

Beholden to God Alone

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- [0 : 0 0] What does it mean to be beholden to someone? I don't think that word is used much nowadays. It's not the name of a car brand, A-holden or B-holden.
- No, if you look up the dictionary, the word means owing something to someone because of something that they have done for you. It has a sense of being indebted to someone or having a sense of obligation.
- In my parents' generation, when they were growing up in Asia, you would hear stories of people being beholden to others. A young man is given support so that he can keep studying instead of going to find a job, and so he becomes beholden to a benefactor.
- Similarly, we hear stories of organ transplants, of someone giving up one of their two healthy kidneys, perhaps, to save the life of a stranger. That's being beholden, the person who receives it.
- When all that you have, including your life, is the result of an action or generosity of someone, then it's hard not to feel a deep sense of obligation or duty to that person for the rest of your life.
- [1 : 1 4] Of course, nowadays, there are also people who make it their goal not to be beholden to anyone. They're determined to succeed in life on their own steam, through their own determination.
- They want to be self-made men or women. Well, this whole idea of being beholden is what we're going to look at tonight. And again, we're going to look at Abraham's life.
- But first, let me set the scene. And if you remember last week, Abraham and Lot had parted company. Abraham remained in Canaan while Lot moved to the plains of Jordan. But even as Abraham and Lot were settling into their new living arrangements, as it were, things were brewing in international politics.
- There were four kings at the time, all lined up along the Euphrates River. Yep, see my graphics there? And incidentally, this is the same area that ISIS is fighting over at the moment.
- Brendan actually read the names, but I wouldn't even dare to do that. Except to say that there were four kings, Elam, Shinar, Elessar, and Goyim.
- [2 : 2 6] And all of them were allied to each other. And of these four, Kether Loma, the king of Elam, was the most powerful. Now, these were the superpowers of their day.
- And they occupied all the fertile land along the river, as my map shows. And the Bible makes it a point to name them not just once, but twice, as if to add to their significance.
- They probably had name recognition for the people who read them first, like Barack Obama or Vladimir Putin would have today. Then there were the five kings, and we know their names too, although they only mention once.
- And their kingdoms are in the valley of Siddam, down, not quite yet, Andrew. We haven't started fighting yet. Near the Salt Sea.

That's that green patch on that slide. And you do have to look carefully, don't you, some of you at the back? Because it's pretty small, isn't it? And so just by the difference in the area, you see the power imbalance.

[3 : 31] Now, for 12 years, these five kings were subject to the four, and they were, you know, vessel states, probably paying tribute to those kings each year. But in the 13th year, as the Bible says, for reasons unknown to us, they rebelled.

And so in the following year, the four kings came out in battle to bring them back under their control. Well, it's a pretty long way, isn't it? If you look at it. And that may be why they dared to rebel in the first place.

But as the four kings made their way to the five kings down south, they decide, and here we can, Andrew, you can have your battle now. I wish I had sound effects as well, but anyway. They attacked other cities as well.

And it would seem with impunity, the way the Bible describes it, all these other cities are just mentioned in one sweep, and they were no match for them. And so it was a show of force, and maybe these cities were even aligned with the five kings to the south.

We don't know. But either way, the effect was to scare the pants of the five kings. So they go south, and they conquer the five cities, and we can go one by one now, Andrew, all the way down to El Paran, which is south, actually, of where they were.

[4 : 43] And then they double back up to Kadesh, which is up north, before heading down to defeat, one last time, one more battle, the Amorites in the middle, just next to where the five kings were.

And then, finally, they come into the valley of Siddam to engage the five kings. And as you would expect, the superpowers prevail. And if you read, it's quite a comical scene, because as Sodom and Gomorrah flee, some of them fall into tar pits in the valley.

What I imagine is that, some of you may remember those old cartoons or black and white comedies where, you know, the comedians get their feet stuck in the tar, and they're just trying to get themselves out of it.

That's sort of what I think is happening. Anyway, others fled to the hills instead. And so the cities, which is in the green patch, are left defenseless.

And the victorious kings now swoop upon them, Sodom and Gomorrah in particular, and they seize the goods and the food in the cities. And it's here in verse 12 that we learn that Lot is already living in Sodom.

