

From the Pulpit

LOT'S WIFE IN THE LATTER DAYS

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My dear brothers and sisters, this evening marks the end of a cycle in my life. Five years ago my husband and I left Durham, with his law degree and a lot of expectation. We had finally passed our years of deprivation and set happily upon a course promising physical abundance. We return — not with great abundance, but hopefully with greater wisdom.

This night marks the end of many cycles. First, a physical one. For our journey has led from North Carolina to Minnesota to Kansas City to New York City and back to Durham. It is the completion of a professional cycle for Frank, from a university student of law, to a practicing attorney of law, and back to the same university as a teacher of law. But most important, this night marks the end of a cycle, for me, from the beginning of a search for the golden fleece to a realization that that search is vain.

I will not try to explain the forces which pulled us through these physical and professional cycles, but I will dwell considerably upon those forces which have produced within me a cycle, or reversal, of concept and purpose.

A major force was the nature of the life we've lived — a nomadic life. One learns a great deal from nomadism. The first lesson is that it is wisdom to remain loosely attached to physical things. We have left homes, one lived in for just nine months; lawns and trees, laboriously cared for; a garden,

planted and nurtured and not yet harvested. We have learned the necessity of hardening one's heart to the loss of physical things.

But there were more specific experiences which taught of the perishableness of earthly things. We lived in St. Paul in the spring of '65 during news-making floods. We were unaffected physically, but being there involved us emotionally, and I was sobered as I watched men and women weep at the loss of a lifetime's work.

We lived for a time in Kansas City, experiencing numerous tornado warnings. During such warnings, the communications media assume emergency broadcasting procedures; residents are advised to take cover. The natives react casually, for most warnings prove to be unnecessary, but to a newcomer it is frightening. He sees the air boil above him. He realizes that mass of darkness hanging over the city possesses the power to drop anywhere, in one instant, the tail of the terrible funnel. As instructed, the novice seeks his basement. Huddling with family in a basement corner, he listens to reports, mainly rumors, of tornadoes touching or heading his way. I cannot forget those moments of anxiety when I realized that out there in reality was a force that could in seconds destroy my life, the lives of my cherished ones, or reduce to rubble all we owned on earth.

For me, all these things were teaching experiences. They were a unique set of events which forced upon me the lesson the Lord has labored to teach since man first became a part of the world and the one great lesson the prophets have warned He must teach again in the Final Day. This lesson is that though we are a part of the world, we must wean our hearts far from the world.

. . . when the Lord ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, to the moles and to the bats;

To go into the clefts of the rocks, . . . for fear of the Lord.

(Isaiah 2:19-21)

This will be our final weaning — but it is not the first his children have experienced. The strong current of nomadism in the history of the peoples of God is no accident. Abraham, Lehi, the Israelites, the early Latter-day Saints — all were deliberately called out and away from possessions. Unmistakably, leaving behind is a weaning experience strongly associated with being the children of the Lord.

Perhaps the clearest insight into the need for weaning comes from the story of Lot's wife. Sodom and Gommorah were to be destroyed. Lot's family was warned to flee, but also warned to flee without looking back. Lot's wife, unable to do so, turned to look — and perished. Lot's story disturbed me until I realized how many of the Old Testament stories are significant as foreshadowing of other events. As Jonah's three days in the fish foreshadowed the crucifixion and resurrection, as Abraham's aborted sacrifice of son foreshadowed the sacrifice God must make of His own son, so, I feel, the story of Lot foreshadows the time of the last days. Christ seemed to indi-

cate this. Speaking of the last days, he compared it to the days of Noah and of Lot. People would be eating, drinking, marrying. Destruction would come suddenly. Then Christ warned ominously, "In that day, he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away; and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back. Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:28-37).

The warning not to return for "things" and the story of the destruction of Lot's wife indicate we may partially determine whether we will be saved or destroyed in that day by the passing of a simple test. If in that day our possessions mean so little we can leave them, can flee without thought for them, we may be preserved. But if, like Lot's wife, we look back, we perish. Why? Because "back there" will be our possessions. If we are not careful, there, too, will be our hearts.

But why? Why does the Lord seek so persistently to wean our hearts from the physical world. The answers lie in the commandments and in Christ's teachings.

"Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart . . ."

And Christ echoed, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Are any of us void of experience in which our possessions have vied for our allegiance to the matters of the Lord? I recall distinctly one such experience. We had moved into a house much larger than we had ever had before. It was a new house and therefore demanded considerable attention. At this time I had competing work from my Father in Heaven to perform, and so I encountered constant conflict as to which work should receive my time and efforts. Of course, preparing the home for occupancy seemed most urgent and I began that. But regardless of what I did, or spent upon that house, there were always details in every room demanding my attention. Finally in my mind's eye I felt I saw what was happening to me. I saw my house as it really had become — a demanding master. And I had become its servant. Regardless of how I labored or how much I gave unto this thing, it was not satisfied.

