

Genesis 19:1-29, Luke 17:26-32

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[0 : 00] I can only apologize, but I am going to begin with a reference to Brexit. Donald Tusk, the European Council President, a few weeks ago shared his thoughts on the subject of hell.

You may recall what he had to say, and I have here word for word what he said on that occasion. And he expressed himself in this way, I have been wondering what the special place in hell looks like for those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out.

Now, more recently, probably in the last week or two, he revisited the subject in fairness in response to a question that he was posed. And he assured us that, and again I quote, according to our Pope, I guess that's Pope Francis, I don't know what he's referring to there, but according to our Pope, the hell is still empty.

It means there's lots of spaces. Now this, of course, was met with guffaws of laughter from the gathered journalists.

According to Mr. Tusk, and it would seem, the journalists present, hell is a bit of a giggle. You know, hell is funny. It's something we can joke about, and people laugh.

[1 : 21] Now his views on the matter are, I suspect, shared by many. If God exists, and it's a big if, he certainly is not in the business of sending people to hell.

The kind of God we are willing to accommodate is one that does not judge. Hell, after all, has to do with judgment. And God, we are assured, does not judge.

Now in the light of such contemporary wisdom, if we can call it that, Jesus has three words for us to ponder on this evening.

Remember Lot's wife. Remember Lot's wife. The story of Lot's wife is all about God's judgment on sin and sinners.

And Jesus urges us, he urges you, to remember Lot's wife. And I want us to do that this evening. I want us to take seriously the words of Jesus as he urges us to remember Lot's wife.

[2 : 27] And the manner in which I want to do it is, I guess, in two ways or maybe in two stages. First of all, reminding ourselves of Lot's wife and the fate that she suffered.

Really just recount the story, but try to do so from the perspective of Lot's wife. And then move on and suggest two ways in which we would do well to remember or consider Lot's wife.

And so heed Jesus' call. So we'll begin with the story itself. The death of Lot's wife. Now we've read the chapter there in Genesis chapter 19.

But let's just recount the story again. But as I say, perhaps focusing particularly on the story from the perspective of Lot's wife.

It would be great if we had a name for her, but we don't. So we'll have to just identify her in the manner which the Bible does. In the manner which Jesus does. Simply as Lot's wife.

[3 : 32] We don't know much about her. But we can propose a plausible reconstruction of her life and circumstances. And given that it is a reconstruction, it can be no more than plausible.

Some of the things we're going to suggest we can't know for sure. But they would seem reasonable in the light of the knowledge that we do have. The Bible first introduces us to Lot's wife in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This is the first time that we meet her or even hear of her. We can perhaps draw from this that Lot only married his wife on settling in Sodom.

Prior to that, Lot is only ever referred to as Abraham's nephew. With no mention of a wife. Now, of course, the fact that there's no mention of a wife doesn't mean that he didn't have a wife.

But again, I think it seems plausible to imagine that it was on settling in Sodom that he began this relationship and married this woman, his wife.

[4 : 35] Now, if this is the case, and as I say, we can't state that categorically, but if this is the case, then Lot's wife was presumably a pagan citizen of Sodom.

I'm not using the word pagan within any pejorative sense, just simply an accurate description of who she would have been. She wasn't a worshipper of Yahweh. She was a pagan. She lived in, we're suggesting, Sodom.

And that's when Lot first met her. But Lot fixed his eyes and affections on this young woman from Sodom. I wonder what she thought of Lot's interest and intentions.

What we do know about Lot is that he was a wealthy man. By this stage, he had already prospered greatly. And no doubt, his arrival. You know, we read the account.

It's very interesting, the account of how Lot begins on the outskirts of Sodom. And then we find him in Sodom. Then we find him owning a house in Sodom. And there's this very dangerous move more and more into this place that was, as we had it described, so characterized by wickedness.

[5 : 43] But he was wealthy. That's the point I want to make. He was a wealthy man. And that can be. I'm not saying it's true always. But it can be an attractive trait. And for a young woman from Sodom to marry, this eligible bachelor would have been, no doubt, thought a good opportunity for her.

But Lot wasn't just wealthy. He was a good man. Peter, in his letter, in the second letter of Peter, he describes Lot as a righteous man.

And we'll come back to that in a moment. And he was a good man. He had many faults. Of that, there is no doubt. But he was, at heart, a good man, a righteous man. And I would imagine that Lot's wife was willing to embrace Lot's God.

His views were, from her perspective, perhaps somewhat curious. He believed in one God. But he didn't seem to be too fanatical in his beliefs nor intolerant of the beliefs of others.

