



WAR, WEALTH, AND WORSHIP

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Catalog No. 1405

Genesis 14:1-24

Fifth Message

Brian Morgan

December 3rd, 2000

In the aftermath of our national election, who would have thought that the future of our nation would be determined by a handful of people living in Florida? It's fascinating to watch what happens to people who imagine they have the potential to wield such power. Being thrust into positions of supreme influence can be very damaging to one's character. How does the man or woman of faith operate under such conditions? Abram finds himself in just such a position in our text from Genesis today. Last week, we ended with Abram settling down in the land of promise, in Hebron, by the oaks of Moreh. Having "walked away" from conflict, finally he was at peace. But that peace would be short-lived. In the background, a huge international conflagration was brewing that would sweep through the valley where his nephew Lot has chosen to make his home.

We can make several observations about this chapter. First, this is "the only chapter in the Book of Genesis that connects a patriarch with great historic events that bring him out onto the international stage."¹ Second, and even more surprising, this wandering Jew who has just walked away from internal strife, now throws himself headlong into a global conflict and, amazingly, routs the enemy. Third, he walks away from the spoils of war and the praise of men. Had we not known that the eighth century hymn, "Be Thou My Vision," originated in Ireland, we might have thought that it was Abram who penned the line, "Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise."

The importance of this text cannot be overestimated. This is the initial text in the Bible on the man of faith's relation to war² and politics. As such, it gives shape to all that follows on this theme in the Scriptures. The story has three divisions. First, the narrator details the "War of Kings" (verses 1-12). Second, Abram's intervention and rescue of Lot (verses 13-16). And third, the contrasting encounters between Abram and two kings in the aftermath of victory (verses 17-23). The text squarely addresses the issue of the tension between involvement and detachment in the politics of this world.

I. A Global Conflict: The War of Kings (14:1-12)

A. The War of Kings (14:1-9)

And it came about in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, that they made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these came as allies to the valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). (14:1-3, NASB)

The narrator opens with a three-verse summary of the war. As these two allied forces fan out for battle, we hear

the names of nine kings, four against five. This is the first time the term "king(s)" appears in the Scriptures. It is used 27 times in this chapter, probably more than any other chapter in the Bible. The list sounds rather royal and imposing until we come to the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, *Bera* and *Birsha*. Both names contain the terms *evil* (*ra'*) and *wickedness* (*rasha'*). Hearing that ominous echo, coupled with the fact that we already know that the men of Sodom "were wicked exceedingly...against the Lord" (13:13), we are left with an uncomfortable feeling about the outcome of this battle.

The narrator goes on to say what precipitated the invasion.

Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but the thirteenth year they rebelled. (Gen 14:4)

For twelve years, five kings in Canaan had been paying tribute to Chedorlaomer, the ruler of Elam. In the thirteenth year, they decided to assert their independence. This is what placed the war machine in motion. In the fourteenth year, armies from the east retaliated with swift and unrelenting force.

And in the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim and the Zuzim in Ham and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their Mount Seir, as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to Enmishpat (that is, Kadesh), and conquered all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, who lived in Hazazon-tamar. And the king of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah and the king of Admah and the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) came out; and they arrayed for battle against them in the valley of Siddim, against Chedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim and Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar— four kings against five. (14:5-9)

If you think that all the geographical detail and place names appear antiquated, you're in good company. The original Israelite audience, who lived some six hundred years after these events, felt the same way. What we have here is a very ancient text that has carefully preserved place names and titles that were out of date even by the time of the writer. Sarna explains:

This tendency to preserve the ancient toponyms, while at the same time supplementing them with the place-names used in later times, is meticulously applied throughout. Sometimes the additional name served to identify the location for the Israelite reader no longer familiar with the site...In addition, there are three sets of double place-names, Astheroth-Karnaim, Shaveh-Kiriathaim and Hazazon-Tamar. In each case, the sec-

ond name is known to us from Israelite times...[while] the first name represents the archaic pre-Israelite designation strange to later generations.³

