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"Abraham and Lot"  
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Saint John Henry Newman  
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"Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan." Gen. xiii. 10, 11.

THE lesson to be gained from the history of Abraham and Lot is obviously this,—that nothing but a clear apprehension of things unseen, a simple trust in God's promises, and the greatness of mind thence arising, can make us act above the world—indifferent, or almost so, to its comforts, enjoyments, and friendships; or in other words, that its goods corrupt the common run even of religious men who possess them. Lot, as well as Abraham, left his own country "by faith," in obedience to God's command; yet on a further trial, in which the will of God was not so clearly signified, the one was found "without spot and blameless," the other "was saved so as by fire." Abraham became the "father of all them that believe;" Lot obscured the especial hope of his calling,—impaired the privileges of his election,—for a time allowed himself to resemble the multitude of men, as now seen in a Christian country, who are religious to a certain point, and inconsistent in their lives, not aiming at perfection.

His history may be divided into three parts:—first, from the time of his setting out with Abraham from Haran, to their separation; then, from his settlement in the cities of the plain (as they are called), of which Sodom was one, till his captivity and rescue; and lastly, from his return to Sodom, to his escape thence to the mountain, under the Angel's guidance, when the Scripture history loses sight of him. Let us review these in order.

1. When Abraham and Lot first came into the land of Canaan, they had received, as it seems, no Divine direction where they were to settle. They first came to Sichem; thence they went on to the neighbourhood of Bethel; at length a famine drove them down to Egypt; and after this the history of their temptation (for so it must be called) begins.

Abraham and Lot had given up this world at the word of God; but a more difficult trial remained. Though never easy, yet it is easier to set our hearts on religion, when we have nothing else to engage them,—or to take some one decided step, which throws us out of our line of life, and in a manner forces upon us what we should naturally shrink from; than to possess in good measure the goods of this world, and yet love God supremely. Many a man might make a sacrifice of his worldly interests from impulse; and then having little to unsettle him, he is enabled to hold fast his religion, and serve God consistently and acceptably. Of course men who make such sacrifices, often evidence much strength of character in making them, which doubtless was Lot's case when he left his country. But it is even a greater thing, it requires a clearer, steadier, nobler faith, to be surrounded with worldly goods, yet to be self-denying; to consider

42 ourselves but stewards of God's bounty, and to be "faithful in all things" committed to  
43 us. In this, then, lay the next temptation which befel the two patriarchs. God gave them  
44 riches and importance. When they went down to Egypt, Abraham was honourably  
45 received by the king of the country. Soon after, it is said that Abraham had "sheep, and  
46 oxen, and he-asses, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and she-asses, and  
47 camels:" again, that "Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold;" and presently,  
48 that "Lot also ... had flocks, and herds, and tents." [Gen. xii. 16; xiii. 2, 5.] The  
49 consequence was, that, on their return to Canaan, their households and cattle had  
50 become too numerous for one place: "The land was not able to bear them, that they  
51 might dwell together; for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell  
52 together." [Gen. xiii. 6.] Their servants quarrelled in consequence; each party, for  
53 instance, endeavouring to secure the richest pastures, and the best supplied wells. This  
54 discordance in the chosen family was, of course, very unseemly, as witnessed by  
55 idolaters, the Canaanites and Perizzites, who lived in the neighbourhood. Abraham  
56 accordingly proposed a friendly separation, and left it to Lot to choose what part of the  
57 country he would settle in. Here was the trial of Lot's faith; let us see how he met it. It so  
58 happened, that the most fruitful region, the plain of Jordan, was in the hands of an  
59 abandoned people, the inhabitants of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the neighbouring cities.  
60 Now, the wealth which Lot had hitherto enjoyed had been given him as a pledge of  
61 God's favour, and had its chief value as coming from Him. But surely he forgot this, and  
62 esteemed it for its own sake, when he allowed himself to be attracted by the richness  
63 and beauty of a guilty and devoted country. The prosperity of a wicked people could not  
64 be accounted a mark of God's love; but to look toward Sodom was to go the way of the  
65 world, and to make wealth the measure of all things, and the end of life. In the words of  
66 the text, "Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well  
67 watered every where ... even as the garden of Eden ... And Lot chose him all the plain  
68 of Jordan ... and pitched his tent toward Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked,  
69 and sinners before the Lord exceedingly." I do not see how we can deny that this was a  
70 false step in the holy patriarch, blameable in itself, and leading to most serious  
71 consequences. "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God," says the  
72 Psalmist, "than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." [Psalm lxxxiv. 10.] But those who  
73 have accustomed their minds to look on worldly prosperity as highly desirable in itself,  
74 take it wherever they meet with it; now as given by God, and now, again, when not  
75 given by Him. It is not to them a point of first importance *by whom* it is given, at least not  
76 in their secret hearts: though they might, perhaps, be surprised did any one so tell them.  
77 If all this does not in its fulness apply to Lot, his history at least reminds us of what takes  
78 place daily in instances which resemble it externally. Men still consider themselves, and  
79 promise themselves to be, consistent worshippers of the One True God, while they are  
80 falling into that sin which the Apostle calls "idolatry,"—the love and worship of the  
81 creature for the Creator.