And so they married. And as I say, no doubt, Lot's wife, at least, formally embraced Lot's God. But without, I suspect, entirely abandoning her own cherished traditional beliefs, whatever they might have been.

[7 : 04] They were blessed with two daughters. And as time passed, her husband, though always an outsider, became more and more respected in the city. You know, there's a hint of that in the account we read in chapter 19, when the men who are seeking to attack Lot, and they describe him as this foreigner.

He had been there many years. He was a man who stood at the city gate. He was clearly a respected citizen and yet still viewed by some as an outsider, a foreigner. Now, there was one recurring matter that distressed her husband, that distressed Lot.

And yet, much to Lot's wife's relief, this did not stand in the way of their growing prosperity and status in the city. And what distressed him was the wickedness of the city.

Referring back to Peter and his letter, in the second letter of Peter. And let me just read what Peter says concerning Lot. That Lot was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless and tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard.

It's a really, very powerful language. Tormented in his righteous soul. Certainly not a sinless soul, but a righteous soul nonetheless. By the lawless deeds that he saw and heard round about him in the city he had chosen to call his home.

[8 : 33] Now, perhaps his wife tried to console him in his distress. Perhaps she urged him to keep his concerns to himself. There was little to be gained and much to be lost by being too different.

Much to be lost from being openly critical or judgmental of those around him. It is what it is. Are words that Lot's wife would perhaps often utter.

Lot, it is what it is. That's just the way this city rolls. Then one evening, Lot came home from the gateway of the city accompanied by two strangers.

It was clear to Lot's wife that her husband's concern was not simply to show hospitality, but to protect his guests from the dangers that they faced in Sodom. That Lot was very aware of.

I think it's significant that Lot is described there as saying to the guests, you know, come and stay at my house and leave early in the morning. Perhaps in that way, hoping to spare them the dangers that they might otherwise have faced.

[9 : 43] Of course, Lot had every right to be concerned for his guests. Before the evening was out, Lot's house was surrounded by a violent mob intent on sexual violence. They had come to rape the two strangers.

And Lot's wife looked on in horror as her husband was also threatened with violence and death and clutched at desperate measures to try and secure the safety of his guests.

And all appeared to be lost until the visitors intervened and somehow struck the mob with blindness. And they were safe for now.

But the visitors then uttered these words of warning. And these words are taken straight from the text of the Bible. Lot said, They thought he was joking.

They mocked this bizarre suggestion that Sodom, this great city, was to be destroyed by these two men. Lot's wife, I imagine, wasn't very sure what to believe.

[11 : 15] The warning of the men seemed real. There was something about these men. She had witnessed the way they had blinded the would-be attackers. And she had been impressed by this.

Struck by this. And so, on the one hand, she thought, Well, these are men who perhaps we need to listen to. And yet, the threat that they make, the prospect that they present, seemed so implausible.

How could these two men possibly destroy the whole of the city? And even her husband seemed to waver.

We're told that Lot hesitated. Did they really need to flee and leave everything they had worked for and cherished dearly? All that they owned.

All that they owned. Their home and their possessions. Their position. To flee and leave it all behind. But the men were insistent. They grasped Lot and his wife and daughters and practically dragged them out of the city.

[12 : 21] And once they were out of the city limits, as it were, they then further urged them, Flee for your lives. Don't look back. And don't stop or you will be swept away.

Lot negotiated a place of refuge. A town called Zoar. A town that came to be known as Zoar. That was nearer to hand. And they made their way to that place.

And as the sun dawned. All of this has been occurring through the night. As the sun dawned. The Lord struck Sodom and Gomorrah. And Lot's wife could hear the cataclysm behind her.

She could feel the searing heat. She could smell the sulfur. And she could still hear, I imagine, the words of the men ringing in her ears. Flee for your lives.

Don't look back. And don't stop or you will be swept away. But what did Lot's wife do? Well, we know what she did. She looked back.

[13 : 26] And she became a pillar of salt. How did that happen? How are we to understand how this woman, looking back, became a pillar of salt?

I think we do best to take seriously the warning of the angels as our explanation. Remember what the angels had said. And they were directing these words to Lot, and to Lot's wife, and to the two daughters.

And they had anticipated what would happen. They said, flee. Don't look back. Don't stop. Or you will be swept away. I think that's what happened.

In some way, she was swept away. She was overtaken by the same burning sulfur that consumed Sodom. Now, the outcome of that was that she appeared as a pillar of salt.

