

## Genesis 14:1-24

### A Sermon

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We are continuing this morning with our study of *The Life of Abram*, as recorded in the Book of Genesis, picking up where we left off previously, at the end of chapter 13. As we have already seen on a couple of occasions now, we are watching the outworking of God's promised faithfulness to his fallen creatures in the Garden of Eden. We have traced those promises through a number of descendants - from Adam and Eve to Seth to Noah to Shem and onward, until we arrived where we are now - with Abram. From this point on, the development of the promise hits a new gear and is expanded greatly through Abram and his descendants.

Now, thus far in looking at Abram we have seen that he is certainly *the man of faith*, as the New Testament portrays him, but he is also *an ordinary man* who is as capable of being as fearful and faithless as you and I are. One moment he is trusting God, packing up his family and possessions and heading off into a strange land. The next moment he is doubting God's ability to deliver and coming up with not-so-clever schemes to protect his interests. And then he rebounds from all that, and begins to act faithfully once more.

That's where we left Abram last week - exercising a renewed confidence in God and, as a result, demonstrating great generosity toward Lot in his desire to place relationships and peace above personal rights and prosperity.

This week we will see another episode in the relationship between Abram and Lot - a far more serious one - with equally serious implications for both Abram and Lot. Before we look into that any further, let's pray....

(Read Genesis 14:1-7)

Now in a moment, we're going to read about Lot being captured and carried off and all sorts of other adventures taking place. But in order to better understand all that, we need to pause for a second to very briefly lay out some of the background circumstances that lie behind what happened. As far as I can tell, the main sequence of events seems to have gone something like this:

a) In the Land of Canaan, near where Abram was currently staying, there was a ruler named Chederlaomer (or Kederlaomer according to some). We're going to call him Chedar, for short, and in that part of the world, he was, in fact, the big *cheese* - every pun intended - with at least 8 other kings that paid tribute or were beholding to him in some way - most likely out of fear as they were worried about what he might do to them if they

resisted.

b) Well, this arrangement went on for a little while but after about 12 years of submitting to King Chedar, five of the kings had had enough and they rebelled against him, which meant, among other things, that they probably stopped paying massive sums of “protection” money to King Chedar every year. The names of these kings were: “Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar), as the ESV tells us. Now, because these names are long and unfamiliar and real tongue twisters, we’re going to just refer to them as “the five” or “the five kings” from here on out, and not worry so much about the details of their names.

c) Well, as the story goes on we learn that these five kings went to battle against king Chedar, and the other three kings that remained loyal to him.

d). However, before *that* battle takes place, the author tells us about a couple *pre-liminary skirmishes* - sort of “warm up” battles that take place where King Chedar and company take on and defeat four *other* people/armies - The Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Emin, and the Horites - all from fairly unpronounceable places except the Zuzim who were from Ham. But the names and places aren’t all that important. What IS important is that King Chedar and company take over all these people, and then they head off in ANOTHER direction and defeat two more groups of people - the Amalekites and the Amorites.

Now the question is, why does the author (Moses) tell us about the rebellion of the five kings against King Chedar and company, but before finishing that story, digresses to tell us about these conquests of all these other peoples? And I think the main reason is to simply make sure the readers understand that these four kings were not *pushovers*, they weren’t “paper tigers”. They were the real thing. And they meant business.

Well, after describing the last of the “warm up battles” in verse 7, we return in verse 8 to a description of how things turned out when the five kings rebelled and took on Chedar and the other three. In a word or two: *things didn’t go very well for the five kings*. Indeed, right after stating that they joined in battle in verses 8-9, the next thing we hear is that two kings from the group of five are running away!

More specifically, the text tells us that as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah were fleeing through the Valley of Siddim. Some people got caught in all these bitumen or *tar* pits that were there while others managed to escape into the hill country. We then hear about one particular person who was caught up in all this - Lot - and are told that he and his possessions were taken captive by the victorious armies of King Chedar. And it’s at this point that Abram enters the picture.