82 In the meantime Abraham is left without any earthly portion, but with God's presence for  
83 his inheritance: and so God witnessed it: for, as if to reward him for his  
84 disinterestedness, He renewed to him the promise already made him, of the future grant  
85 of the whole land, including even that fair portion of which Lot had temporary  
86 possession. "And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift

87 up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward and southward  
88 and eastward and westward; for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and  
89 to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth, so that if a man  
90 can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk  
91 through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee."  
92 [Gen. xiii. 14-17.]

93 2. Thus ends the first portion of the history of Abraham and Lot:—To proceed. God is so  
94 merciful that He suffers not His favoured servants to wander from Him without repeated  
95 warnings. They cannot be "as the heathen:" they are pursued with gracious visitings, as  
96 Jonah when he fled away. Lot had chosen the habitation of sinners; still he was not left  
97 to himself. A calamity was sent to warn and chasten him;—we are not told indeed that  
98 this was the intention of it, but we know even by the light of nature that all affliction is  
99 calculated to try and improve us, and so it is fair to say that this was the design of the  
100 violence and captivity to which Lot was soon exposed. Sodom, Gomorrah, and the  
101 neighbouring cities, which were subject to Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, at this time  
102 revolted from him. In consequence, their country was overrun by his forces and those of  
103 his allies; and, a battle taking place, the kings of those cities were defeated and killed,  
104 and "their goods and victuals" taken. Lot also and his property fell into their hands.  
105 Thus, independently of religious considerations, his place of abode had its disadvantage  
106 in that very fertility and opulence which he had coveted, and which attracted the notice  
107 of those whose power enabled them to be rapacious. Abraham at this time dwelt in the  
108 plain of Mamre, and on hearing the news of his kinsman's capture, he at once  
109 assembled his own followers, to the number of above three hundred men, and being  
110 joined by several princes of the country, with whom he was confederate, he pursued the  
111 plunderers, surprised them by night, routed them, and rescued Lot with his fellow-  
112 captives and all his goods.

113 This, I have said, was a gracious warning to Lot; not a warning only, it seems also to  
114 have been an opportunity of breaking off his connexion with the people of Sodom, and  
115 removing from the sinful country. However, he did not take it as such. Nothing, indeed,  
116 is said of his return thither in this passage of the history; but in the narrative which  
117 follows shortly after, we find him still in Sodom, though not involved in the Divine  
118 vengeance inflicted upon it;—but of this more presently.

119 Let us first turn, by way of contrast, to Abraham. How many excuses might he have  
120 made to himself, had he so willed, for neglecting his kinsman in misfortune! Especially  
121 might he have enlarged on the danger and apparent hopelessness of the attempt to  
122 rescue him. But it is a principal characteristic of faith to be careful for others more than  
123 for self. With a small band of followers he boldly pursued the forces of the victorious  
124 kings, and succeeded in recovering his brother's son. Observe, too, his disinterested  
125 and princely spirit after the battle, in refusing part of the spoil. "I will not take from a  
126 thread even to a shoelatchet," he said to the king of Sodom, "and I will not take any  
127 thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich." Besides, this might  
128 be especially necessary to mark his abhorrence of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah,  
129 and was a sort of protest against their sins. His conduct suggests a further remark:—He

130 had been promised the land in which he now lived as a stranger;—he had valiant  
131 troops, though few in number, who, doubtless, had he so desired, might have  
132 conquered for him a sufficient portion of it. But he did not attempt it: for he knew God  
133 could bring about his design and accomplish His promise in His own good time, without  
134 his use of unlawful means. Force of arms, indeed, would not have been unlawful, had  
135 God ordered their use, as afterwards when the Israelites returned from Egypt; but it was  
136 unlawful without express command, and Abraham perhaps had to overcome a  
137 temptation in not having recourse to it. We have, in the after-history, a similar instance  
138 of forbearance in the conduct of David towards Saul. David was promised the kingdom  
139 by God Himself; Saul's life was more than once in his hands, but he thought not of the  
140 sin of doing him any harm. God could bring about His promise without his "doing evil  
141 that good might come." This is the true spirit of faith: to wait upon God, to watch for and  
142 to follow His guidance, not to attempt to go before Him.

