

Abram Goes to War

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to Genesis chapter 14. Genesis 14, today we're looking at verses 13 to 16, where we read here about Abraham who went to rescue his nephew Lot and others who were taken captive during this time of war that we read of as we've read through the first part of the chapter.

Those of you who are keen on jigsaws will know that sometimes you get a piece and you just wonder, where is that going to fit? And it might be quite a long way into trying to complete the jigsaw before you actually realize that this odd-shaped piece fits into its own place in the overall structure of the jigsaw.

And there are some parts of the Bible like that, and sometimes we may think that a passage like this or a chapter like this is really a bit like that odd-shaped jigsaw. Not only might we ask, well, what does it mean, but why is it here?

Why is it placed here in this particular section of Genesis? Well, it's, as we'll see hopefully, it's here for a good reason.

It's not just something that is dealt with in passing. It relates very closely to the previous one and to the following chapter as well. What we have to keep in mind is God's promise to Abraham regarding the land and God's commitment to Abraham to fulfill that promise.

[1 : 40] He's still not known as Abraham, although that's how we refer to him, and that's the word I've used just now. But it is Abraham here. He isn't known as Abraham until God changes his name to Abraham in chapter 17.

That's another issue. But here in chapter 14, Abraham has to go and rescue his nephew Lot and those of his family and others who were actually taken captive when these kings fought against each other.

What is all that about? Why does it sit here between these two chapters that deal with God's promise to Abraham and God's commitment to fulfilling that promise to Abraham?

Let's first of all look at the trouble regarding Lot, the trouble that happened, that took place by which Lot came to be taken captive.

Then we'll look at Abraham's rescue mission, and we'll spend most of the time looking at that. But the trouble with Lot is really concerning these kings. We mentioned, they're mentioned there as the five kings who were vassals or under the dominance or the suzerainty of Keraliomer, and they actually rebelled in the year that's mentioned there.

[2 : 57] They had served Keraliomer for 12 years. In the 13th year, they rebelled against him. And that led to war. It led to these kings, five kings against four kings, and the forces on each side.

And the outcome of that was that as they came to Sodom, they actually took the possessions of Sodom in verse 11, and all their possessions. They took Lot, the son of Abraham's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.

Now, you would need to read through some of the previous chapters in order to understand how it was that Lot came to be found here in Sodom. I know that Sodom was, in fact, a very wicked place. And that's the choice that Abraham had given to Lot. He gave him the freedom to choose which part of the land he would settle in, and Abraham would take whatever Lot didn't take.

And Lot chose Sodom. He looked, we're told, at the area of Sodom. He saw the lushness, the greenness, and he thought, that's the best place for me. He didn't take account of the fact that he was going to be living in close proximity to rampant ungodliness.

[4 : 08] And it's really interesting. When you come to cast your mind back to chapter 13, and verses 10 to 13 there, you'll find that this is how Lot chose the Jordan Valley because it was well watered.

And so he settled in the land of Canaan while Lot settled among the cities of the plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

In other words, he's in the vicinity of Sodom. And then it says, Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. And Lot had not taken account of that primarily as he worked out where he was going to live and make his home.

Then you go forward to this chapter, chapter 14, and you see in verse 12, it's not that he's now living in proximity to Sodom. He's actually living in Sodom.

He's been drawn into the life, into the kind of situation that the men, the women of Sodom, the people of Sodom actually have. And that's where you see they're dwelling in Sodom.

[5 : 16] They took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom and his possessions and went their way. Now you could make too much of that. Maybe it's just a stylistic thing, a variation in wording.

But I think it's important because it shows that he hadn't taken regard of the kind of place that Sodom was when he chose to live in close proximity to it.

And so he was sucked in towards the life of Sodom. We know that he remained a man of God, but nevertheless, he departed from the ways of God. He let the spirit of Sodom, if you like, enter into his life to some extent at least.

And that's why he's here when this war breaks out. He is caught up in it and he's taken captive. And there's a point for us in that to notice for ourselves too before we go on to look at the second point, which is Abram's rescue mission to take Lot back.

And that's this. Lot was really paying the price of living too close to the world, if you like to put it in New Testament terms.

[6 : 23] He was living too close to Sodom. He was living too close to a place that appeared to his natural vision to be perfect, and yet spiritually was a very dangerous place.