Our homes, yards, cars, pleasures are demanding. "Feed me." "Care for me." "Serve me." Foolishly, we believe we can serve God *and* Mammon. By accumulating unto ourselves too much of the world we make ourselves parties to inevitable conflict. If we neglect the Lord's work, we ought to feel guilt. But factually, when we neglect our possessions, we often feel greater, more immediate guilt. When there is conflict, the solution is not to neglect God's work; the solution lies in removing ourselves from the realm of conflict — holding to the one and despising the other.

How do we know whom we really serve? If we serve the world, we will neglect God's work and resent the demands the Church imposes. Conversely, if we truly serve the Lord, we will do His work and resent the demands of physical things. "How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" There is a form of resentment in those lines.

We serve the things of the world because we like the beauty and order they give to our lives. Physical beauty and order have their place — but that place is secondary, not paramount. In times of conflict they must be relegated to their proper station. For the difference between the beautiful things of the world and spiritual duty is as the difference between man and God.

The Lord desires to wean our hearts from the world for the worldly things we serve shall fail us. Thus Christ warned, "Lay not up . . . treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, . . ." But like the foolish children of old we have built a tower of Babel thinking we can preserve our things from destruction. Our Babel is Insurance. Have we not already heard rumblings forecasting the demise of our safeguard? For on the words "insurrection," "act of God," "nuclear warfare," hangs our faith in Insurance.

The Lord desires to wean our hearts from love of possessions for that love bars our hearts from our love of neighbor. The crucial question is whether we love our possessions more than our neighbor, remembering Christ's clear definition of neighbor.

Sometimes it seems hard to apply Christ's teachings to the complex problems of our age. When problems are complex, morality has a way of becoming vague and uncertain. But I remember a principle learned somewhere in early school days, that when one is confronted with complex problems, it is often possible to reduce them to simpler parts. Thus, we could multiply and divide with complex fractions if we could reduce them to simpler ones. Perhaps we can use this principle here. What is one's responsibility to his neighbor of little means? When there are great barriers dividing poor from wealthy — distances, economic and political beliefs and systems, national and racial suspicions, things become vague and unclear indeed. Yet I am haunted by a clear, simplified version of mankind's problem. If one man sat at a table laden with food and another came and sat before him and pulled from his pocket a crust of bread, does morality still evade us? Could any here indulge in abundance while another sat near with meager substance and feel he could justify himself before God *for any reason*? But things get more complex in the real world. Distance, disagreement, apathy hide us from the hunger of others, and we indulge, in peace.

For me, the key to our responsibility to neighbor lies as much in the Parable of the Talents as in the Good Samaritan. The Parable of the Talents is probably the most quoted parable in the church, yet hearing we seem not to hear, and seeing, we seem not to see. We have cheapened it, for we see it only as counsel to develop our singing or speaking or painting abilities. Yet talents in the Bible does not mean "talents" of our time. The Lord spoke of money, but it was meant to symbolize everything that the Lord has entrusted to us. The real message is that all men are stewards only; that harsh accounting for our stewardship awaits us. With this in mind then, let us remember that the riches of the earth have been prepared for all men. Surely we are wrong in accumulating to ourselves more than we justly use, especially when our usurpation denies to others the things they truly need. This is not faithful stewardship, nor is using the world to glorify ourselves, or indulge

our pleasures, or gratify our egos. "To bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" is God's work and Christ's work and our work. Toward this end only, the faithful steward labors.

In direct contradiction to the knowledge we are but stewards is the belief that *we* have achieved all we have and are therefore under no obligation to those we feel are unindustrious brethren. Yet this is the pride God has so repeatedly condemned. Harken to the words of Samuel, the prophet.

Ye do not remember the Lord your God *in the things with which he hath blessed you*, . . . your hearts are not drawn out unto the Lord, *but they do swell with great pride.*

(Helaman 13:22, Italics added)

What kind of pride does Samuel speak of? The pride that believes *man* is responsible for his own accumulation of wealth. If any believe we earn what we have and are therefore free of obligation to others, I challenge them to return to the scriptures and find support. But do not search for amputated lines; seek instead the waves of meaning that pervade all scripture. For these contain the gospel's heart, and the heart of the gospel asserts, "All that you have and all that you are comes from your Father in Heaven."

And in nothing doth man offend God, or against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things, . . .