After these kings have been victorious on three successive campaigns, word gets back to Abram that in their last campaign his nephew, Lot, had been captured. In response, Abram gathers his own trained fighting men - numbering 318 - and is joined by others who apparently were friends or allies of his - Mamre, Eshcol and Aner.

Now, we don't get that information here, but at the end of the chapter, when Abram tells the king of Sodom to give Aner, Eshcol and Mamre their share of the spoils. When Abram says that it becomes apparent that they must have joined with him in the battle. And if they did, then they too would most likely have had people with them. So, in the end, we do not know the exact number that went with Abram but my guess is that the grand total of this rapidly assembled "army" would have been around 1200 people, and probably less.

Whatever the exact total, one thing is clear: *There weren't many of them.* And the confederation of kings they were chasing would have to have been a much **larger** army than that to do what they did. Indeed, that's one of the other purposes behind the descriptions we get in verses 1-12 - to show not only that King Chedor and company were an *effective* army, but that they were also a *large* army, capable of engaging in sustained, successive battles and putting to flight all that came up against them.

Nevertheless, Abram seems to be undaunted by these things.. He is sort of on a roll with regard to his willingness to trust God - and so on this occasion at least, acts with a renewed confidence in the Lord. As a result he takes his much smaller army and chases down the Fantastic Four and engages in a night-time, surprise attack, dividing his forces into two groups. The text then tells us, almost matter-of-factly, that he was victorious and routed King Chedor and his coalition, and chased them as far as a place called Hobah. Subsequently, he reclaims his nephew Lot and takes him, along with all the other spoils of what had been captured, back home.

And it is at this point, that the real test in this story begins. Because on his way back, as he is returning from this victorious campaign, Abram is met by *two kings* who represent two paths that are as different as two paths can be.....

(Read Genesis 14:17-24 here)

The last time we saw the king of Sodom, he was running for his life through the bitumen- pit-infested Valley of Siddim. He now reappears to approach the man who has recovered the Sodomite possessions and the Sodomite people that were taken from him. At the same time, another king is approaching Abram - Melchizedek. This one we have not heard of before, nor will we hear from him again. He is the king of *Salem* which, as most scholars agree, is probably what would later be known as *Jerusalem*. The name "Melchizedek", means "righteousness" and the name "salem" means peace.

And so we have quite a contrast here. On the one hand we have a king who represents righteousness and peace, and is described as a priest of God Most High. Now *how* he got to be a priest - we are not told. Evidently it is not important that we know. The fact remains that he was a priest of God - the same God that Abram was trusting in. And right next to him is the king of Hell, so to speak, the ruler of this desperately wicked place called Sodom - which we'll see evidence of further on in this series.

But two very different sorts of kings come out to Abram. And they approach Abram in two very different sorts of ways. Melchizedek comes out with hands full - bringing bread and wine -

which were *simple* provisions to be sure, but they were *sufficient* provisions nonetheless. The king of Sodom, by contrast, comes out with his hands empty, ready to receive, not give.

Then the king of Salem - Melchizedek - in his priestly role - pronounces a blessing on Abram, making it very clear by what he says that the one to whom all praise should be given for the victory is not Abram, but God. In contrast to this, the king of Sodom pronounces no blessing, makes no mention of the Lord at all but simply makes a demand, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself". In other words, he doesn't expect Abram to give him back his possessions as these would be the "spoils of war" that would normally go to the victor in a battle. So, he doesn't ask for that. But he does demand that Abram at least return his people.

Well, after seeing the two approaches from the two kings, we then see 2 very different *responses* by Abram. Indeed, what we see here is, arguably, the most important part of this chapter. To be sure, the actions of these pagan kings, and Lot's capture, and his subsequent rescue - all those things are meaningful but, in many ways, they are only setting the stage for what will be the most significant test - Abram's response to these two kings, after all the fighting is over.