But what happened to her was what the men had said would happen to her. She was swept away. Had she fled, she would have been spared. But she stopped.

[14 : 25] She looked back. And she was consumed. Let's just draw together or summarize all that happened to Lot's wife or all that we can identify as being critical in this incident concerning Lot's wife.

First of all, we know that Lot's wife was warned of God's intentions. She would die if she remained in Sodom. We know that.

We know that Lot's wife was offered a way of escape. She was shown mercy. Lot speaks in those terms about how he had been shown mercy. And his wife also had been shown mercy.

She was shown mercy and she was given this offer of salvation. But Lot's wife was not only offered salvation, she was dragged in the direction of her salvation.

And she was this close to safety. She really was so close to safety. And all of this through no merit or effort of her own.

[15 : 34] It was all of God's grace, all of God's mercy. But we also know that Lot's wife looked back and was consumed. So this is what happened.

This is the story or part of the story. But why does Jesus urge us to remember Lot's wife? I think the fate of Lot's wife serves as both a warning and a call.

I think it's principally intended as a warning, but I think it also serves as a call. And I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. But let's think first of all of the principal purpose that Jesus has in view when he urges us to remember God's wife, Lot's wife.

First of all, it serves as a warning. Let's just for a moment step back and consider the big picture of what this story, a true story, tells us. Well, there are a few things that we can draw from it.

A few core truths. The first thing we have to acknowledge is that this story tells us that God hates sin. He hates all sin. The manner in which he responds to the sin of Sodom is ample evidence of that.

[16 : 44] God hates sin. He hates gross sin. Of course, when we hear Sodom and Gomorrah, the immediate reality that comes to mind that the names of the places are synonymous with what we might consider gross sexual sin.

Rape and violence and all manner of sexual sin. That's what the names of these places are most associated with and there's good reason for that. But God also hates what we might call respectable sin.

The sin of doing your own thing and living your own life without any reference to God or without worshipping God, without serving God. It's striking, surely, how when Jesus makes reference to the days of Lot, he makes no reference to the gross sin.

Not that he didn't know about it, but that's not what he focuses on. Notice there, or let's just remind ourselves of what Jesus says there in Luke chapter 17. Luke chapter 17, there in verse 28, it was the same in the days of Lot.

Does Jesus say people were raping and killing and murdering? No. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.

[17 : 59] But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. Of course, the picture perhaps there is the suddenness of it, how it came unexpectedly.

But nonetheless, the picture has been painted of a city that was extremely wicked, and yet part of their wickedness was simply this fact that they chose to live their lives ignoring God, not worshipping God, doing their own things, many of them seemingly innocuous enough, normal, the normal things that you and I do in our daily lives.

God hates sin. He hates all sin. We go back to Donald Tusk and his references to hell. Well, hell will be populated by the reprobate and the respectable, by nasty people and by nice people, by the violent and the virtuous.

As Donald Tusk assures us, there's plenty room. God hates sin. He hates all sin. God judges sinners. That too is very clear from the account.

But it's also true that God in mercy urges sinners to flee from his judgment. And where are we to flee to? Lot's wife had to flee to the mountains.

[19 : 22] That is where she was told she had to flee to. And had she done so, she would have been spared. She would have been saved had she done so, had she gone to where she was directed. But what about us?

Where do we have to flee to from the judgment of God? Well, we have to flee to Jesus. We flee from God's hand of judgment and we flee into God's arms of mercy.

And that doesn't seem to make sense, does it? We have to flee from God, but we flee to God. The very God who rightly and justly will judge sinners is the God who invites sinners to flee not from him, but to him.

We flee to God's son. We flee to Jesus. Why Jesus? What has Jesus done that equips him to provide refuge from God's judgment? Well, Jesus fled into the anger and judgment of God.

Indeed, of his own anger. You know, we read of the wrath of the son. Let's not have this idea that someone's the father who's very angry and you have this son. Oh, he's not angry.

[20 : 35] He's the nice one. No, the anger of God is the anger that is shared by each member of the Trinity. But Jesus, God the Son, he fled into the anger and judgment of God.

Jesus had no need to flee from God's judgment. He was sinless. But he chose to flee into the fire, into the crucible as he embraced death for us, as he bore the punishment that we deserved.

Why do so many fail to heed the warning? Lot's wife serves as a warning. Why do we fail to heed the warning? Why do many fail to heed the warning? Why do so many look back?

Why did Lot's wife look back? The truth is we don't know. Again, we're in the realm of plausible speculation. But we're not told was her heart in Sodom.