[5 : 50] It didn't take him very long, did it, from the last chapter to be pitched his tents outside Sodom, to come into Sodom. And so as the kings come through, they carry him and the possessions off as well.

Meanwhile, Abraham's on the other side of the Jordan River. So we have the next slide now, a close up of that area. Yep. And he's sort of safe from the marauding armies that's coming down the east and probably unaware of what's taken place.

But thankfully for Lot, one of the captives managed to escape, and he finds Abraham to tell him what's happened. And on hearing this, Abraham springs to action. Now, this is yet another generous act on his part to Lot.

Because remember, he and Lot had parted ways. And really, he's got no need to go after Lot. But it's also a courageous act.

Because if you think about it, what chance did he really have against these superpowers? This nomad, with no land or city to speak of, of his own, against the king's withstanding armies across that vast area.

[7 : 01] Still, Abraham persuades a few friends to join him, the Amorite brothers, Memre, Eskel, and Anna. And then he also takes 318 of his own men.

So it's not a very big force, but they were loyal, because the Bible says that they were born into his household. So together, they ride out to reclaim Lot.

And I don't have it on the map, but they go as far north as Dan, which is at the top of Canaan. And using the cover of darkness and the element of surprise, they ride the kings and they bring Lot and his possessions back, together with the women and the other people.

So this is really, this is a real David and Goliath victory. And the contrast between the earlier battle couldn't be more stark. There, the might of Cataloma and his allies would conquer all before them.

But now, these very same superpowers are being defeated by a minnow. One man, three friends, and 318 men. It was quite a victory too, because verse 16 says that Abraham recovered all the goods and possessions, Lot and his possessions, and the women and the other people.

[8 : 17] But we know, however, from the next few verses that behind this victory was God himself. And we're now about to discover this as Abraham encounters two kings on the way home.

So these two kings come up to meet Abraham in the king's valley, as the Bible says. One was the defeated king of Sodom. Most likely, I think he was hiding out in the hills, and then now he's coming out to try and suss out what Abraham has brought back.

The other is Melchizedek, the king of Salem. And as we read in Hebrews, his name means king of righteousness, and Salem, city of Hulub, means peace.

And so he's the king of peace and of righteousness. But again, the way Abraham treats each king couldn't be any more different. what a contrast both these encounters were.

Well, let's look at them and we'll deal firstly with Melchizedek. This is a mysterious king and he's actually not involved in any of the battles in this chapter and we actually don't hear anything of him again in the rest of the Bible except in Psalm 110 when he's mentioned and in Hebrews again when Hebrews quotes Psalm 110.

[9 : 32] But we know he's not only a king but a priest and a priest of God most high and so it turns out that he actually worships the same God as Abraham. Now as we read verses 18 to 20 it's clearly an act of worship.

Melchizedek brings out the bread and wine and he pronounces a blessing. I don't think we're meant to read into it the sacraments or anything but it's sort of a foreshadowing of it. He attributes what he says in verse 19 is that he attributes Abraham's victory to God most high.

So he says blessed be Abraham by God most high creator of heaven and earth and blessed be God most high who delivered your enemies into your hand. So Abraham's victory very clearly is a blessing from God.

But if you think about it so is everything that God has done for him up to this point. It was God who plucked him out of Ur and led him into Canaan.

It was God who protected him and Sarai in Egypt in spite of his failings there. And when Abraham allowed Lot to choose God placed Abraham on the safe side of the Jordan out of the path of the marauding kings.

[10 : 51] Other people might call it good luck but Abraham knew that this was God's providence. So Abraham responds in worship and he does this by giving a tenth of everything to Melchizedek.

This is a clear acknowledgement of the blessing. A recognition that his victory was from God. And also with this offering Abraham shows public allegiance to God.

God most high that was the person that Abraham worshipped. God but now along comes another king and he too tries to claim Abraham's allegiance.

He's probably I don't know I'm guessing but he's probably witnessed what's just happened and so now he thinks maybe I can get a piece of the action too. But let's just rehearse some facts here.