143 But did Abraham return to his place without reward for his generous and self-denying  
144 conduct? Far otherwise; God mercifully renewed to him the pledge of His favour in  
145 answer to this new instance of his faith. As He had renewed the blessing when Lot at  
146 first chose the fruitful land, so He blessed him now by the mouth of a great priest and  
147 king. Lot went back to Sodom in silence;—but God spoke to Abraham by Melchizedek.  
148 "And Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought forth bread and wine, and he was the priest  
149 of the most High God; and he blessed him and said, Blessed be Abram of the most  
150 High God, possessor of heaven and earth" (who can give away kingdoms and countries  
151 as He will), "and blessed be the most High God, who hath delivered thine enemies into  
152 thy hand." Who Melchizedek was, is not told us: Scripture speaks of him as a type of  
153 Christ; but we cannot tell how far Abraham knew this, or what particular sanctity  
154 attached to his character, or what virtue to his blessing. But evidently it was a special  
155 mark of favour placed on Abraham; and the bread and wine, brought forth as  
156 refreshment after the fight, had perhaps something of the nature of a sacrament, and  
157 conveyed the pledge of mercy.

158 3. Now let us pass to the concluding event of Lot's history. The gain of this world is but  
159 transitory; faith reaps a late but lasting recompense. Soon the Angels of God  
160 descended to fulfil in one and the same mission a double purpose;—to take from Lot his  
161 earthly portion, and to prepare for the accomplishment of the everlasting blessings  
162 promised to Abraham; to destroy Sodom, while they foretold the approaching birth of  
163 Isaac.

164 The destruction of the guilty cities was at hand. "The Lord said, Because the cry of  
165 Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down  
166 now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is  
167 come unto Me, and if not, I will know." [Gen. xviii. 20, 21] And now the greatest honour  
168 was put upon Abraham. God entrusted him with the knowledge of His secret purpose,  
169 and, in so doing, made him a second time the deliverer of Lot from ruin; strongly  
170 marking the contrast between the two, in that the weak brother owed his safety to the  
171 intercession of him, who, enjoying God's favour, was content to be without earthly  
172 portion. "And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do? seeing that

173 Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth  
174 shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his  
175 household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment,  
176 that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of Him." Accordingly,  
177 Abraham was allowed to intercede for Sodom, and all who were in it. I need scarcely go  
178 through this solemn narrative, which is doubtless well known to all of us. Abraham  
179 began with asking whether fifty righteous were not remaining in the city; he found  
180 himself obliged gradually to contract the supposed remnant of good men therein, till he  
181 came down to ten, but not even ten were found to delay God's vengeance. Here he  
182 ceased his intercession, perhaps in despair, and fearing to presume upon that adorable  
183 mercy, the depths of which he had tried, but had not ascertained. He did not mention  
184 Lot by name; still God understood and answered the unexpressed desire of his heart;  
185 for we are told presently, "It came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain,  
186 that God *remembered Abraham*, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when  
187 he overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt." [Gen. xix. 29.]

188 It was at eventide that two Angels came to Sodom, to rescue from it the only man (as it  
189 would seem) who had retained in his mind those instincts of right and wrong which are  
190 given us by nature, who continued to acknowledge the true God, had exercised himself  
191 in faith and obedience, and had not done despite to the gracious Spirit. Multitudes of  
192 children there doubtless were in that city untainted with actual sin; these were involved  
193 in their parents' ruin, as they are now-a-days in earthquakes, conflagrations, or  
194 shipwreck. But of those who could "discern between their right hand and their left," not  
195 ten (we know for certain), and (as it may be concluded) not one had righteousness such  
196 as Lot's. "Old and young, all the people," "in every quarter," were corrupt before God,  
197 and therefore are "set forth for an example" of what the All-merciful God can do when  
198 sinners provoke Him to wrath. "We will destroy this place," the Angels said, "because  
199 the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord, and the Lord hath sent us to  
200 destroy it." "And when the morning arose the Angels hastened Lot ... and brought him  
201 forth and set him without the city: and said, Escape for thy life, look not behind thee,  
202 neither stay thou in all the plain, escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed." Thus  
203 was Lot a second time warned and rescued; whether he was brought thereby to a more  
204 consistent righteousness, or more enlightened faith, than before, we know not. What  
205 became of him after this event we know not; of his subsequent life and death nothing is  
206 told us, the sacred record breaks off abruptly. This alone we know, that his posterity, the  
207 Moabites and Ammonites, were the enemies of the descendants of Abraham, his friend  
208 and kinsman, the favoured servant of God; especially as seducing them to that idolatry  
209 and sensuality which the chosen family was set apart to withstand. Had not God in  
210 mercy confirmed to us, by the mouth of St. Peter, the saying of the wise man in the  
211 Apocrypha, that Lot was "righteous," we should have had cause to doubt whether he  
212 had not fallen away.

