

## Chapter 8

### Miracle, Sublime, Striking and Awful— Sodom and Gomorrah

A REMARKABLE exhibition of the visible hand of God occurred in Abraham's days, though somewhat outside the circle of his experiences. The occasion was the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This event is distinctly and reliably historic, notwithstanding the modern tendency to regard it as mythical and legendary. Its appearance in the Mosaic narrative would be conclusive, without further evidence, considering how completely established the authority of the Pentateuch is by Christ's own endorsement; but in addition to this, we have Christ's specific allusion to the matter, thus—"As it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded. But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all" ([Luke 17:28](#)). Then, we have the apostles alluding to it more than once ([2 Peter 2:6](#); [Jude 7](#)), while, in the prophets, it is familiarly used as a standard of comparison in the most matter of fact way, thus: "Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah" ([Isaiah 13:19](#)). "As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and the neighbour cities thereof, said the Lord, so shall no man dwell there" ([Jer. 1, 40](#)). "The punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom" ([Lam. 4:6](#)). "Sodom, thy sister, hath not done as thou hast done" ([Ezek. 16:48](#)). It follows that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah stands or falls with Christ, the apostles and the prophets. As the falling of these is on the list of logical impossibilities, the record of that destruction is established. Let us consider what the nature of the event was.

Abraham's nephew, Lot, had gone to reside in Sodom, in the plain of Jordan, an extensive and fertile district, lying between the hill ranges, at the northern end of the Dead Sea. The plain, we are informed, "was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord" ([Gen. 13:10](#)). That it was an attractive region is shown by Lot's choice of it, when Abraham called upon him to go right or left, that he might go the other way for the sake of peace. The Jordan probably intersected it in many intricate turnings and windings (after the style of the upper part of the river), before escaping into the Gulf of Akaba (if that was the outlet before the convulsion that led to the formation of the Salt Sea), while mountain rivulets, descending from the Moabite hills on the east, and the Olive-crowned tableland on the west, would water the land on their way to the Jordan. It must have been a smiling scene of plenty and peace.

It had a considerable population clustered in several towns and villages, but the character of the population was by no means in harmony with the beauty of their fertile surroundings. "The men of Sodom were wicked, and sinners before the Lord exceedingly" ([Gen. 13:13](#)). Their wickedness is manifest in the incident that followed the arrival of Lot's angelic visitors; but their behaviour on that occasion was only a symptom of their general character. This is thus described in a long subsequent message to Israel: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, *pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness* was in her, and in her daughters, neither did she

strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And *they were haughty, and committed abomination before me. Therefore I took them away as I saw good*” ([Ezek. 16:49](#)). It may be remarked, in passing, that this divine specification of Sodom’s sins, is not such as would have been drawn up by popular imagination in the case. The men of Sodom were not cut-throats and brigands: they were such as thousands who are to be met with every day in the streets of most European and American cities; whence we are enabled rightly to estimate the true character of modern days, as it appears in the divine eyes. Pride, arrogance, indifference to the poor, and abomination, are the common characteristics of European and American civilisation of the present hour.