She was out of Sodom but her heart was still in Sodom. In Sodom was her past. In Sodom was her present. In Sodom was her position.

- [21 : 42] In Sodom were her possessions and she loved them so. And she chose them over God's refuge, God's embrace, God's salvation.

What about us? What about you and me? Are you so enamored and captivated by your past, your present, your position, your possessions that you hesitate to trust in and follow Jesus and go where he would have you go and live the life that he would have you live?

We are to remember Lot's wife as she serves as a warning to us on the urgency of fleeing to Jesus, of trusting in Jesus, of finding our refuge in Jesus.

Jesus is to be our Zohar, that place of refuge. So, Lot's wife serves as a warning but I think Lot's wife also serves as a call.

And here my focus is more on Lot and his responsibility to witness and to warn. So, we're moving away a little bit from Lot's wife to Lot himself. Let me suggest that there is a two-fold call to witness and to warn.

- [22 : 50] First of all, I think that the story of Lot and Lot's wife serves as a call to serious Christian living as a witness to the seriousness of God and of God's judgment.

And really, my thought process here is along these lines. Why did Lot's wife not take God's warning seriously? Or certainly not sufficiently seriously?

Why was that? I wonder, is Lot not partly responsible? His Christianity light suggested that it was possible to love God and money.

It was possible to be a follower of Yahweh but also dabble with those around him. There was no need to make tough choices and every opportunity to compromise.

As far as his wife could tell, Lot could have his cake and eat it and so could she. And so, Lot didn't do all that he ought to have done in demonstrating to his wife the seriousness of the matters at a hand.

- [24 : 04] What about his sons-in-law? We're told specifically about how he was told to go to his sons-in-law and to warn them that they should flee the city. But what are we told? We're told that they thought he was joking.

Now, why would they have thought that he was joking? You can be sure that the manner in which he gave the message gave no indication that he was joking. I can assure you that there would have been an intensity in the warning that he brought to them.

Why would they have thought he was joking when he said, Yahweh is going to destroy Sodom? Well, surely the reason they thought he was joking is because he'd never spoken of this Yahweh before, certainly not in these terms.

And they thought, well, what is this nonsense about? What is Lot talking about? We don't know anything about this Yahweh. We don't know anything about this God who judges sinners.

What's this all about? I wonder if Lot had been more careful in his life and witness in the years, the time that he knew his sons-in-law, their response to his warning might have been a different one.

- [25 : 18] So there's a call to serious Christian living, but a call also, and these things are very much intertwined, a call to urgent gospel witness. You see, God doesn't change.

God is eternal. He's unchanging. God still hates sin. He still judges sinners. When Jesus called on his disciples to remember Lot's wife, it was in the context of speaking of his coming, a coming to judge.

We need to warn those around us. We need to warn the reprobate and the respectable, the nice and the nasty, the violent and the virtuous. Will they listen?

Many, like Lot's sons-in-law, will mock. They'll laugh. They won't take it seriously. Others, like Lot's wife, will come so far but then turn back.

But others, we are sure, by the grace of God, will flee to Jesus and be saved. But the response, of course, is not our responsibility. We are simply called to sound the alarm.

[26 : 18] Let me suggest one further call that there is in this account as we remember Lot's wife. And I think it's a call to prayer. I think there's a very significant final detail in the account.

In chapter 19 of Genesis, in verse 29, at the very close of the account, we read this. So, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe.

You see, there's a connection there. There's a connection between God bringing Lot out of the catastrophe and his remembering Abraham. What had Abraham done? Abraham had pled on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham had interceded on behalf of the righteous in that city. And God remembered Abraham. And as he remembered Abraham, so he spared Lot and he brought him out of the catastrophe.

And so there we have, surely, for us, a call to prayer. To pray for those who are lost. To pray for those who are unsaved. To pray for those who have not yet put their trust in Jesus.

[27 : 28] That they might know Jesus and trust in Jesus and be spared his judgment. Remember Lot's wife.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the truth of it. We pray that we would take seriously all that you teach us and all the truths that you bring to our attention.

We acknowledge that you are a holy God. That you are a God who cannot countenance wickedness and ungodliness and sin of any kind.

You take sin seriously while we treat it as a joke. We treat your judgment as something to be laughed about and joked about. Forgive us for such folly and such foolishness.

Help us to heed the words of your son, our savior Jesus, when he comes to us and urges us to remember Lot's wife.

[28 : 36] Help us to do so in the manner that Jesus intends us to do so. And we pray these things in his name. Amen.