

ANGEL WORK IN A BAD TOWN**F.B. Meyer:**

The waters of the Dead Sea ripple over a part of the site where once stood the cities of the plain, with their busy stir of life, and thought, and trade. But all the sounds of human joy, sorrow, or industry. the tread of the soldier, the call of the herdsman, the murmur of the market, the voices of little children playing in the open spaces -- ALL are hushed in that awful solitude, the aspect of which is a striking testimony to the truth of the inspired Word.

Embosomed in gaunt mountains, the Dead Sea lies thirteen hundred feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea. So weird and desolate is the scene, that it was long believed that no birds would fly across the sullen waters; no shells line the strand; no trace of living verdure is found along the shores: but, strewn along the desolate margin lie trunks and branches of trees, torn from the thickets of the river jungle by the violence of the Jordan, borne rapidly into the Sea of Sodom, and cast up again from its depths, encrusted with the salt which makes those waters utterly unfit to drink. And as the traveller wanders around the spot, he is irresistibly reminded of the time, when "the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground."

THE REASONS WHICH JUSTIFIED THIS SUPREME ACT OF DESTRUCTION:**(1) IT WAS A MERCIFUL WARNING TO THE REST OF MANKIND**

The lesson of the Flood had well-nigh faded from the memory of man; and, heedless of all restraint, the human family had made terrible advances in the course of open shameless vice -- so much so that there seemed an imminent danger of men repeating the abominable crimes that had opened the sluices of the Deluge. It was surely, therefore, wise and merciful to set up a warning, which told its own terrible story, and reminded transgressors that there were limits beyond which the Judge of all the earth would not permit them to go.

It is true that the visitation, if it temporarily alarmed the nations of the immediate neighborhood, did not prevent them from reaching a similar excess of immorality some centuries later, or from incurring at the edge of Joshua's sword the doom which heaven's fire had executed on their neighbors in the Jordan plain. Still, God's warnings have a merciful intention, even where they are unheeded; and this Sodom catastrophe has been well said to belong to that class of terrors in which a wise man will trace "the loving-kindness of the Lord."

(2) MOREOVER, IN THIS TERRIBLE ACT THE ALMIGHTY SIMPLY HASTENED THE RESULT OF THEIR OWN ACTIONS

Nations are not destroyed until they are rotten at the core; as the north-east wind which snaps the forest trees only hastens the result for which the borer-worm had already prepared. It would have been clear to any thoughtful observer who had ventured out after dark in Sodom that it must inevitably fall. Unnatural crime had already eaten out the national heart, and, in the ordinary course of events, utter collapse could not be long delayed.

Go into the tents of Abraham, and you find simplicity; hospitality; the graces of a truly noble character, which guarantee the perpetuity of his name, and the glorious future of his children. Now go to Sodom; and in that sultry climate you find a population enervated with luxury; debased by cowardly submission to a foreign tyrant; cankered to the core with vice; not ten righteous men among them all; whilst the purity and sanctity of home are idle words. All these symptoms prognosticate, with prophetic voice, that their "sentence lingereth not, and their destruction slumbereth not."

This suggests a solemn lesson for ourselves. The tide of empire has ever set westwards. India, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, have successively wielded supreme power, and sunk into oblivion. Shall it depart from Britain, as it has departed from the rest? It need not do so. Yet, as we remark the increase of extravagance and luxury; the reckless expenditure on pleasure; the shameless vice that flaunts itself in our streets; the adulation of wealth, the devotion to gambling laxness of the marriage tie -- we may well entertain the darkest fears about the future of our fatherland. The only hope for us is based on the important part which we are called to play in facilitating the evangelization of the world. Should we once fail in this -- or should we send out more opium chests than Bibles, more spirit-sellers than missionaries --nothing can avert our fall.

(3) BESIDES, THIS OVERTHROW ONLY HAPPENED AFTER CAREFUL INVESTIGATION

"I will go down now and see." Beneath these simple words we catch a glimpse of one of the most sacred principles of Divine action. God does not act hastily, nor upon hearsay evidence; He must see for Himself if there may not be some mitigating or extenuating circumstances. It was only after He had come to the fig-tree for many years, seeking fruit in vain, that He said, "Cut it down: why cumbereth it the ground?" And this deliberation is characteristic of God. He is unwilling that any should perish. He is slow to anger. Judgment is His strange work. He tells us that some day, when we come to look into His doings, we shall be comforted, concerning many of the evils which He has brought on the world, because we shall know that He has not done WITHOUT CAUSE all that He has done (Ezekiel 14:23).