And when you and I live too close to the world, that's really the danger we're placing ourselves. We can't get out of the world in the sense in which we live in the midst of people, wherever we are that we live.

Obviously, we live in the world in that sense and in the ways of the world as we see that around us. And there's no way you can extricate yourself from being part of that to a certain extent, even if you try and keep yourself spiritually at a distance from worldliness, from sinfulness.

But this is a warning to us as well, that going as close to the world as you can, just trying to minimize the difference between a Christian life and the life of somebody who is thoroughly worldly, is a very dangerous practice.

When you're coming to a place where there are cliffs that you could very easily fall over, the wisdom that's in your head says, well, the best thing for me is just to not go too close to the edge, because it might crumble, and I might just go down to the bottom of the cliff and might fall over, and it might just end up dead.

[7 : 42] You give a safe distance to yourself between the edge of that cliff and where you're standing or where you're walking. And it's the same spiritually as well, and Lot didn't do that.

And it's a sad sight, as you see, Lot's described in the end of his life, particularly later on in Genesis, where he's lost his way completely and is in a drunken stupor as he's left Sodom and made his way out of the place.

And that's all that's recorded of the end of his life. And it's a very sad picture indeed. So don't go as close to the world as you can.

Stay as far away from it as you can without compromising your Christian witness, your responsibility to bring Christ to the world. But also stay as close as you can to the Abrams that you know of in this life, the people of God that you respect, that you know are walking in God's ways, that you know will be a good and safe guide to you in this life.

Lot and Abram separated. They needed to because a dispute had risen between them in regard to looking after their animals and where they were going to settle to be the best for their herds and so on.

[9 : 01] And it really shows us too that you and I must keep close, as close as you can, to the Abram-type figures that you know of in this life. There are Christians that you know of that are dependable, that are experienced, that are well on the way in their Christian life, in their Christian experience.

There are Christians you know of who have experienced various hardships, who know what temptation is, who have learned from their mistakes as well. And so you stay close to them. And I would say to the young folks especially, how important that is. Not just to the young folks, young in age, but also young in experience, young in the Christian faith. Keep close to those who are more experienced.

Be with them. Spend every opportunity you can in learning from them, in gaining from their experience. Don't keep a great distance between you and the Abrams you know of, but keep a big distance between yourself and the world.

That's the trouble with Lot, the trouble he found himself in, and that's how it ended up, with him being taken captive and being brought away by these kings.

[10:16] So here is Abram, in verse 13, one who had escaped came and told Abram, who was living by the oaks of Mamre. And when Abram heard that his kinsmen had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men born in his house, 318 of them, not very many when you think of the numbers that these kings had of their forces, 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 to Hobah, north of Damascus. And he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsmen, Lot, with his possessions, and the women, and the people.

And there are two things in the second part of the passage we're looking at. Abram's rescue mission, first of all, he was exerting his right.

He was exerting his right in doing this. Secondly, he was exerting his might, the might that he had as God gave him the ability and the might to carry out this venture into this place.

He was exerting his right. What made him go to war? It wasn't that he loved war. In fact, you might say this is really not typical at all of Abram, that he's not a man of war. He's not somebody who's often in conflict.

[11:37] As you read through his life in the book of Genesis, it's a very docile life. It's a godly life. It's a life in which there's very little of this sort of thing. So why did he go to war here?

Well, he was exerting his right. What do you mean, what I mean by exerting his right? Well, God had given him a specific promise. See, this chapter fits in between these previous two, the previous chapter and the following one, as we've said at the beginning.

When you go back to chapter 13, just look at verse 14. The Lord said to Abram after Lot had separated from him, lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards, for all the land that you see, I will give to you and to your offspring forever.

This is the land of Canaan. This is the promised land. God is saying to Abram, it doesn't matter what your eye looks at as you look out in all directions. This is yours. I'm giving it to you and to your descendants.

And you go forward to chapter 15. And in chapter 15 and verse 18, you find very similarly God is saying on that day that God made a covenant with Abram saying to your offspring, I give this land or I have given, actually it's saying literally, I have given this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites and so on, all the way through there, God is saying to him, I have given you this land.