213 However, without forming harsh judgments concerning one whom Scripture thus  
214 honours, we may at least draw from his history a useful lesson for ourselves. Miserable  
215 will be the fate of the doubleminded, of those who love this world so well that they will  
216 not give it up, though they believe and acknowledge that God bids them do so. Not that

217 they confess to themselves that their hearts are set upon it; they contrive to hide the fact  
218 from themselves by specious excuses, and consider themselves religious men. My  
219 brethren, do not take it for granted that your temper of mind is much superior to that  
220 which I have been describing and condemning; nay, that it is not worse than it. You,  
221 indeed, are placed in an age of the world which is conspicuous for decency, and in  
222 which there are no temptations to the more hideous forms of sin, or rather much to deter  
223 from them. But answer this one question, and then decide whether this age does not  
224 follow Lot's pattern. It would appear that he thought more of the riches than of the sins  
225 of the cities of the plain. Now, as to the temper of this country, consider fairly, is there  
226 any place, any persons, any work, which our countrymen will not connect themselves  
227 with, in the way of trade or business? For the sake of gain, do we not put aside all  
228 considerations of principle as unseasonable and almost absurd? It is not possible to  
229 explain myself on this subject without entering into details too familiar for this sacred  
230 place; but try to follow out for yourselves what I suggest in general terms. Is there any  
231 speculation in commerce which religion is allowed to interfere with? Whether Jew,  
232 Pagan, or Heretic, is to be our associate, does it frighten us ever so little? Do we care  
233 what side of a quarrel, civil, political, or international, we take, so that we gain by it? Do  
234 we not serve in war, do we not become debaters and advocates, do we not form  
235 associations and parties, with the supreme object of preserving property, or making it?  
236 Do we not support religion for the sake of peace and good order? Do we not measure  
237 its importance by its efficacy in securing these objects? Do we not support it only so far  
238 as it secures them? Do we not retrench all expenses of maintaining it which are not  
239 necessary for securing them? Should we not feel very lukewarm towards the  
240 established religion, unless we thought the security of property bound up in its welfare?  
241 Should we not easily resign ourselves to its overthrow, could it be proved to us that it  
242 endangered the State, involved the prospect of civil disturbances, or embarrassed the  
243 Government? nay, could we not even consent to that overthrow, at the price of the  
244 reunion of all parties in the nation, the pacification of turbulent districts, and the  
245 establishment of our public credit? Nay, further still, could we not easily persuade  
246 ourselves to support Antichrist, I will not say at home, but at least abroad, rather than  
247 we should lose one portion of the freights which "the ships of Tarshish" bring us? If this  
248 be the case in any good measure, how vain is it to shelter ourselves, as the manner of  
249 some is, under the notion that we are a moral, thoughtful, sober-minded, or religious  
250 people! Lot is called a "just man" by St. Peter, he is referred to as "hospitable" by St.  
251 Paul [2 Pet. ii. 7, 8. Heb. xiii. 2.]; doubtless he was a confessor of the truth among the  
252 wretched inhabitants of the cities in which he dwelt; and the rays of light which those  
253 Apostles shed upon his history, are most cheering and acceptable, after reading the sad  
254 narrative of the Book of Genesis; still, after all, who would willingly take on himself Lot's  
255 sins, plain though it be that God had not deserted him? Surely, if we are to be saved, it  
256 is not by keeping ourselves just above the line of reprobation, and living without any  
257 anxiety and struggle to serve God with a perfect heart. Surely, if Christians are to be  
258 saved, at least their righteousness must be far other than that which merely argued  
259 some remaining grace in one who was not a Christian. Surely, if Christians are to be  
260 saved, they must have carefully unlearned the love of this world's pleasures, comforts,  
261 luxuries, honours. No one, surely, can really be a Christian, who makes his worldly  
262 interests his chief end of action. A man may be, in a measure, ill-tempered, resentful,

263 proud, cruel, or sensual, and yet be a Christian. For passions belong to our inferior  
264 nature; they are irrational, rise spontaneously, are to be subdued by our governing  
265 principle, and (through God's grace) are ultimately, though gradually, subdued. But what  
266 shall be said when the reasoning and ruling faculty, the power that wills and controls, is  
267 turned earthward? "If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"  
268 [Matt. vi. 23.]

269 God only knows how far these remarks concern each of us. I will not dare to apply them  
270 to this man or that; but where I even might, I will rather turn away my mind from the  
271 subject. The thought is too serious, too dreadful to dwell upon. But you must do, my  
272 brethren, what I must not do. It is your duty to apply them to yourselves. Do not hesitate,  
273 as many of you as have never done so, to imagine the miserable and shocking  
274 possibility of your coming short of your hope, "having loved this present world." Retire  
275 into yourselves and imagine it; in the presence of Christ your Saviour—in that presence  
276 which at once will shame you, and will encourage you to hope for forgiveness, if you  
277 earnestly turn to Him to obtain it.