In preserving this history with meticulous accuracy, the narrator is attempting to help the reader grasp the enormity of this conflict. The list begins, first, with Amraphel king of Shinar, a reference that takes us way east, to Babylonia. The second king, Arioch king of Ellasar, may be from eastern Asia Minor or perhaps the southern coast of the Black Sea. Chedorlaomer was king of Elam, a powerful state in the Middle East during the early second millennium BC. Tidal king of Goiim may represent the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia, which today is central Turkey. Putting all the geographical pieces together, it is apparent that this was a conflict of global proportions.

Once this impressive coalition of kings travels west, we can follow their destructive path with great precision. Their army traversed the entire length of the land of promise, down the “*King’s Highway*,” which was the international trade route connecting Arabia with the port of the Red Sea. Sarna explains that archaeological discoveries maintain that there were indeed thriving civilizations in this Transjordan valley and the Negev region to the south at this time. But just after this period a sudden catastrophe wiped everything out in this valley for the next six hundred years, “until the founding of the Kingdoms of Edom and Moab in the thirteenth century [B.C.] In the Negev, the break in civilization lasted nearly a thousand years.”⁴

Heading south down the King’s Highway, this war machine appears unstoppable. They conquer formidable foes, like the Rephaim, the renowned giants of the land, without even a mention of resistance. As their path of destruction continues they seem to circumnavigate the whole of the land at will. This leads to the final conflict as the coalition of five kings fans out for battle to take their stand against their opponents. But it wasn’t even a battle.

B. The Booty and Plunder of War (14:10-12)

Now the valley of Siddim was full of tar pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and they fell into them. But those who remained fled to the hill country. Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply, and departed. And they also took Lot, Abram’s nephew, and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom.

We are prepared to hear the gory details of the conflict, but there isn’t even a battle to record. Following one look at the imposing enemy, the kings and troops drop their weapons and flee. In the ensuing chaos it appears that, to avoid being discovered, the two kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fling themselves headlong into one of the many tar pits lining the area. The rest, seeking to avoid capture, flee up the steep mountainous slopes to the east and west. The conquerors arrive to find the cities deserted and the spoils lying there for the taking. Nothing remains. The narrator saves his final line for the worst news of all. There is one more casualty in this war. Lot was taken, along with all his possessions. Why? Because “*he was living in Sodom.*” Earlier we saw that he was camped *near* Sodom, now it appears he has taken residence *within* the city walls. So Abram’s nephew suffers the same fate as the city he chose to live in.

II. The Intervention of Abram (14:13-16)

Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram. (14:13)

At this crucial hour, Abram is brought into the conflict when a sole fugitive escapes the battle to bring him the news. Interestingly, Abram is referred to as Abram the “Hebrew” (lit. “*one from beyond, from the other side,*” perhaps from *beyond* the Jordan or Euphrates). Wenham explains that this is “not a term used by Israelites of themselves, but only by non-Israelites of Israelites (39:14; 41:12). The Habiru/Apiru were well known in the ancient Near East...It seems to be more of a social categorization than an ethnic term. The Apiru are usually on the periphery of society—foreign slaves, mercenaries, or even marauders. Here Abram fits this description well: he is an outsider vis à vis Canaanite society.”⁵ This is very significant to our story. Abram, the nomad from the other side of the tracks, has no vested political interest in the alliances of the day. As he worships the God of promise by the oaks of Mamre, he has made allies. This suggests that he has spent his life bringing blessing to his neighbors, and their loyalty to him is supreme.

This is what was happening on the forested heights of Palestine. But out in the plain, a tragic tale of horror is being played out. The earth-shattering news about the fate of Abram’s nephew is about to break.

