be the more diligent to redeem the time. Because our work will soon be over, we should do it the more earnestly. Because we can do so little, we should be the more bent on doing as much as we can, and on making our little more by doing it with a perfect heart.

This is our warning; and our hope is that, if we keep a righteous soul under all our faults and defects, all our failures and sins, the Divine Judge and Ruler of men will recognize it as a righteous soul; and will send us the discipline which will free us from all faults and establish, settle, and strengthen us in all righteousness.

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