In the case of Sodom, there did not appear to be an exception. This transpires in the interesting conversation between Abraham and his three wonderful visitors, who were to him the angelic representation of Yahweh, the most High, *Ail*, Possessor of heaven and earth. At the close of their visit ([Gen. 18](#)) “The men rose up from thence, and looked towards Sodom: and *Abraham went with them to bring them on their way.*” Here is a picture: Abraham, the father of the faithful, escorting three angels, one of whom pre-eminently bore THE NAME. There is a halt on the road, and this last communicates to Abraham the divine intentions with regard to Sodom, after which, the other two angels go forward to execute those intentions, leaving the NAME-BEARER with Abraham, standing before him, at a reverential distance. Abraham is concerned for the fate of Sodom, on account of his nephew, Lot, who had gone to sojourn there. Knowing Lot’s righteousness of character, he makes bold to think that surely he will not be included in a destruction intended only for the wicked. But he does not presume to make known his thoughts in a light or abrupt manner. He draws near and speaks, but he speaks with profound reverence. He breaks the subject, but it is in an indirect and apologetic manner: “Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city, wilt thou also destroy and spare not the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?” “*If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.*” This condescending answer was satisfactory so far as it went; but it did not touch the subject of Abraham’s anxiety. He would like to ask again; but he is embarrassed at the idea of interrogating the Deity angelically manifest. He makes profound obeisance: “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes: peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous, wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five?” “*If I find there forty and five I will not destroy it.*” Again, he is graciously answered in the terms of his own question: but again he is without the information he seeks. “Peradventure there shall be found forty there?” “*I will not do it for forty’s sake.*” Abraham is perplexed how to proceed. He throws himself on the consideration of the august personage who held the fate of Sodom in his hands: “Oh, let not my Lord be angry, and I will speak; peradventure there shall be found thirty there?” “*I will not do it if I find thirty there.*” And so Abraham, with apologies for his familiarity, pursues the subject, till he is finally informed that, if there are as few as ten, the place will be spared. The event showed that there was not a single resident besides Lot, for whom Yahweh had any regard.

This prologue to the destruction of Sodom, is instructive in a variety of ways. Does it not show the value of righteous men in a community? These may be the meekest and obscurest among men, yet are they the shields and safeguards of the sinners among whom they dwell. “All things for your sakes” defines a principle of very wide application. “The salt of the earth,” “the light of the world,” is Christ’s own description of the relation of his people to the present evil aion; and although the idea may be laughed to the uttermost scorn, it will be found a true idea (as regards those whom God esteems righteous), in the day when the saints being removed, nothing will remain to hinder the outpouring of the judgment of God upon mankind. How useful, also, is

the picture of Abraham's intercourse with the Elohim, in illustrating the personal reality and grace and condescension of the angels, who, though so harmless and sociable with Abraham, are, to the enemies of God, more formidable than the deadliest dynamite torpedo, as the Sodomites experienced. The reflection is of practical value in view of the prospect exhibited to us in the Gospel, of one day, and that not a long distant one, becoming acquainted with myriads of them, and of sharing the wonderful exaltation which they enjoy, as the immortal and powerful servants of Yahweh.

The two angels who departed from Abraham while he engaged in the interesting conversation recorded, duly arrived at Sodom. As their arrival and work there are in the highest order of "miracle," the contemplation of the narrative, in detail, will be advantageous. Lot mistook them for ordinary travellers. He was sitting in the gate of Sodom when he saw them approach. Perceiving they were strangers, and doubtless by their carriage, distinguished strangers, he rose and advanced towards them, and making profound obeisance offered them an importunate and cordial hospitality for the night. The angels declined, remarking they would "abide in the street all night." Abide in the street all night! Curious visitors these, who could dispense with roof and bed while darkness brooded on earth—and make themselves at home "in the street!" There is here a peep into the modes of angel life. Habits are according to nature and need. The fish in the water, the birds in the trees, beasts in the open field—are at home where man would perish. The comforts of a human home would be death to these. Angels are higher than man: they cannot die anywhere: they can adapt themselves to any condition. At the same time, possessing the highest and most appreciative order of intelligent faculty, they have their preferences. A human habitation may be to them what a "lodging house" would be to the lord of a palace. Sleep they apparently do not require. Sharing the nature of Him who "slumbers not nor sleeps" ([Psa. 121:4](#)), "who fainteth not neither is weary" ([Isa. 40:28](#)), they can "abide in the street all night" without inconvenience. The fact is interesting to us because of the hope the gospel gives us of becoming like to them ([Luke 20:36](#)).