And when Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. And he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people. (14:14-16)

When Abram gets word that his nephew has been seized, with lightning speed he throws himself into battle, with 318 “trained”⁶ men. He carefully chooses the most gifted and reliable men, born in his household, and charges after the marauding invaders. With great military prowess he divides and conquers in a surprise night attack at Dan, the northernmost point of the land. So swift is the victory, the narrator gives no details of the conflict. Refusing to settle for mere victory, Abram cleanses the land, driving the invaders clear north of Damascus. He returns triumphant — miraculously, without any loss of troops, spoils or hostages.

How did the conversation between nephew and uncle go on the long trek home? We have no word of that. But the contrast between these two is becoming more and more distinct. Fokkelman makes the observation: “how totally Lot is the object or victim of others and their movements.” As to matters of faith, Lot is utterly passive. Even when faced with the angelic choice to leave Sodom in the face of impending doom, he lingers. And once out of the city he keeps negotiating. He finds it difficult to distance himself from that place. Compromise is Lot’s home. So his choice to settle in Zoar (19:19-22) will be tainted by the same sexual perversion that dominated Sodom. The only active choice he makes in the story is the choice to have

paradise on earth. "The denouement shows us how this choice works out" (Fokkelman).

By contrast, Abram risks life and limb to save the one he loves. His actions raise the question of why the patriarch who walks away from internal conflict, now actively engages in an international conflict and by faith defeats his enemies at their own game. Bruce Waltke observes that when conflict arises regarding the kingdom and promises of God (i.e. *seed* and *land*), the patriarchs most often seem to "walk away" from conflict. They will not "seize" the gifts of God in their own strength (Gen 26:12-33). But when an issue involves *justice* outside the kingdom, they will use worldly means to accomplish their ends. It is equally important to note that though Abram fights, he does not engage in the conflict for political motives. He has a very different agenda. He fights, not for political power, but for restoration. He wants to save the lives of his nephew and family. In so doing he not only saves Lot but restores an entire city. Everything that was once lost is now fully restored. This gives Abram the freedom to fight for a "wicked" side. Though both sides were probably wicked, we clearly know just *how* wicked the men of Sodom were.

III. The Aftermath of Battle: Worship vs. Spoils (14:17-24)

A. Abram and Melchizedek (14:17-20)

Then after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). (14:17)

Now the final scene, the aftermath of the battle. This is the first recorded conversation in the narrative, indicating that the entire battle scene of densely packed action is really the backdrop for this important dialogue. Two kings come out to meet Abram. They arrive simultaneously, but their responses could not be more different. The first king is from Sodom. But his approach appears interrupted by a second king, who comes from Salem (the old name for Jerusalem), preempting the first. Immediately we feel the tension rise.

**And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said,
"Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand."
And he gave him a tenth of all. (14:18-20)**

The second king's name, *Melchizedek*, means, "king of righteousness." His city, *Salem*, means "peace." Not only is he a king, he is also a priest, a common occurrence in those days. Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned in the Bible, which gives his actions great significance. As these two strangers meet, every word and every action between them is a holy celebration of worship. Not one word about politics passes between them. Melchizedek performs the actions of a priest, first blessing Abram, then the God of Abram. Three times we hear that marvelous word "*blessed*." He calls God *'el elyon*, meaning, the God of most high. *El* was the common name for "divinity," but, taken in combination with *elyon*, most high, this is saying that

Abram's God has no rivals. He is blessed not only as Creator ("*possessor of heaven and earth*"), but as "the same God who makes a difference now" ("*who has delivered your enemies into your hand*"). "This God is a source of life, buoyancy and joy in the trials of the day, not just origins" (Bruce Waltke).