Sodom was a defeated king. The last time we saw him he was fleeing into the hills or getting his feet stuck in tar one of those two. His city has just been plundered and his subjects been taken captive.

[12 : 00] So for the people to be brought back at all was down solely to Abraham's initiative. Nothing to do with him. In fact if he had any sense at all he should have done what Abraham did and worshipped God most high don't you think?

For he too was beholden to God for it is true Abraham that God used and secured a victory for him. But no Sodom was actually a wicked king.

We remember that from last week didn't we? That the men of Sodom were wicked and sinning greatly and so was their king. And so Sodom is the exact opposite of Melchizedek.

He's a king of wickedness not a king of righteousness. And with that character what he does is try to play God himself presuming he could hold out a blessing for Abraham and trying to look magnanimous in the process.

And what he offers in verse 21 is to say give me the people and you can keep the goods for yourselves. And on the surface it looks generous doesn't it?

[13 : 05] After all if we recall these were all the goods from Sodom and Gomorrah. So it's quite a lot even for a rich person like Abraham. Quite tempting I would have thought. All the king wanted was his subjects for with them I think came their loyalty and hence his power.

But Abraham could see that there was more to this than just accepting goods and gifts. Now it's even arguable whether the gifts or the goods belonged to the king in the first place because after all it's Abraham who brought them back.

You could mount a case to say that these were already Abraham's goods. But Abraham doesn't even go into that argument. He's willing to forsake the riches on offer.

Why? Because he's got something more valuable to protect. And so he responds in verse 22 like this. I have raised my hand to the Lord God Most High Creator of heaven and earth and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you not even a thread or thong of a sandal so that you will not be able to say I made Abraham rich.

I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belonged to the man who went with me the three brothers let them have their share. So can you see what's the more valuable thing that's at play here?

[14 : 34] It is God's glory isn't it? And the reputation that Abraham was God's person. I have raised my hand to the Lord I have sworn publicly my allegiance to him and so the last thing he wanted was to compromise on that allegiance to allow someone else to rob God of his glory to take credit for Abraham's blessing so much so that he wouldn't even accept a thread or a thong and allow Sodom to claim I made you rich.

He didn't want to be beholden to Sodom in any way. This was how zealous Abraham was for God's reputation. For him faith wasn't just a private matter.

He wanted everyone to know that he was beholden to God alone, that his allegiance cannot be bought, nor would he be tempted to bring God's name down.

Now we may listen to this story and have great admiration for Abraham, but we may then well ask, how is that relevant for us? Because it doesn't mean, does it, that just because something has happened to Abraham, that it necessarily means that we have to follow suit.

So what else does the Bible say so that it's appropriate for us to follow in Abraham's footsteps? That's where I want to go next. Well, if you've been coming over the last few weeks, you may have already cottoned on to the same pattern I use each week in the Bible.

[16 : 10] And certainly if you're paying attention to Hebrews, the reading, you would most certainly know where I'm heading next. And it turns out that we too have our Melchizedek, our king of peace, our king of righteousness, and a priest of God Most High.

Because as Hebrews tells us very clearly, Jesus is our Melchizedek. He is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Now I'm very tempted to go and preach another sermon on Hebrews 7, but that's not what we're doing tonight, so we don't have time to unpack that.

Just fortuitously, the morning services have been looking at Hebrews, so if you're interested, then what I suggest you do is just check the website, the church website, and there'll be recordings, I think, by Andrew, on this very chapter, and you can listen to those.

And I encourage you to do that, actually, because they're great sermons. But the gist of the second reading, and of Hebrews more generally, is this, that Jesus is the ultimate high priest, better than all the human ones that have gone before, for he's the perfect mediator between God and man.

What he mediates for us is not just on earth, but what he does is he mediates for us in the very presence of God in heaven. That's why he's a better priest.

[17 : 30] And whereas Abraham offered a tenth of everything, we are unable to offer anything. Instead, it is Jesus himself who has to offer his own blood on our behalf, his death.

Not earthly gifts or sacrifices, but his very own life. And so the blessing that Jesus secures is not just victory over earthly enemies, no, but over even more potent enemies, that of evil, sin, and death.