(D. & C. 59:21)

But is it enough just vocally to express gratitude for blessings? *If we truly believed our blessings come from the Lord, we would never use them toward selfish ends.*

As members of the Church we profess to seek celestial glory. Do we realize the significance of that aspiration — to become truly as God is? What is He? The possessor of staggering power. The creator of staggering wealth. What kinds of hands and heart could grasp that ring? Hearts that seek self-glory? Hands that seek self-pleasure? The Lord has asked of us on earth that we give all that we have, all we are, unto His service. And for what purpose? Because hands and hearts that possess His power must be willing to give totally and unconditionally as He has given. God gave His Son to save a world that spat upon and crucified that very son. That is the kind of giving required of celestial seekers: to give in spite of rejection, to give in spite of corruption, to give in spite of waste, to give for righteous purpose — to give that which is most precious that others may find eternal life.

But I am afraid there are many concepts prevalent in our day which are not in harmony with the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. In our world, material possessions are enthroned as gods, for it is they who receive our labors and thoughts and honors — and even our willingness to war as the crusaders of old.

Consider for a moment the conflict within our nation, a conflict which may be comparable to illness where fever has grown so high it has resulted in convulsions. I recall a neighbor whose daughter had convulsions. Terrified, the mother sought help and with proper care the fever was lowered, the convulsions ended. But how foolish that mother had she believed she

had overcome her problems. Further work was needed — to diagnose and heal the disease underlying the symptoms. In a very real sense our society has reached the point of convulsions. These must be stopped or they will destroy us. But we are fools indeed if we believe we can stop until we have struck at the source of the upheaval. Our disease is materialism. There are many evidences that this is true. It is the motive prompting rioters who have decided to get what they want the easy way. But it is also the motive of those who refuse to relinquish anything they have and desire yet more. If the pie is just so big and everyone wants a greater percent, the solutions are limited. One solution is bloating the pie (inflation) so all believe they have much more. Another is for those with greater shares to willingly reduce their percentage. Not many are willing, so we bloat the pie and battle for it.

Materialism is a generator of another problem — the indulgence of many youth in Bohemia, drugs, political excess. These indulgences are their reaction to what they feel is their elders' sin, materialism. Many youth are disillusioned with the material life. They are angered by our apathy and cruelty toward those outside our affluence. They despise a system that cannot correct inequalities. And they have reacted accordingly — to extremes.

The scriptures would uphold the diagnosis that our illness is materialism, though from a different angle. Words from Isaiah, Samuel, others, arise from scripture to haunt our time as well as their own. Their messages apply. *When the children of light become too prosperous and their hearts turn to things, not God, they are afflicted.* Throughout religious history, God's people have been preserved until their hearts leave their Creator. They may not necessarily leave the church, but their hearts leave God and only their lips draw near. And when their hearts leave Him, they are chastened. The Israelites were chastened for this reason many times.

In one instance, speaking through Hosea, the Lord laments that his people have left Him, their first love, and become as harlots, giving their hearts to their riches instead.

I did know thee in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. . . .
But they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten me. . . .

O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself. (Hosea 13:5,6,9)

The Nephites were likewise chastened. So great was their iniquity that the Lord raised up a prophet from among the Lamanites, a hated people, to warn them of their state:

Behold, I Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart; and behold he hath put it into my heart to say . . . that the sword of justice hangeth over this people.

Because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of the Nephites, except they repent, I will take away my word from them, and I will withdraw my Spirit from them, and I will suffer them no longer, and I will turn the hearts of their brethren against them.

(Helaman 13:5,8)

Why this chastening?

Ye do not remember the Lord your God in the things with which he hath blessed you, but ye do always remember your riches. . . .

And behold, the time cometh that he curseth your riches, that they become slippery, that ye cannot hold them; and in the days of your poverty ye cannot retain them. (Helaman 13:22,31)

Is there a striking parallel in our day? There has been one who spoke unto this nation. He was of a despised race. But the words he spoke were Christ's; they were of brotherhood, of forsaking riches, of ministering to the poor; they contained warnings of conflict and chastening. Reaction to his words were stones of slander ("Communist!"), and violent death. I cannot say Martin Luther King may have been another Samuel. I can only wonder.

Are we not being chastened? Is further chastening imminent? In the past, preservation came from repentance of the Lord's people, not from calling for repentance from the Phillistines, the Lamanites, or the Gentiles. Why do we not see that the messages of the past apply to us? How is it that we rip from scripture those passages promising hope and apply them to our time, yet ignore the warnings as though they directed themselves only to the past? "O Israel, thou has destroyed thyself."

As all past prophets warned of materialism, they also warned we must serve the poor. In our time, controversy rages among men concerning *how* we should serve the poor. Sincerely, I suspect the Lord will not be so concerned with our opinions as with our motives. Beware, if there is improper motive behind the masks we wear or the banners we carry. For the Lord's division of righteous and unrighteous shall cut across party lines and philosophical divisions, and only we blind men divide less justly. I fear there may be hypocrisy in most of us. If we call for relief programs from certain sources yet are not personally charitable, we are hypocrites, for it is all too easy to be charitable in theory. If we cry *against* certain programs, citing reasons, yet do not *use* every resource at our disposal to heal the wounds of poverty otherwise, we stand equally condemned as hypocrites.