However, Lot "pressed upon them greatly." His importunities were not unavailing. The angels are not indifferent to the wishes and comforts of others. They are the true gentlemen of the universe. They reflect the character of the Eternal Father of all, who is gracious, compassionate, and good. They would have preferred God's open air, but in view of Lot's strong desire, "they turned in unto him, and entered into his house," and not only so, but they condescended to partake of what he provided for them. "He made them a feast, and did bake unleavened bread, and *they did eat.*" Angels eating, will only be a difficult idea with those whose notions on the subject are drawn from religious novels and art illustrations. The Scriptural exhibition of the subject is free from difficulty. Angels can eat, though independent of eating for life; and when they eat, their food is assimilated to their spirit-nature, just as food eaten by man is assimilated to man-nature; by animals to animal-nature. There is this difference, that angel-nature is spiritual and incorruptible. There is none of the offensiveness more or less incident to the processes of all animal organisations. Cleanness, holiness, incorruptibility, and strength, are characteristics of the spirit-nature, involving completeness of absorption of all substances partaken of.

"Before they lay down"—then they did lie down? Yes, they can accommodate themselves to circumstances. They were under Lot's roof: they had the hours of darkness to spend; they had accepted his hospitality; and they conformed to his wishes and expectations in the matter of "lying down"; they could make themselves as comfortable by lying down as sitting up, and lying down would be more to the comfort of the family than if they had sat up. But "before they lay

down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter.” They had heard of the arrival of Lot’s guests, and, in an idle and wanton mood, they wanted to get sport out of them. They demanded of Lot to bring them out. Lot expostulated with his neighbours. He might as well have expostulated with a pack of wolves. They are deaf to every appeal of reason; they persist in their madness, and make an attempt to break into the house by force. And, no doubt, brute force would have been successful, as it has been in thousands of cases in the history of the world. But there was a power inside that only rarely takes part in the concerns of men. These comely, gentle visitors, whose arrival had caused the strife, had power that this mob knew nothing of. They had greater power than comes with mere bone and muscle, of however brawny an endowment. They had control of the occult forces of nature. In the exercise of this control, they first released Lot from the turmoil, and shut the door, and then struck the rioters with blindness. This is what men call “miracle,” a definition correct enough when employed to mean a use of power beyond human reach, but not correct when understood to mean a violation of nature, a suspension of law, a magical performance incomprehensible, outside the realm of natural fact. It is by no means so. It is but a superhuman use of nature—a manipulation of nature’s forces by the power that lies at the root of all nature—from which nature sprang, and in which it subsists from hour to hour. The Spirit of God is this energy of nature, and when God gives its control to angel or man, wonderful things can be done, but those wonderful things are all in harmony with nature’s forces—not upsetting or displacing them, but using and modifying them with the aim of producing specific results by means of those forces intelligently and dynamically applied. It is as when a demonstrator of chemical science takes a natural substance, and by decomposing agents, reduces it to elementary principles, or, as when he artificially produces ice, or light, or any other phenomenon. The professor produces extra-natural results—results that override nature for the time being: but the results are not contrary to nature; he produces them by applying nature’s forces in a specific way. “Miracle” is of this order, with this difference, that the operators have a higher command of nature than is possible to man. They have this by having hold of the root-element, the primal eternal force, the Spirit of God, in which all things exist. Man is an external mechanical operator, so to speak, who can only use the established affinities in educing results. The Spirit of God has to do with the inside and constitution of everything, and can at will evolve results in a direct manner, and of a radical sort. Lot’s visitors were incarnations of this Spirit. They had but to will the blindness of the senseless crowd outside the house; their will became a paralysis of the optical nerves of every one of them, and they were blind. It is what happens in mesmeric experiments, only that, in the case of the mesmerist, he has laboriously to expend much of his feeble force in a warm apartment, free from draught, to bring one or two in a company under his influence, while the angels, with the completeness of divine power, smite a whole crowd of robust people in the open air.

