

1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11

Let me read these words of our text to you again, “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” We cannot just walk away from these words without first looking carefully at them. They’re shocking. Not the last part so much; we know what will happen to the ungodly, but the first part, “If the righteous is scarcely saved.” Scarcely saved? But we like to think that getting into heaven is like a walk in the park for us. We’re Christians. Believers. And heaven isn’t something we have to earn; it’s a gift in Jesus. It’s not as though we have to defeat the roaring lion, Satan. Christ defeated him for us. So what’s the problem? Why does St. Peter throw these words at us: “If the righteous is scarcely saved...?”

It sounds like the Apostle is saying that those who will be in heaven will barely make it in. And that’s just what he’s saying...just the opposite of what we are hearing today all around us. At funeral services too often you hear the preacher talking as if everyone there was going to heaven, no matter who they are. “No worries...relax...you’re in.” But God’s Word disagrees. Those living ungodly lives, we know what will happen to them, because even the “righteous is scarcely saved.”

There is a story in the Old Testament which may help us understand these words. It’s the story of Lot. He was living in the city of Sodom with his wife and their two daughters. Two angels came to visit him. They were there to tell him to leave the city because God was going to destroy it. “Up,” they told him, “Get up and leave.” But evening turned into night, and night into morning, and Lot had not left. “Leave now,” they told him again, “the city will soon be destroyed because of its wickedness.” But again Lot hesitated. And so the angels seized Lot by the hand, as well as seizing the hands of his wife and their daughters, and they literally dragged them out of Sodom. “Go,” they said, “and do not look back.” But as soon as they came to the town of Zoar, Lot’s wife turned back to take a look and she became a pillar of salt.

Could we not say that Lot was scarcely saved? He kept hesitating, kept resisting. If God’s angels had not dragged him out of the city, he would have perished along with the ungodly. Salvation for Lot was not like a walk in the park. He and his family barely made it out. God’s angels kept urging him, but Lot kept resisting. Cannot the same thing be said of us? God keeps urging us to be faithful as Christians, but we, like Lot, keep resisting. “Resist the devil,” the Apostle commands in our text, “the roaring lion who seeks to devour us.” But how often don’t we resist God instead?

Lot was like that. He resisted God’s angels more than he resisted the wickedness all around him. He had grown accustomed to it. Sodom was a disgusting city. The people there were grotesque with their sinfulness. But Lot did not flee the city. His home was there. He was used to all the wickedness. He did not take part in it, but he also did not resist it. He was content to live there among it. Lot did not resist the city of Sodom, but he did resist God’s urging to leave the city, even when he was told the city was about to be destroyed.

We are much like Lot. We live in an evil world, but we, too, have grown accustomed to it. And so we do not resist the roaring lion with all his temptations as the Apostle urges us to do. We are not shocked anymore when foul language comes through the television set, or even from the mouths of our friends. We’re not disgusted anymore by the perverse lifestyles displayed not just in Hollywood, but in the communities where we ourselves live. When God’s Commandments are dragged through the mud by those who care nothing for Jesus, rather than resist such sinfulness, we get our feet a little dirty as well.

We do not resist the sinful world as much as we resist God. God urges us to be in His Word daily; to be in His House weekly; to arm ourselves with the weapons of the Spirit so that we are able, as His Christian soldiers, to fight against our sinful flesh, against the sinful world and the roaring lion. Yet how often don't we flip on the television rather than flipping open the Bible on the shelf? When friends urge us to stay up late with them on Saturday night, we do not resist, but the next morning we resist God's urging to be in church.

It has always been this way. Adam and Eve did not resist Satan in the Garden. And from that day on God's people have had the sinful habit of resisting their Lord more than they resist wickedness. Is it any wonder that St. Peter writes, "the righteous is scarcely saved?"

Friends, if you and I are going to be saved, it's going to come not from our strength and dedication, but from God. You do not feel it, but right now as you are sitting here in the pew He is seizing you by the hand, and as He did for Lot, He is dragging you out of Sodom. We hesitate, we resist. But God does not. He takes action because this world is about to be destroyed and He will not let you perish along with the ungodly.

You see, unlike us, Jesus knew who to resist, and who not to resist. He resisted the roaring lion when Satan tempted Him in the desert. But He did not resist those who slapped His face. He did not resist the cross that was laid upon Him. He did not resist, hanging from that cross, as they mocked Him and spat on Him. Jesus let the ungodly do what they wanted to Him, and He did this for you. And so now, my sinful friends, God declares you forgiven. He forgives you for resisting Him. He forgives you for not resisting wickedness. He forgives you because His Son died for you.

And through God's word of forgiveness in Christ, through His flesh and blood given at this altar, He grabs your hand again and again, because we keep hesitating, we keep resisting. But as God had compassion on Lot, so He has compassion on you. You and I resist Him day after day, yet He keeps forgiving you here again and again. He keeps giving you His Word and Sacraments so that He lives within you, so that He helps you resist, not God's Word, but the wicked roaring lion.

Now why do you think God's angels pulled Lot's wife out of the city when God knew full well that she would perish anyway; that she would disobey the mercy of God and look back? I suppose we could ask as well why God commands baptism when He knows full well that many baptized Christians will perish; that they will disobey the Gospel and turn away from the hearing of it? It is not, however, for us to tell God who He must have compassion on. "I will have compassion upon whom I will have compassion," He says. He had compassion on Lot and his daughters, but Lot's wife kept resisting; she turned away from God's compassion and she perished.

What joy it gives me that so many of you are living in God's compassion. Even though our sinful flesh resists, God keeps pulling you by the hand to His House of Mercy where His compassion flows freely to all. He wants all to be saved. Jesus died for every sinner. He died for you. Do not resist Him. Resist the roaring lion, but rejoice that Jesus conquered him for you. Rejoice that you have a forgiving Lord. Rejoice that despite our weaknesses, despite our hesitation, despite everything, you have a God who is compassionate and merciful. And His hand is on yours right now to pull you out of this dying world to Himself in heaven. And He will not, not ever, let go of your hand. Amen.