

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF GENESIS.

GENESIS XIII. II.

So Lot chose him all the Plain of Jordan ; and Lot journeyed east : and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the Plain, and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

CERTAIN minor characters are apt to be passed over by us somewhat too lightly as we read the Holy Scriptures. Our eye dwells naturally on the prominent figures ; we grow familiar with leading patriarchs, lawgivers, and prophets, while the minor characters stand indistinct and overshadowed in the background, and their features are only dimly realized. And yet these are the men who, for the most part, form the most exact types of everyday characters ; and so the lesson of their lives very often comes even closer home to us than that of men who were greater and better than they.

The name of Lot is not one of the great names of the ancient story. It finds no place on the roll of the worthies immortalized by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He is not named as one of that illustrious company of whom the world was not worthy. No deed of heroism, no achievement of faith, is associated with his name. On the contrary, it is a name of weakness and of shame, as well as of dire and terrible calamity. Yet Lot was not a bad man so far as his personal character was concerned, considering the age in which he lived. He was a man who wanted to get the best out of this world from a godless standpoint, and then get what he valued of the world to come. He did not make his choice upon dishonest principles ; he simply chose from worldly motives. He had not Abraham's largeness of soul or 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. Lot was a good man—good, that is, in intention, good in the deepest desire of his heart, perfectly sincere in many ways, always desiring to be right, and yet becoming so sadly wrong that to-day he stands out upon the page of Holy Scripture, not as an example in whose steps we should follow, but as a warning, in order that we may avoid his pathway.

History may be described as an epitome of life. Just as evolution asserts that in the structure of man every type of created life is represented, so it may be said that every man epitomizes in himself all the moral forces that make the tragedy or the triumph of life. The passing of thousands of years makes absolutely no difference to the problem : the story of Lot is as human, as real, as vital, as though it happened yesterday ; and, indeed, there is no day when it is not being re-acted in human lives.

I.

TOWARDS SODOM.

1. Abraham and Lot had come forth together from the land of their birth in obedience to the same command. They started, it would seem, in the same hope, and joint-heirs of the same promises, and, as far as human eye could see, with the same future before them. For such an one as Lot, 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. There seems to have been a mixture of motives in his mind, partly religious and partly selfish. He believed in his uncle's future and no doubt was impressed with his nobility of character ; and it was doubtless with some stirring of heart, and with sincere feeling, that he had thrown in his venture with Abraham. They had shared in each other's poverty and hardships, and now shared in each other's wealth. Driven to Egypt by hunger and want of rain, they had returned men of substance, rich in flocks and herds.

2. They arrived at Bethel, where Abraham had built an altar unto the Lord, 'and there Abram called on the name of the Lord,' but 'the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together.' Their substance was great, and there was a strife between the herdsmen of Abraham's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle. Abraham accordingly proposed a friendly separation, and left it to Lot to choose what part of the country he would settle in.

Here is the trial of Lot's faith. If there be

anything great in the heart of Lot the nobility and generosity of his uncle's purpose will surely bring it to the surface, and evoke an answering nobility. If he have but one spark of right feeling he will indignantly refuse to choose. For Abraham the older man; his flocks and tents are more numerous; to him God has promised this land that lies smiling to heaven around them; and all of prosperity that has come to Lot has come through association with Abraham.

3. In this great crucial test of Lot's character he (as no doubt he often did before) met Abraham's generosity with selfishness. He lost his chance of meeting Abraham's generosity with equal generosity. For the world had taken possession of his heart. Egypt, which had been to Abraham a discipline, had been to Lot a temptation. His imagination there was inflamed by the sight of wealth beyond dream. His soul was taken captive by the desire to be rich. So he made his choice just as everybody else would who wanted to be rich, who wanted to have worldly pleasure and fame. He lifted up his eyes and saw the plain of the Jordan, 'that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the garden of the Lord,' and he said, 'That is the place for me.' He did not pause to think that 'the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.'