Now in thinking about these things, it is important that we take note of a part of the story that has not yet been discussed. The fact is, we don't even know that it IS part of the story until we get to verses 22 and 23...

(Read Genesis 14:22-23 again)

When the king of Sodom makes his demands, we realize from what Abram says here, that *prior* to his going to rescue Lot he must have paused to make a vow to the Lord. When Abram says, "I have lifted my hand to the Lord God Most High" - when he uses the language of "lifting his hand" he is talking about making a vow. And the *content* of the vow is reflected in these words here. Apparently, as he was praying to God for success in rescuing Lot, Abram also made a vow: that he would not take as reward any spoils, or anything at all that belonged to Sodom, or his wicked city, or any of the other people for that matter.

So, apparently all these promises have been made by Abram *before* he ever embarks on his mission to rescue Lot. And now here he is on the other side of all these things. God has given him success and spared his life, and that of his nephew.

And now the BIG MOMENT arrives. As he is returning from battle, out come two kings to greet him and, as we have seen already - the real test starts here. And the question is: *Will Abram remember the Lord NOW?* He remembered God before, in the midst of the crisis. But will he remember Him now? Will he remember the promise he has made? Will he honor God in the midst of his accomplishments? Will he be satisfied with the simple provisions of bread and wine and the words of blessing from God, through Melchizedek? Or will he be tempted to hang on to the spoils of war already in his grasp - in spite of his vow not to do so? *What will Abram do?*

Abram chooses to honor the Lord. That's what he does. The bread and the wine, the blessing of God - these are enough for him. So he keeps Lot and what belonged to him of course,

but beyond that he only asks that the king of Sodom remember the men who came with him - Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner - and reward them for their efforts. With that, the account formally comes to an end, leaving us with a number of things to think about.

Firstly, when we think about the people who first received these stories, it is not hard to see how this account might have been especially meaningful. Here they are, near the promised land, but not quite in it. And they have been here before, nearly 40 years before. And the question haunting them now is the one which faced them then: *Will we be faithful and courageous to enter this land and trust God's promises to be with us as we go?* They weren't faithful last time. Will they be that way now?

In the passages before this they would have already received a number of incentives in this area. In Chapter 14 they receive even more. For one thing, they see Abram, their forefather, engaging in battle with *seasoned, larger* armies - and WINNING. Any fears they might have about what resistance they would meet while taking the promised land would likely be lessened somewhat as they saw Abram's success.

Additionally, they see Abram keeping his vows and deciding not to accept the plunder of the people of Sodom. They see him not compromising himself or doing anything that might make him beholding to a pagan king or leave the door open for any sort of claim to be made upon him by anyone else.

Most importantly, they see Abram not forgetting God in his success, not falling under any illusions about who he is or starting to "believe his own press", so to speak. He accepts God's blessing through Melchizedek because he knows *exactly* where his victory came from. He knows that apart from God's blessing, there was no way his tiny army was going to be able to do what they did. All these things are ones which the people of Israel needed to see and hear.

Well, looking further on past God's people in Moses' day, we find, when we get to the New Testament, that the writer of Hebrews has some important things to add to our understanding of this mysterious figure named Melchizedek. Now, in the interest of time, I'm not going to read those passages to you, but will try and summarize the main points being made in Hebrews 4:14-7:28.

As some of you may remember from our previous series on Hebrews, one of the simple ways of briefly stating the message of Hebrews is by using a single word: "Better". The whole letter reads like an argument designed, among other things, to convince persons of Jewish background or loyalties to consider how what Jesus offers is *better* than and indeed the fulfillment OF all that we see revealed in the OT Scriptures. And so, after showing that Jesus is superior to angels, and superior to Moses, the writer of Hebrews argues that as a high priest, Jesus is also superior or *better* and that his priesthood is better than the priesthood under Aaron in the Old Testament.