[13:05] So when Abram actually needed to take Lot back and those had been taken captive, he was exercising his right. You have all of these kings and they all have their own portions of this land that they rule over in their own smaller parts and the sections of it that they actually rule over and they've now been at war and they've taken Lot as one of God's covenant people, the nephew of Abram to whom God has given these promises have taken him captive.

And Abram is exercising his right because these kings have really acted as if this land is theirs. What God is saying, actually this belongs to me and I've given it to my servant Abram.

And because I've given it to Abram, everything that assaults that has to be actually faced up to and it has to be rectified. Abraham is in fact the inheritor of this land because God has given it to him. And as God has given it to him, he's exercising his right of reclaiming it and reclaiming it for Lot and for the people that are with Lot as well.

So that's the first thing. God's promise of this land, he's given it to Abraham, he's committed to that promise, and so Abraham is really saying, actually God has given me this land and these kings have no right to invade my territory and take my nephew captive.

[14 : 36] And that really reminds us of God's mandate to the church. Because you might say that Abram, you could say here, is really a symbol for us, a type of God's church, living in the world for God, acting for God, being given a mandate by God.

What is that mandate? Well, you go to Matthew chapter 28, and in Matthew 28 verses 18 to 20, you have that famous and well-known mandate where God, Jesus spoke to the disciples and said, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations. He went on from there to say that teaching them to observe all the things that I have commanded you and I am with you to the end of the age, the end of the world.

You see, there is the mandate to the church, but what does it actually mean in practice? It means that God's people are in the business of reclaiming territory for God.

That's what your Christian life is about. It's not just something by which you and I benefit personally and individually and privately or by which we as a congregation, as we congregate here from time to time, benefit spiritually from spiritual teaching.

[15 : 55] God has said to us, I am giving you a mandate, that mandate remains with you. The world out there needs to be reclaimed for God. There are portions of that world under enemy possession.

It's enemy territory at the moment. It's under the dominance of the ungodly, of those who are anti-gospel, of those who are anti-church, of those who want to secularize everything and take religion out of public life altogether and especially remove the Bible from public practice.

Go and make disciples of all nations. Reclaim that territory that's been lost and taken over by the enemies of God.

I know that that language nowadays isn't fashionable. We're not in the business of being fashionable or actually just conforming to present-day thoughts or ideologies that you face in the world when they're anti-gospel and anti-God.

You don't conform to that. You have to try with all the tact and the love and the faithfulness to God that you can muster, you have to try and reclaim that territory for God.

[17 : 13] It doesn't matter whether it's in areas of education or for our young people or in terms of medical ethics, wherever you find what is ungodly, that is anti-God, that is anti-Scripture, that is anti-the Bible, anti-everything that you value as a Christian, all God is saying, you have to do in Abraham, you have to actually seek to recover and reclaim that territory for God.

You're one of His. You have that privilege and you have that responsibility. You know, in 19, we very rightly talk about the dangers to freedom in our country.

Many places in the world that don't have the freedom that we enjoy, but the freedom that we enjoy is being steadily eroded. And freedom in terms of freedom for the gospel and freedom to witness for Christ, freedom to be regarded as just as valid in your Christian stand as any alternative to that, that's being steadily eroded.

And in fact, laws are being brought in and that makes it more and more difficult to be a Christian in every sense in which you need to be a Christian without actually being prosecuted for it.

in 1984, for two years until 1986, the Statue of Liberty had to be renovated and repaired.

[18 : 47] It was in danger of collapse. And it was in danger of collapse because internally the structure was made of iron. And iron, as you know, rusts and corrodes.

And over the period of time that the statue had stood there, well, it had begun to corrode from inside. And when it started to corrode from inside and some of the main structure really began to show bad signs of collapse or corroding or danger of collapse, the decision was taken we've got to renovate this.

And so they replaced the iron structure, or most of it at least, with stainless steel so that it would stand against the elements and not be in danger of collapse.

Well, any nation whose structure morally is corroding and has been corroding over the years as ours have in terms of spiritual and moral ethics and values is in danger of collapse.

That society is in danger of collapse. And a society that goes as far as to live entirely free of any obedience to God has already collapsed.