4. Lot pitched his tent *towards* Sodom. The action explains the man. He could not have been wholly ignorant of the reputation of Sodom, but he was in no mood to remember it. He saw the rich, fertile plain, the magnificent opportunities for aggrandizement it afforded, and he conveniently overlooked the character of its inhabitants. He had a keen eye for his worldly interests, but no sense whatever of his spiritual interests. He had no sentimental views about Canaan such as Abraham had; the plain of Sodom was a Promised Land good enough for him. If there was any moral risk in choosing Sodom, he was prepared to take it.

Lot meant to have no part morally in the place. He meant only to reap the earthly advantage. And possibly not much evident harm could come to *himself*; his habits were formed: his life was more or less fixed in its tendency; the risk was very little that he would be infected by the loathsome sins of the cities of the plain. And so he shut his eyes to the risks to his children, and

likely enough argued that it was for their good that he made his choice, to make money for them, and advance them in life. In the light of things seen, Lot for the moment had shut out of vision the unseen things. He was acting as though this life were all, as though the only thing worth thinking about was wealth, as though the supreme aim of existence was to become more and more wealthy.

And yet we must not understand that Lot intended to throw away his religion, and to give up the service of God. Had this been the case, his whole religious character would have been sacrificed at a stroke, and he would never have obtained mention among the righteous men of the Scriptures. But the religious life was weak within him. For the time being, he sank his religion out of account, and made his decision in view of worldly principles alone. Probably it did not occur to him that his religious life was involved in the matter.

There is an old legend of a swan and a crane. A beautiful swan alighted by the banks of the water in which a crane was wading seeking snails. For a few moments the crane viewed the swan in stupid wonder, and then inquired. 'Where do you come from?' 'I come from heaven!' replied the swan. 'And where is heaven?' asked the crane. 'Heaven!' said the swan, 'Heaven! have you never heard of heaven?' And the beautiful bird went on to describe the grandeur of the Eternal City. In eloquent terms the swan sought to describe the hosts who live in the other world, but without arousing the slightest interest on the part of the crane. Finally the crane asked: 'Are there any snails there?' 'Snails!' repeated the swan, 'no, of course not.' 'Then,' said the crane, as it continued its search along the slimy banks of the pool, 'you can have your heaven, I want snails!' Abraham chose Heaven as his portion. Lot was willing to sacrifice his wife, his family, his all, for snails.

II.

IN SODOM.

1. When Lot pitched his tent towards Sodom, it was a step towards sin. His history from the day that he left Bethel is one of steady moral declension.

If any one had told Lot that within a little while he would be inside the city, and those pure-hearted girls of his would be married to Sodomites, he would have scorned the idea. He thought he could live in the suburbs of Sodom and still retain the simplicity of a patriarch; but it was impossible. The lack of principle that made him willing to risk the demoralization of the plain at all, for the

sake of temporal advantage, made him ready before long to go further, and become a citizen of Sodom. Within a few years he allied himself wholly with them. He 'sat in the gate' among the elders, and dispensed the hospitality of the city. He married and betrothed his daughters to men of Sodom. Then the city was stormed by the Kings of the East, and Lot, as one of the principal inhabitants, was carried off a prisoner.

2. Thus independently of religious considerations, Lot's place of abode had its disadvantage in that very fertility and opulence which he had coveted, and which attracted the notice of those whose power enabled them to be rapacious. Abraham at this time dwelt in the plain of Mamre, and on hearing the news of his kinsman's capture he at once assembled his own followers, pursued the plunderers, surprised them by night, routed them, and rescued Lot with his fellow-captives and all his goods. This was a gracious warning to Lot. And it was not a warning only; it seems also to have been an opportunity for breaking off his connexion with the people of Sodom, and removing from the sinful country. However, he did not take it as such. Nothing, indeed, is said of his return thither in this passage of the history; but in the narrative which follows shortly after, we find him still in Sodom. The temporary loss of his property, his meeting again with Abraham, who bravely rescues him and his belongings, does not win him back to his former life. The man *himself* is altered by the moral choice he made, and back he goes to the Sodom which he has chosen.