(4) THERE IS THIS CONSIDERATION ALSO -- THAT, DURING THE DELAY, MANY A WARNING WAS SENT

First, there was the conquest by Chedorlaomer, some twenty years before the time of which we write. Then there was the presence of Lot, which, indeed, was enfeebled by his inconsistencies, but was yet a protest on the behalf of righteousness (2 Peter 2:7-8). Finally, there was the deliverance and restoration by the energetic interposition of Abraham. Again and again had God warned the men of these cities of their inevitable doom, if they did not repent. To use His own expressive words, He "rose up early" to send His messengers; but the people would not hear.

Nor is His usage different in the case of individuals. The course of every sin is against a succession of menacing red lights and exploding fog signals, warning of danger if that course be pursued. Just as the quivering of the nerves tells when the system is overstrained, and demands immediate rest at the risk of certain paralysis, if that warning be disregarded; so has God arranged that no downward step can be taken, without setting going vast numbers of shrill bells that tell of danger ahead. Transgressor! the signals are all against thee.

To regard these alarm-tokens is to be saved. To disregard them, persevering in spite of all, is to deaden the soul and harden the heart, and run the risk of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. For that unpardonable sin is not an act, but a state -- the condition of the soul that does not, and cannot, feel; that is utterly insensible and careless of its state; that drifts heedless to its doom; and is not forgiven, simply because it does not admit or feel its need of forgiveness, and, therefore, does not ask for it.

(5) IT IS WORTHY OF NOTICE THAT GOD SAVED ALL WHOM HE COULD

Lot was a sorry wreck of a noble beginning. When he started forth, as Abraham's companion from Ur, he gave promise of a life of quite unusual power and fruit. But he was one of those characters which cannot stand success. There is no temptation more insidious or perilous than that. The Enchanted Ground is more to be dreaded than the open assaults of Apollyon. More are ruined by the deceitfulness of riches than by the cares of life.

When first Lot went down to Sodom, attracted by the sole consideration of its pastures, it was no doubt his intention to keep aloof from its people, and to live outside its walls. But the moth cannot with impunity flutter about the flame. By and by he abandoned the tent life altogether, and took a house inside the city. At last he betrothed his daughters to native Sodomites, and sat in its gateway as one of its aldermen. He was given to hospitality; but in the proposals by which he endeavored to vindicate its exercise, he proved how the air of Sodom had taken the bloom off his purity. He was with difficulty dragged out of Sodom, as a brand plucked from the burning; and over the closing scenes of his life it is decent to draw a veil. And yet such a wreck was saved!

Nor was he saved alone; but his wife also, who did not take many steps outside the city, before, by looking back, with a mixture of disobedience and regret, she showed herself utterly hopeless; and her two daughters, whose names are branded with eternal infamy. If God was so careful to secure their safety, how bad must those have been whom He left to their fate! Is it not clear that He saved all who at all came within the range of mercy's possibilities? There will not be one soul amongst the lost who had the faintest claim to be among the saved; and there will be a great many among the saved whose presence there will be a very great surprise to us. "They shall come from the east and west... but the children of the kingdom shall be cast out."

THE MOTIVES OF THE ANGELS' VISIT

These were three:

(1) THE PROXIMATE, OR NEAREST CAUSE WAS THEIR OWN LOVE TO MAN

The angels love us. Though they know that we are destined to a dignity before which that of the loftiest seraphs must pale, no envy eats out the pure benevolence which throbs within their holy spirits. It is enough that God has willed it so, and that we are dear to their sweet Master, Christ. It is then no hardship for them to leave "their golden bowers," or "cleave the flitting skies," that they may come and hasten lingerers to repentance. If there were any hardship, it would be in their mission to destroy.

(2) THE EFFICIENT CAUSE WAS ABRAHAM'S PRAYER

"And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" (Genesis 19:29). Pray on, beloved reader, pray on for that dear one far away in the midst of a very Sodom of iniquity. It may seem impossible for you to go down into it for his rescue, or to help him in any other way; but, in answer to your prayer, God will send His angels to that ship laboring in mid-ocean; into that log-house in the Canadian clearing, or that shanty by an African diamond mine; or away to that abode dedicated to vice or drink. God's angels go everywhere. A Sodom cannot hold its victims back from their touch, any more than their bright presences can be soiled by the polluting atmosphere through which they pass. Whilst you are praying, God's angels are on their way to perform your desire, albeit that their progress may be hindered by causes hidden from our ken (see Daniel 10:12).