[19 : 59] I'm not saying that's happened yet with our society. Thank God for that. But you can see how the structures are beginning to corrode and how the corrosion has set in to an alarming extent in some parts of our people's thinking and lifestyles.

And it's up to you and to me as Christians to counter that. To come with the stainless steel, if you like, of gospel truth. I don't want to make it sound as if it's just a harsh kind of truth, as if it's something that's just so solid and so unmovable that people will find it completely and utterly unacceptable.

The gospel may seem like that to some people, but the gospel should be, as we presented, it should be a thing of love and a thing of compassion and a thing of understanding and a thing of appeal and a thing of real meaningfulness to people as we present it.

That doesn't mean they'll accept it, but that's how we should certainly set about presenting it. So that's the mandate that God has given to His church.

It's very obvious to us, even in the present day, that for our nation to again be exalted in righteousness, as the Bible puts it, politics is not going to do it.

[21 : 20] politics will fail to accomplish that of itself. Secularism will not do it. A wide acceptance of other ideologies along with Christianity will not do it.

You have the gospel, and to that gospel God has attached the mandate, go and make disciples for Jesus, for God of all nations.

That was Abraham exerting his right. And you and I have been given the right. This right will be challenged. The right to actually go and make disciples for Christ and teach them to observe what He has commanded, that's going to be challenged, that is challenged.

But the right remains. It's a God-given right. And you have to insist on that right. Come what may, difficult though it may become. So there is Abraham exerting his right, but then secondly, he's also exerting his might.

He brought this relatively small force with him, and he actually defeated those who had taken Lot and others captive. And that's a strand in the Bible that's very important as well.

[22 : 43] that strand of the few being empowered by God to accomplish great things. You find it all the way through the Bible. Think, for example, of Israel and Egypt.

They're not as numerous as the Egyptians, and yet it is the people of Israel and Egypt that God has His eye on, that God listens to, that God hears the cry of, and they're the ones who come to show their supremacy with God's help over the Egyptian forces.

Then you find Gideon, and in fact, God at one time telling you, you've got too many people with you against the Midianites. I'm going to take it down just to a few hundred. And Gideon, of course, obeyed God, and he went out with that small force and defeated the Midianites.

You find the early New Testament church. Just think of how the New Testament church began. You could put them into one room before Pentecost, especially, you could put them into one room.

The disciples and the Gospels and those who were with them. And yet, by the time Paul wrote his epistles, there were churches, some of the greatest pagan centers of population in the world of the time, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Corinth, and so on.

[24 : 00] Why did that happen? What is the secret? What's the key? The key is God's power. The key is God actually empowering what seems to be a small number facing impossible odds, and yet through that, as we read and sang in Psalm 18, through God, I can overleap a wall.

I can overcome hosts. Through God, with God on our side. That's why 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 7, actually speaks about having this treasure, as Paul says, of himself and the apostles especially, but the principle is there for every Christian.

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, in vessels of clay, jars of clay. They're not steel. They're not unbreakable. Why is it that he describes his own life as a Christian as a vessel of clay into which God has deposited this life?

He says, so that the excellency of the power might be of God and not of us. In other words, he's saying, the fact that not only I have survived the traumas that I've been through, but overcome them, and I'm better for them, and have certainly defeated some of those who stood against me by way of argument.

The excellency of the power is seen to be of God. If it weren't, then I would have cracked and broken long ago. But I'm still held together. There are cracks in my life, but I'm still a northern vessel in which God has deposited this life.

[25 : 40] Take encouragement today from the fact that, in fact, God uses your smallness to show his greatness. And God shows his greatness through our weakness as human beings, as believers as well, as we express our weakness, our inability, our smallness compared to the forces that we face in the gospel as we seek to go out with the gospel.

But God is saying, I'm on your side. I'm with you to the end of the age. I've given you the mandate. I'm committed to my promise to you. And so go and make disciples.

We sing with the children very often that chorus, my God is so big, with all the actions that go with it. But it's true.

That's why we teach our children, my God is so big. And we have to, ourselves, just sometimes get a grip and say, well, yes, my God is so big, so where does that leave me?

It means that things that are happening in my life that are too big for myself to cope with on my own, and even too big to cope with even if I get help from experts elsewhere.

[26 : 57] But they're not too big for God. And they're never too big for Him or too heavy. He is so big. He is so committed to His people.