In the Freeport Debate in 1858 between Douglas and Lincoln—during the contest for senatorship of Illinois—Lincoln decided, against the advice of his party friends, to put to Douglas the question: 'Can the people of a United States Territory in any lawful way, against the wish of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of a State constitution?'

The advice against propounding the question was emphatic. 'If you propound it, you can never be Senator.' 'Gentlemen,' said Lincoln, 'I am killing larger game: if Douglas answers, he can never be President, and the battle of 1860 is worth a hundred of this.'

Douglas answered the question, and won his election; but shortly afterwards the prediction of Lincoln came true, and the situation was thus described by a member of Douglas' party:

'His adversary stood upon principle and was beaten: and lo! he is the candidate of a mighty party for the presidency of the United States. The senator from Illinois faltered. He got the prize for which he faltered; but lo! the grand

prize of his ambition to-day slips from his grasp, because of his faltering in his former contest, and his success in the canvass for the Senate, purchased for an ignoble price, has cost him the loss of the presidency of the United States.'¹

III.

AS SODOM.

1. Lot returns, then, to the accursed city. 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: '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. We read in 2 P 2⁸, 'That righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their lawless deeds.'

Why did a man with a beginning like Lot, and with past experiences like Lot, why did he not rise up and leave a life, and a neighbourhood, and an occupation, and a companionship out of all which so much danger and so much vexation of soul continually sprang? The reason was that he had invested in Sodom, as our merchants would say. He had invested money, and he had embarked himself and his household in the land round Sodom, in the produce of Sodom, and in her splendid profits. And with all the vexations that wrung his heart Lot could never make up his mind to be done with Sodom and Gomorrah for ever. And so he remained in Sodom, not entering into its life, uneasy and disturbed, vexing his righteous soul from day to day, but without the moral courage to leave the city till he was thrust out by the mercy of heaven, 'saved yet so as by fire.'

2. Eleven years have now glided away since the plundering of Sodom and the calamities of Lot. All things are again as they were. If there is any difference, the city is much worse in morals and its abuse of God, religion, and nature. But the cup of Sodom is now full and running over, and the cry of her sins has gone up before the God of the nations. The angels of God visit Abraham with the news of her impending doom, and he intercedes in vain, for there are not ten righteous men to be found to save her from destruction. These messengers of wrath towards the ill-fated

¹ John G. Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln*.

city approach the gates at even, and are received by the hospitable Lot alone. Turning into his house, vile revellers threaten them, and are struck with blindness. The angels advise Lot with his family and kindred to escape the coming wrath. 'The Lord,' said they, 'will destroy this city.' Lot, deeply anxious for his married children, winds his way, unknown, through the violent and dissolute throng, hurries to the houses of his sons-in-law, and warns them of the impending fate; but they turn him away 'as one that mocked,' and pity his insane delusion. Indeed, one may affirm that he himself hardly credits the message he brings to others; we are expressly told that he lingered, could hardly be torn away from the precious things of earth to which his soul so clung, was delivered from perishing with the perishing city only by the gracious violence of an angel, who saved him as in his own despite. The angels lay hold upon him and his, and thrust them out of the city; with his wife and his two unmarried daughters, he flees from all else he held dear on earth.

3. They went on—but in the heart of Lot's wife ten thousand conflicting wishes, fears, emotions, regrets were working hard and fast. As they hurried on in silence these acquired form and force; her frail soul lingered. The twilight was gone, the sun was rising gorgeous and bright, touching the bright valley with a smile. There were no symptoms of the coming portent. Why should they hasten so? They might have brought some of their goods with them. She was weary of going out at God's bidding—never knowing whither she went. Better they had stayed at Haran. She had gone over from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran, from Haran to Canaan, then they were driven by stress of famine into Egypt, then from Egypt to Canaan again, then they settled in Sodom, then they were harried by Chedorlaomer; and now, just when they had recovered from that, and were rich and increased in goods and forming connexions in the city—when she wanted to be at peace in her old age and die in her nest—she must go forth again, without home, or shelter, or substance, or hope. It was too much. It required a bold and foreseeing faith to bear this, to follow the guidance of an unseen God leading through such mysterious and painful ways. Her spirit sank and she fell behind; what temptations rushed through her mind we know not. Only we know the loss of

Sodom clave to her—she had gone out with her feet, her heart was there still. She had no notion of going back in person, but in heart and in thought she was there. She would look and take one long, last gaze at her only quiet home. She turned and looked, and God smote her in that moment. 'His wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.'