(3) BUT THE ULTIMATE CAUSE WAS GOD'S MERCY

"The Lord being merciful to him." Mercy: that is the last link in the chain. Is it not the staple in the wall? There is nothing beyond it. The Apostle himself cannot allege a more comprehensive or satisfactory reason for his position in the sunlit circle of salvation than this: "I obtained mercy." "By the grace of God, I am what I am." And this shall be our theme also through that eternity whose day-star has already arisen in our hearts.

It seems marvelous that God should employ sons of men to win men to Himself. Surely angels could do it better! Nay, did they not save Lot with a pertinacity, and a holy ingenuity, which are full of teaching and stimulus to ourselves, as workers for the Lord? The world is full of Sodoms still; and Lots, whom we have known and loved or who have a claim on us, are sitting at their gates. Oh, why are we behind the angels in eagerness to pluck them as brands from the burning? Bright spirits, ye shall read us some holy lessons as to methods of Christian work; and we will try and emulate you -- lest the time should come when we shall be dismissed from our posts; and heaven's doors flung wide open each dawn to let out your rejoicing crowds, to take our place in class, or pulpit, or squalid court!

THE ANGELS WENT TO WHERE LOT WAS

"There came two angels to Sodom at even." What! did angels go to Sodom? Yes, to Sodom -- and yet angels. And as a ray of light may pass through the fetid atmosphere of some squalid court, and emerge without a stain on its pure texture, so may angels spend a night in Sodom, surrounded by crowds of sinners, and yet be untainted angel still. If you go to Sodom for your gains, as Lot did, you will soon show signs of moral pollution. But if you go to save men, as these angels did, you may go into a very hell of evil, where the air is laden with impurity and blasphemy, but you will not be befouled. No grain of mud shall stick. "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn" (Isaiah 54:17).

This is the spirit of Christ's Gospel. "He goeth after that which is lost till He find it." "He put forth His hand and touched him" (Luke 15:4; Matthew 8:3). We must not wait for sinners to come to us; we must go to them -- to the banks of the stream, where the fish hide in the dark, cool depths; to the highways of the town, where men congregate; to public-houses, music-halls, stews of crime, and homes of poverty; yea, and to the most distant parts of the world -- wherever men are found we must go to them, to preach the Gospel. The most unlikely places will yield Lots, who would have died in their sins, if they had not been sought out.

THEY WERE CONTENT TO WORK FOR VERY FEW

Special value attaches to hand-picked fruit. Too often we, in our ignorance, prefer to go into the orchard and shake down from the trees the abundant crop, until the ground far and near is littered with fruit. But we forget how much waste there is in the process; and how much of the crop becomes bruised: whilst some is torn prematurely from the parent bough.

So far as we can gather, all our Lord's choicest followers were the result of His personal ministry. To one and another He said, "Follow Me!" His life was full of personal interviews. He sought out individual souls (Matthew 4:19,21; 9:9; Luke 19:5). He would spend much time and thought to win one solitary woman, her character none too good (John 4). He believed in going after one sheep that was lost. And the steadfastness of their characters vindicated His methods. And it is most beautiful to trace the same characteristic in the Apostle Paul, who says that he "warned every man, and taught every man, that he might present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Colossians 1:28).

It is a question whether more men are not saved by individual appeal than by all our preaching. It is not the sermon which wins them; but the quiet talk with a worker at an after-meeting, or the letter of a parent, or the words of a friend. When Christ said, "Preach the Gospel to every creature," did He not suggest that we were to set ourselves to the work of leaving the proclamation of heaven's love at every door, and to every child of Adam, throughout the world?

We never know what we do when we win one soul for God. Is not the following instance, culled from the biography of James Brainerd Taylor -- called home to God too early, and yet not before he had won hundreds of souls by his personal appeals -- a fair specimen of myriads more?

On one occasion he reined up his horse to drink at a roadside well. Another horseman at the same moment did the same. The servant of God, as the horses were eagerly quenching their thirst, turned to the stranger, and spoke some burning words concerning the duty and honor of Christian discipleship. In a moment more they had parted, and were riding in different directions. But the word of God remained as incorruptible seed, and led to the conversion of that wayside hearer. He became a Christian and a missionary. Often he wondered who had been the instrument of his conversion, and sought for him in vain. But he did not succeed in identifying him till years after, when, in a packet of books, sent him from his native land, he opened the story of that devoted life, and in the frontispiece beheld the face which had haunted him, in sleeping and waking hours, ever since that slight but memorable interview.