The trick in making this argument was showing how it was that Jesus could even be regarded as a priest at all since he was not of the priestly, Levitical line. The writer of Hebrews does that by appealing to this account in Genesis 14. Essentially, his argument is this: When you

look at the life of Abram, you see him at one point recognizing and paying homage to a priest - Melchizedek - who came along even *before* Aaron and the Levites even existed.

Further, since the entirety of the Levitical priesthood was still “in Abram” - in the sense that it was yet to come from his descendants - then when Abram pays tribute/tithe to Melchizedek what you have, *symbolically*, is the Aaronic priesthood paying tribute to the Melchizedekian priesthood. And the one that *pays* tribute is inferior to the one that *receives* tribute, thus Aaron is inferior to Melchizedek.

The writer of Hebrews says more than this, but that is his main point, in a nutshell. He is saying that there is a better, superior priesthood out there, an eternal one that existed even before Aaron, back in the days of Abram, and that Jesus is the high priest of this priesthood, offering a better sacrifice, a lasting, permanently sufficient sacrifice.

Taking, then, what Hebrews teaches us about the significance of the passage, and thinking about how these words might have been significant for God’s people in Moses’ day, we can then draw a few conclusions about what these things might mean for us.....

Firstly, just as God showed his faithfulness to Abram to defeat larger and more powerful enemies through him - if only he would engage them with what he had - in the same sort of way Christians today ought to trust that God is still in the business of delivering his people today as we engage in our own sort of warfare - not physically, but spiritually.

Now that means a lot of things, but at the very least it means this: that as prayer is one of the primary means of spiritual warfare, then we ought not be afraid to pray *big prayers*, faith-stretching prayers, odds-beating prayers, even impossible prayers. We may not feel that we have much in our arsenal. We may feel that we can *only* pray. But we have what we have. And the God who used a handful of men to rout a coalition of armies in Abrams’ day is the same God who can take the believing faithful prayers of his people - such as they are - and make them effective for great things.

The second thing I think we can take away from all this is that, just as the greatest danger for Abram was not so much *during* the battle but *afterward*, so too are we often in the greatest danger when the pressure is *off*, and the battles have subsided, and things are working. We easily remember God in our distress. We easily forget Him in our *ease*.

We may meet with great success in this life, but in the wake of that success there comes to us the test of the two kings. The one king comes, reminding us of who is *really* in charge, and who is *really* responsible for the blessings we are receiving. And the other king comes, reminding us of no such thing but simply tempting us to feel that we are entitled, and to find fullness and satisfaction in the world’s treasures.

When we are experiencing victory in our lives, the question that haunts us is: *Will we forget God amidst our blessings? After our prayers have been answered? After we have been spared? Will we in those moments be tempted to find satisfaction in the spoils we can obtain from this world, or will we keep turning away, again and again, ignoring their empty promises*

and instead embracing the simple, but sufficient, provision that is ours in Jesus, clinging to the promises of God, seeing the fullness that is ours. When we do these things, we find that the bread and wine in Melchizedek's hands becomes the bread and wine in the hands of the priest who comes after him - Jesus Christ - and in which we find fullness that can be found nowhere else.

Finally, as Hebrews emphasizes the superiority of Jesus as priest so that people will look to him and no other, we need to do the same: to urge people to look to Christ, even to the *exclusivity* of Christ over all other truth claims. We need them to see that he is the one true mediator that bridges the gap between God and man and that the things he accomplishes by that priesthood are eternal and lasting, with eternal and lasting consequences for all those that are his. And because he is the one - the only one by which people might be saved - then we can trust that the things he brings to us - like the things which Melchizedek brought to Abram - but the things that he says are enough for us, indeed ARE enough. And they are more than enough, they are fullness and abundance - it may look like bread and wine, but it *feels* like a feast.

And within these things there is the promise of an even *greater* fullness that we cannot possibly imagine.

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