At first sight, perhaps, one might suppose this woman had been dealt with very hardly; and we are tempted to say that the punishment was out of all proportion to the crime. But, if we feel that, it is because we fail to realize all that her longing glance implied. It was a clear proof that, if she could, she would have turned back to her old haunts; and that indeed, so far as will and choice were concerned, she had turned back already.

As a snap-shot seizes the attitude of the instant and gives it a permanent record, so the pillar of salt embodies the attitude of Lot's wife as she turns back in her flight. It gives permanent expression to the dominant note in her character. She is flying from Sodom, but her heart is there still.¹

4. 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. It is life, and life only, that he has saved; all else is gone, all that he has gotten by preferring himself in honour and profit to others on that memorable day when they two, uncle and nephew, separated and went their several ways to issues so different; all that he had gotten by taking up his abode with the wicked—that is gone too. It is not much more that we hear of him—certainly nothing that alters for the better our estimate of his character.

5. The story of Lot is an account of a man who started with brilliant prospects, but who made a failure of himself. It is recorded for us in order that we may understand and avoid the causes that led to the failure. And the point of the whole narrative is that the trouble with Lot was not his lack of a fair chance but his lack of deciding power in his choice and his conduct. Lot in effect made the great refusal, turned his back upon the highest, chose the world, and got Sodom for his portion; he was dowered with the worldling's withered heart and enfeebled will, and in the

¹ J. H. Murphy.

end shame and ruin and 'self-contempt bitterer to drink than blood.'

So from the heights of will
Life's parting stream descends,
And, as a moment turns its slender rill,
Each widening torrent bends.

From the same cradle's side,
From the same mother's knee,
One to long darkness and the frozen tide,
One to the peaceful sea.¹

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Prayer in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

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THE specific expression of faith is prayer; all means of grace therefore may be valued according to their influence upon the prayer of the believer. The witness of a Christian life is measured in this way:

'They knelt more to God than they used
That was all.'

Preaching is effective, when it makes the hearer move more freely in the spiritual world, where all movement is prayer; and since the New Testament is, in Dr. Forsyth's phrase, 'a preached word,' its measures also must be found in terms of prayer. Of any book or strand of teaching in the New Testament we may inquire—What difference did this make for those who received it in their understanding of prayer, and in their practice of it? There were other reactions, it is true, varying according to the needs and powers of the readers, but if we seek for the one reaction, common to all,—the one universal and inevitable reaction,—we shall find it in prayer. Thessalonians, or Colossians, or 'Hebrews' prayed differently after they received the messages of truth sent to them; this truth was worked out in their practical experience. It may be helpful to inquire, how this would come about in the little group to which the Epistle to the

Hebrews was addressed. What does it say in answer to the unspoken word of all hearers to all preachers, 'Teach us how to pray'?

The Letter was written to a group of scholarly believers, who were in danger of drawing back from their Christian profession. They must have gone more bravely without the camp, and borne the reproach of Jesus more loyally because of this message from their absent leader. But the demand for this loyalty to the Crucified is linked to a demand for a bolder approach to God. 'Let us therefore go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach' (13¹³); this is the one demand; and the other inseparable from it is to be found in the words, 'Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace.' It is our purpose to discover how the readers of such a letter would translate its vision and its counsel into prayer. What difference did the Letter make to the 'Hebrews' in their approach to God?

The concordance will not carry us all the way. The answer is not to be found in a catena of passages, directly dealing with prayer. Some writers and preachers make few explicit references to prayer, but their readers know that in reality they never deal with anything else. It is especially