We said to the children earlier, His fatherhood is one of the great undergirding truths that support us through life.

Our Father Father who is in heaven. Now, of course, there's a few other points to mention just before we close. And one of them is, it's interesting that Abraham here actually developed a strategy.

He didn't just rush in against those who had taken Lot captive. He didn't just rush in without thinking about what he was doing. You can see there in verse 15, he divided his forces against them by night.

He and his servants and defeated them and pursued them. That's a very brief summary. But you can actually see within that that Abraham very skillfully and very thoughtfully and very prayerfully to be sure actually divided up his forces.

[28 : 02] They weren't very big anyway. But he divided them up strategically in the way that he thought best to take on these forces. And that's how it is for us as well.

All of us have a gift to use in the service of God. But we don't all have the same gifts. We divide the gifts. That's what makes the church the body of Christ.

Just like our natural body, physical body, have all of these different parts. And Paul uses, as you know, that imagery in the New Testament to describe the church and to describe not only the church but the church's gift by God of all of these various abilities and personalities and offices and callings.

When we see people with a different gift to ourselves, we actually have to back that up and not actually feel in any way jealous about the fact that maybe they're more prominent, maybe they're more successful as you see things on the outside.

What we have to do is just divide the forces, make sure that we're all doing our part, contributing our part to the overall advance of the whole and not actually in any way seeking to divide in such a way that dissipates the strengthening that God gives to His people.

[29 : 26] It's by accepting that God has given us something specific to use alongside of what He's given to others. It's by accepting that and pushing on with it that we actually gain in strength together.

And He was very successful in that. He brought back Lot and all his possessions and the people and the women and the people.

In other words, you could see, in fact, that Sodom actually benefited from Abraham's intervention on behalf of Lot and his family. The people of Sodom themselves benefit from what Abraham did. He rescued people, he brought back their possessions and their goods. And yet, not many people, hardly any of at all, in Sodom benefited spiritually from the advantage he gave them.

Sodom was destroyed in God's displeasure. Sadly, that's how it is for the gospel as well. despite the fact that people see what it's like to be a Christian, those not as, in my own life or yours, I'm sure, we say that it's not in any way as strong or as perfect as it should be.

[30 : 46] Nevertheless, people dismiss that and don't benefit from the things that Christianity and the gospel has brought. If you think about it, it's an argument that's often used against secularism and certainly against seculars to dismiss the gospel and the Bible and God's people.

Many of the great benefits that we've received by way of mental and physical health and the well-being of looking after people properly in hospitals and educational centers, many of these were set up by Christians.

The emancipation of slaves, the abolishment of slavery, came from Christian movements. And yet, the world of today in our society is not prepared to accept that and dismisses that when you tell

them.

Like the people of Sodom who benefited from Abraham's intervention. That's why we are actually concerned for our nation, concerned for our people when they continue to cast off the obvious benefits the gospel has brought to us as a people.

But we have to keep at it. We have to actually keep showing that in the words of the psalmist, except the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Except the Lord keeps the city or watches the city, the watchmen watch in vain.

[32 : 13] Let me just close by reading to you words from a commentary on Genesis by Derek Kidner. It's a small Tyndale Old Testament commentary, one of that series, but excellent commentary.

And this is what he says in regard to this passage. The two activities, he says, of verse 1, are samples of a great area of life, its enterprises and its conflicts.

This is actually, sorry, on Psalm 127, Psalm 127, verses 1 and 2, except the Lord build the house. Go back again, he says, the two human activities of verse 1 are samples of a great area of life, its enterprises and its conflicts, the work of creating and of conserving.

For each of them, this verse sees only two possibilities, either it will be the Lord's doing or it will be pointless. Verse 2 underlines the fact that to work still harder is no answer to the problem.

It can be a fresh enslavement, in fact. It is not simply that our projects will fail, there is at least bread to show for them, but that they will lead nowhere.

[33 : 30] In terms of verse 1, the house and city may survive. The question is, were they worth? building. That's the commentary of Kidner on these words of Psalm 127.

There's the mandate that God has given us. There's our privilege and our challenge. Go. Therefore, because Christ is in charge, and make disciples of all nations. there's a obsessedhi, who is in charge,