It has been said that the true method of soul-winning is to set the heart on some one soul; and to pursue it, until it has either definitely accepted, or finally rejected, the Gospel of the grace of God. We should not hear so many cries for larger spheres, if Christians only realized the possibilities of the humblest life. Christ found work enough in a village to keep Him there for thirty years. Philip was torn from the great revival in Samaria to go into the desert to win one seeker after God.

Have you ever spoken to your servant, your shoeblack, your postman, your companion, your neighbor? Ah, it would not take long to evangelize the world, if every man would teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying "Know the Lord!"

THEY TOLD LOT PLAINLY OF HIS DANGER

"Hast thou here any besides? ...bring them out of this place: for we will destroy this place, because the cry of them in waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it" (Genesis 19:12-13). We are rather squeamish nowadays of talking to men thus. We have lined our lips with velvet. We aim to be gentler than Christ. He did not hesitate to speak of an undying worm and a quenchless flame. The gnashing of teeth; the wail of despair; the knock to which no door would open -- were arguments which came more than once from His lips. (See Matthew 8:12, 13:42,50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:10-12,30; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 13:25-28). He evidently taught as if men might make a mistake which they could not possibly repair. If certain elements are wanting in food, the children will grow up boneless and unhealthy; and if we do not take care, the deficiency of our modern teaching will have disastrous results. Whether we talk about it or not, it is yet as true as the nature of God, that those who obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ "shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power" (2_Thessalonians 1:9). And "if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:26-27).

It may be that the day of grace is nearer to its close than we think. The clock of destiny may have struck; the avalanche may have commenced to roll forward its overwhelming mass; whilst the storm-clouds may brood heavily over a godless age, for which, in the Day of Judgment, it shall be worse than for Sodom and Gomorrah. There may be nothing to portend this momentous fact. "The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar." Nature keeps God's secrets well. No portent in heaven, no driving up of the cloud-wrack in the clouds, no tremor on earth; but the axe suddenly driven home to the heart of the doomed tree. Escape, my reader, for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou anywhere short of the cleft side of Jesus, where only we may hide

from the just judgment of sin. Rest not till thou hast put the Lord Jesus between thyself and the footsteps of pursuing justice.

THEY HASTENED HIM

"When the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot" (19:15). They had been reluctant to stay in his house, unlike the alacrity with which they accepted Abraham's hospitality; and they spent the short sultry night in urging on Lot the certainty and terror of the approaching destruction. So much so that they actually got him to go to arouse his sons-in-law. But an inconsistent life cannot arrest the wanderer, or startle the sleeper into wide-awakeness about his soul. People say that we must conform a little to the manners of our time, if we would exert a saving influence over men. It is a fatal mistake. If we live in Sodom, we shall have no power to save the people of Sodom. You must stand outside of them, if you would save them from the gurgling rapids. Yes, dwellers in Sodom, you cannot level Sodom up; but it will certainly level you down, and laugh at you, when you try to speak. "He seemed as one that mocked unto his sons-in-law."

But when he came back from his ineffectual mission, Lot seemed infected by the scepticism which had ridiculed his warnings. "He lingered." How could he leave his children, and household goods, and property, on what seemed to be a fool's errand? Surely all things would continue as they had been from the beginning of the world. "And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand."

It was hand-help. It was the urgency of a love that would take no denial. The two angels had but four hands, but each hand was full, and each clasped the hand of a procrastinating sinner. Would that we knew more fully this divine enthusiasm, which pulls men out of the fire! (Jude 23).

Nor were they satisfied, till their protoges were safe outside the city; and were speeding towards the rampart of the distant hills. So Lot was saved from the overthrow. But though he was sent out of Sodom, he took Sodom with him; and over the remainder of his history we must draw a veil. Still, it is a marvelous testimony to the power of intercessory prayer, to learn that a man so low in the moral scale, together with his daughters, was saved for Abraham's sake; and if he had finally settled at the little city of Zoar, that too would have been spared for his sake.

Let us hasten sinners. Let us say to each one: "Escape for thy life; better lose all than lose your soul. Look not behind to past attainments or failures. Linger nowhere outside the City of Refuge, which is Jesus Christ Himself. Haste ye! habits of indecision strengthen; opportunities are closing in; the arrow of destruction has already left the bow of justice: "behold, now is the accepted time: behold, now is the day of salvation."