So that's why he's a true king of peace. Because those enemies of evil, sin, and death, they bar us from a loving relationship with God. Jesus defeats those things so that when we come to God, we find salvation rather than judgment.

And verse 25 of chapter 7 in Hebrews, and I've got it on the screen, just summarizes that perfectly. And says, therefore, Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

So friends, if you thought Abraham's victory was impressive, then this victory by Jesus is even more so. Because this victory or salvation is complete.

[18 : 50] Jesus is able to save completely. And it is internal because he's always living to intercede for us. His eternal living presence before God is an unending testimony for our salvation.

And all we need to do is to come to God through Jesus. That's what verse 25 says. And then we'll be saved from the punishment of sin, which is death. We'll be saved from the power of sin over us by the gift of the Spirit in us.

And then one day we'll be delivered from the very presence of evil. The truth is everything good that's happened in our lives comes from God. God, doesn't it? Whatever material blessings we have, whatever we achieve in this life, they all come from God's hand, doesn't it?

God may use other people, but ultimately God's the one that provides for everything that we have. But we actually owe God more than that, don't we?

Because we also beholden to Him for what Jesus has done for us, saving us completely. And the thing is that we don't have to repay God for it.

[20 : 04] It's a debt actually we can't repay. Instead, what He wants for us is to live by faith in His Son and to show our allegiance to Him. So if there's anyone here tonight that hasn't done that, then let me invite you to do just that.

Jesus is able to save completely all those who come to God through Him. of course, what we also have in our lives are kings of Sodom.

And I don't mean by that individual people necessarily, but powers and principalities, institutions and societal pressures that live by values that are very different to God.

And they pressure us to come with them, to go with them. And the impact they have is exactly the impact that the king of Sodom tried to do, tried to have.

They play on our desires or our fears, saying in effect that if we can give you what you want, riches, recognition, happiness, fulfillment, whatever things we long for, they can give us what we want, provided, of course, that we play by their rules.

[21 : 16] So it may be the company that will fast track your career, provided you go along with their unethical practices, or you go along with their idolization of work.

Or it may be a group of schoolmates who will include you in their inner circle if only you play along with their standard of morality, laugh at their coarse jokes, swear, get drunk.

Maybe a whole heap of other things, but friends, this is nothing more, none of these things are anything more than a Faustian bargain, which the devil is trying to get us to buy into. We can have all the worldly desires we want, if only we will give our soul to it.

Jesus himself faced that very temptation, did he not? Remember when the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and promised to give him all authority over it, provided he would worship him?

But Jesus saw that for the lie that it is, didn't he? Because all glory and authority belongs to God, and he said, worship the Lord your God only.

[22 : 25] Well, friends, my experience is this, that the sooner people know we're Christians, whether it's at work or at school, then actually the easier it becomes to draw those boundaries. You don't have to make a big song and dance about it, but once people realize your commitment to Jesus, then even though they may not like you, or they may talk behind your back, what will also happen is that they will respect you for it.

They will know that you can't be bought, and therefore you've drawn those lines in the sand that they know they're not supposed to cross. And then if in spite of standing up for Jesus, you still progress, you know, with the promotion or becoming school captain at school or whatever, then it would be very clear, wouldn't it, who gets the credit for it?

And no one could claim that you got there with favors from other people. All glory will go to God alone. But even if it means that our stand would mean that we suffer loss, then it doesn't matter, does it?

Because we know where our true blessings lie, in Christ, hidden for now, but one day we will be revealed in glory when Christ comes again. So friends, let me encourage you, let's be like Abraham, let's be zealous for the glory of God, let's be unashamed to show our allegiance to Christ, defend our reputation as Christians.

Remember, we are Christ's own treasured possession. This is a reputation worth defending, worth standing up for, even if it means forsaking the riches of this world.

[24 : 05] let's pray. Father, sometimes we just don't appreciate what a great privilege it is, what a great gift, what an act of grace it is for you to call us children of God, to have chosen us in Christ Jesus.

Nothing that we deserve, and yet here we are, trusting in Jesus. What a great gift. help us, Lord, to see that for the great treasure that it is, so precious that we will not trade it in for anything else in this world.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.