In response to the blessing, Abram offers a tenth of the spoils, symbolic of his worship. This tenth represented the first and the best of what he could give — a public acknowledgment that the battle was the Lord's and that all the spoils truly belong to him. Following Abram's tithe, the two enjoy a royal banquet of celebration. This cameo appearance by Melchizedek is picked up by King David in Psalm 110. David had a vision of a future priest-king of such stature that he called him "Lord." To this one belonged the future rule of Israel and the whole world. Before him the kings of the earth would bow down, laying aside their politics to worship him. This psalm shaped the messianic hopes of the Jews. Melchizedek would become a key figure of hope for the Qumran community. Finally, in the New Testament, that priest-king appears (Heb 7). It is no coincidence that Psalm 110 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament.

Throughout the Bible, whenever we come to the crossroads of politics and God's kingdom, the kingdoms of men become mere tools in the Lord's hands to accomplish his purposes. In their aftermath, there is no glory for man. That is reserved solely for God, who reigns supreme. So once again we see that the chief end of man is worship, not glory.

At this wondrous Advent season we remember that the prestigious Augustus, emperor of Rome, was so driven by greed to increase his tax base that he exercised his "sovereign" power, issuing the decree for a census of his entire realm. But, unbeknownst to him, God used his pretentious agenda to accomplish a small family matter, namely, transporting his "priest-king" 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just in time for his birth. The mighty bureaucracy of Rome was set in motion just to fulfill an obscure prophet's words:

**"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be a ruler in
Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2).**

In the aftermath of the birth of this one we hear rumors of kings coming from the East, not for war this time but for worship of this King — right under Herod's eye. Such is the world of God and politics. The proper place of kings is worshiping the King of kings.

Now we move from poetic praise of Melchizedek to the terse words of the king of Sodom.

B. Abram and the King of Sodom (14:21-24)

And the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself." (14:21)

Though he was introduced first, the king of Sodom was pre-empted by Melchizedek's blessing. Before he gets a chance to speak he has to stand in the background and watch both patriarch and king lose themselves in worship. All that worship and feasting must have taken some time,

and with great impatience he finally blurts out his words. A literal translation would read,

*“Give me the soul(s),
the goods take for yourself.”*

His words lack politeness and dignity. So blunt and terse are they (he can only muster four words in the original), they sound almost like grunts. This is the speech of a cave-man. Here is a king, standing before an outsider who at great personal cost has just restored his entire city to him, but rather than being filled with appreciation he is begrudging the fact that it might have to cost him something. He is like a millionaire whose wife has been miraculously saved through the heroic efforts of a surgeon, but now, standing before the doctor in the recovery room, the man complains about the bill.

Abram’s response is highly instructive.

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share.” (14:22-24)

Here is Abram at his best. He claims the name of the God whom he has just been worshiping, and declares that he wants neither the riches nor the praise of men. He dis-

tances himself from the king of Sodom in the most decisive way, through an oath. On the long walk home he must have spent some time thinking about his response. He decided he was not about to accept a promotion or join this king’s political party (*Sodomite*). Now he makes good his pledge. He refuses any and all payment, lest this wicked king boast that he had made Abram rich – a lesson Abram had learned all too well in Egypt through his lack of faith. The root of “rich” (*shr*) is almost identical to the root title (*sr*). Abram refuses to profit from his success. Thus we learn that the appropriate place for wealth following God’s victory is not for personal profit but for extravagant worship.

*Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always.*

Abram operates on a totally different agenda. All that he requires is that the king of Sodom rightfully pay the expenses of the young men from his own household who went with him. As to the allies who joined forces with Abram, they may receive a payment from the spoils. Abram’s faith has allowed him to deal properly with every relationship spoken of in this text. So we find that the man of faith may enter worldly realms, and may by faith be extremely successful, but in the end he refuses to use his success as a stepping stone for personal advancement. Worshiping the God Most High remains his supreme calling. He will not deviate one iota from that. In the end, “walking away” from success may well be one of Abram’s supreme acts of worship. May we do likewise.

© 2000 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 111.
2. This is the first mention of war in the Bible.
3. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 112.
4. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 113-115.
5. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1987), 313.
6. This term “trained” is rare in the Bible and may carry the idea of “dedicated training” or “trained fighters.”