The divisions of our time include divisions between the haves and the have-nots. The have-nots cry, "Thou art thy brother's keeper." The haves cry, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider his ways and be wise." Let wisdom lead us, not passion, for consider this wisdom gained from our experience as earthly parents. In how many cases can an earthly parent, arbitrator over childish disputes, send one child away with rebuke and the other with none? How more likely is the need to rebuke both? I am certain that this is so with the Lord. For surely if he were here among us to personally arbitrate our disputes, he would sigh with impatience, finding us all worthy of rebuke. Both arguments brought before him in the case of the haves versus the have-nots are words which have issued from the mouths of his prophets. *But our great modern struggle is really the time-old problem of each beholding the mote in his brother's eye.* If the arguments were reversed, if the have-nots spoke of labor and the haves spoke of giving, then we would have peace

rather than revolution, building rather than destroying. But as long as we preach to the other, we shall have struggle and hatred and violence.

There is one more thing we must point out. When one is truly acquainted with the scriptures, he cannot but be aware that when the Lord has deemed it necessary to rebuke two parties to a dispute, his harshest rebuke has gone to those who have received the most — both in light and blessing. For of them he expects light, not darkness. Of them he expects love, not contention. Of them he expects an extra mile. Again, perhaps this indicates it is we who must repent, not just the rest of the world.

My own answer to the seeming conflict between individual industry and serving the poor has been crystalized in my understanding of Christ's reaction to the standing of the adulteress. When he quietly said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," he did not condone adultery. He was teaching. To those angered by adultery, to those who supposedly had mastered that particular law, he directed a new one. Many today have mastered the basic principle of industry. But now that we have mastered that principle, a new one is required of us — compassion.

Material possessions divide mankind. We debate heatedly as to the methods we should use in serving the poor. And while we debate the methods, the poor remain unfed and unclothed, and Satan is served. Aren't the problems of such proportions that we need every resource? — though it is true they must be used more wisely. But in our time of debate, let us be careful we do not heap to ourselves with itching ears words we want to hear.

I feel most of us do not intend to fail our neighbor. This temptation is perhaps the most subtle of all those Satan gives us. We buy too expensively, believing we are justified through love of beauty, and then our resources are committed and we have little left to serve the poor!

I fear most of us feel we adequately serve our neighbor, for we can call to our defense many contributions we have made. Yet, I suspect there have been few men who could not claim they had "given to the poor." What we give is tokenism. Christ noted the difference. In the incident of the widow's offering Christ said, "Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast in the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living" (Mark 12:43, 44).

I am deeply troubled concerning this matter of materialism. For as I search the scriptures, I see that the gospel has been given many times, but has been lost each time through the hardness of men's hearts. If the gospel has slipped from the hands of others, how firm is our grasp?

The very description of the trials of the latter days as a refiner's fire should cause us concern. For what is a refiner's fire, but one which applies such heat and pressure that the accumulations, the impurities are removed, leaving only the essential. What do we have that is unessential, that mars our worth and purity? Could it be our love of possessions?

We ought to absorb these startling facts: (1) It was love of possessions which led most if not all previous civilizations to a need for chastening. (2)

We are the wealthiest civilization in the history of Earth. How can we help but squirm? How can we help but seek the deepest analysis we have ever given the status of our hearts? For if we have this great wealth and have remained undivided in loyalties, it may be the greatest miracle God has ever wrought.

We cling too persistently to an illusion that if we are active in the Church, and especially if we make some sacrifices, all is well with us in the sight of the Lord. The scriptures cry, "Not so," for they are the chronicle of others thus falsely believing. Ultimately, the key word is "heart." Our heart must cling to God and nothing else. The great mass of scripture decries the danger of division of heart or purpose:

The Light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. (Matt. 6:22)

Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou has fallen by thine iniquity. . . . say unto him . . . [we will say no more] to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods. . . . (Hosea 14:1-3)

Brothers and sisters, we live in a time of smothering materialism. It has invaded the Church. I pray we will seek in our hearts and the scriptures for answers about how to live in this time. To me, the answers are increasingly clear. For inasmuch as our possessions divide our hearts from total love of the Father; inasmuch as many of our brothers live in soul-destructive want, while many forces seek to use that want for socially destructive purposes; inasmuch as we live in the last days with apocalyptic warnings looming over our heads, I pray we may have the wisdom to give our hearts totally to the Lord and thus find ways to give our possessions to serve his purposes. For it would be wiser to wean ourselves now and put them to redemptive use than to turn back with Lot's wife to see them and us destroyed.

I say these things humbly in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.