The assault thus effectually repelled, the angels give instructions for Lot’s immediate withdrawal from the place with the first light of dawn. “Whatsoever thou hast, bring them out of the city, bring them out of this place, for we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the Lord, and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it.” This “*whatsoever thou hast*,” was explained to Lot to include “sons-in-law, and thy sons and thy daughters.” Accordingly, “Lot went out and spake unto his sons-in-law, which married his daughters, and said, ‘Up, get you out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city.’ But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons-in-law” ([Gen. 19:14](#)). Here are relations invited to escape, because of God’s regard for those to whom they were related. Lot, for Abraham’s sake ([19:29](#)), and

sons-in-law, etc., for Lot's sake. The point is worthy of notice in an age when we may look for another divine visitation, and when, for the sake of those whom God may favour, docile relations may again be invited to share the chamber-refuge of the righteous from the destroying storm ([Isaiah 26:20](#)). Lot's sons-in-law treated the warning as lunacy, and were destroyed. To this day, the intimation of the divine purpose is as the speech of those that mock. Let the Lots endure. Their faith and patience will be justified.

Some time was spent in these futile importunities. We are told, "When the morning arose, *the angels hastened Lot.*" There must have been a reason: the reason may have lain in Lot's concern for his married daughters leading him to try and overcome the mirthful incredulity of his sons-in-law. Probably Lot persevered in his implorations, and was delaying for the sake of those he loved. At all events the angels pressed him. "Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters, which are here: *lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city.*" Still, Lot was loth to go: he yearned on his married daughters, and perhaps his sons-in-law. Then the angels resorted to gentle pressure: "While he (Lot) lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand and upon the hand of his two daughters, the Lord being merciful unto him; and they brought him forth and set him without the city." Having brought Lot, his wife, and two daughters, clear of the place, the angels enjoined them to make for the hills, saying, "Escape for thy life: look not behind thee, nor stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountains, lest thou be consumed." But Lot's wife could not be made to hurry. She did what they were told not to do; she looked behind; she lingered; her heart was in Sodom. Perhaps it was natural; perhaps some would glorify it as a case of "fine maternal instinct." But it was a distinct disobedience to the divine instructions, and "she became a pillar of salt." And Jesus says, "Remember Lot's wife." Natural affinities are in the wrong place when they obstruct the divine will. The lesson is good for all ages, and may be applied in thousands of cases, though it may not appear to be so urgent as in Lot's circumstances.

Lot did his best to comply with the angelic command, but he had certain fears about the mountain. He asked that he might be permitted, instead, to take refuge in an adjoining village. His request was granted, but he was told to make haste. "Haste thee," said the angel, "escape thither: for *I cannot do anything till thou be come thither.*" Divine anger held in rein for the sake of a man! So it is in a larger sense in all ages till the time appointed. The sun had risen when Lot entered the place of his refuge—Zoar. There was then no obstacle to the dread work of the angels. They let loose the thunderbolts of heaven. They did not go against nature. They used the powers of nature. The elements of combustion exist in the atmosphere. The scientific experimenter can liberate them on a very small scale by instrumental appliances. But who can lay hold of the elements themselves? In coast and harbour defences, a man in a tower can touch a key, which, liberating an electric current, can explode a mine under a ship miles distant: but suppose he had the current under his will without the apparatus? Oh, vain supposition! Here is the dividing line between God and man. The angels, His servants, can, when need be, evoke fire from the air without mechanical appliance, and manufacture burning substance without "chemical works." They can do so by the instantaneous combination of the elements. They showed their power when Lot was safe in Zoar. The Lord (Yahweh)—by their hands—"rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Yahweh out of heaven, and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities." Abraham, early astir, "looked towards Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace." Here was sublime, and striking, and awful miracle—the hand of God as visible as it can ever become. It opens out an inexhaustible chapter of profitable reflection. It illustrates divine modes, and gives insight to the divine relation

of things in the present evil world. God is angry with the world as it now is, but He defers His anger for His name's sake ([Isaiah 48:9](#)), that His people may be developed for His praise, and that the earth may be prepared as their inheritance and the habitation of His glory. When the ripe moment arrives, the world will see the arm of His power bared, as the inhabitants of Sodom saw, though with a difference of form, suited to the difference of the age and purpose. It is for the friends and the enemies of Christ to note Christ's declaration on the subject: "As it was in the days of Lot: they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded. But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed."