



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Uncompromising Faith

Genesis 14:1-24

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This morning brings us to Chapter 14 of Genesis. You'll probably notice right away that this chapter is different from anything we've seen so far. In fact, you'll probably notice that Abram—who has been at the centre of the story for the last two chapters—isn't even mentioned until halfway through. But Chapter 14 follows closely on Chapter 13 and will lead us, next week, directly in to Chapter 15. All three chapters have to do with one primary theme: God's promise of Canaan to Abram. Remember, that while Abram might be at the centre of the story, it's not really his story; *it's God's story*. And, more specifically, these chapters are about God making good on his promise by overcoming *obstacles*. We saw this first as God overcame the obstacle of Abram stepping out of his will—leaving the promised land to go to Egypt for bread and then jeopardising God's promise of descendants through his dishonestly putting Sarai in a compromising position that ended up with Pharaoh take her for his harem. God showed first that he will overcome the faithlessness of his people. But what about "circumstances"? In Chapter 13 we saw that not only did Abram have only a small piece of Canaan in which to live—squeezed tightly between the Canaanites in the cities and the Perizzites in the country—but he was being squeezed out of that little piece of land by the prosperity of his nephew, Lot, who was not part of the divine promise. This time we saw that Abram had the faith to let God overcome the obstacle. Instead of doing the uncharitable thing and giving his nephew the boot, he let Lot choose his own land. Lot chose the Jordan Valley. It was the better land agriculturally, yes, but it was also the land closest to the greatest evil: the city of Sodom. Lot chose to remove himself from the promised land. In faith, Abram

did the right thing and allowed God to take care of the obstacle for him.

Chapter 14 continues on with the problem of the land. Lot is gone, but the land is still controlled by the Canaanites. Keep this problem—this obstacle in the way of God's promise—in mind as we make our way through the chapter. There are some very interesting things that happen here, but the main focus of the text is this problem of the land: God promised it to Abram, but there are other people—powerful people—living in it.

The story opens with a war. Look at verses 1 and 2:

In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, these kings made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar).

This is one of those passage that makes your eyes glaze over after the second or third name. Don't worry; even historians and Bible scholars can only speculate at a few of these names and places. What's described here fits in with what we know generally of the Ancient Near East in the time period from about 2100 B.C. to 1800 B.C., but we don't know enough *specifics* of that time to identify any of these kings or chieftains precisely. To sum it up: there was a war or series of skirmishes between an alliance of four kings from the east and five kings from the area around the Dead Sea—the place where Lot settled. Shinar is Babylon. Elam is now part of southern Iran. Ellasar probably refers to part of what is now eastern Turkey. These kings allied together and fought the kings of the Dead Sea valley. There were no "countries" in those days; these are a bunch of warring city-states. In this case we're told that the towns and cities of the Dead Sea had been subject to Chedorlaomer, king of a city far to the east.

And all these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). Twelve years they had served

Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. (Genesis 14:3-4)

Not surprisingly, Chedorlaomer didn't approve of this revolt. It cut off his tribute revenue—and possibly cut into the recruitment quotas for his army and his slaves. The rebels get away with this for a year simply because it took that long for Chedorlaomer to find out about their rebellion and muster his allies and his warriors. Needless to say, the rebellion doesn't last. Chedorlaomer calls his allies together and they head west to beat the rebels back into submission. Again, the text gives us a list of people and places that might make our eyes glaze over. In this case what we see is Chedorlaomer and his allies marching south and west through the region east of Canaan. In ancient times there was a road that ran south from Damascus, in Syria, along the mountains on the east side of the Jordan River. It was called the "King's Highway". All of these people listed here lived in that area and we see Chedorlaomer crushing all of them on his way to deal with the rebels.

In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran on the border of the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh) and defeated all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who were dwelling in Hazazon-tamar. (Genesis 14:5-7)

Phase one of the expedition shows us that Chedorlaomer and his friends mean business. Not only do they have forces strong enough to deal with the rebels, but they're strong enough and powerful enough to beat everyone along the way into submission—even the Rephaim, people related to the giants that later frightened the Israelite spies whom Moses sent to scout the land in Canaan. In fact, these four kings don't just war against the people along the direct route to the Dead Sea, they even go all the way down to El-paran on the Red Sea and then over into the Negeb to crush

the Amalekites, a people known for their strength and warmongering. Only then does Chedorlaomer circle back around to the Dead Sea. Now the expedition enters phase two:

Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim with Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar, four kings against five. (Genesis 14:8-9)

We might think that five kings could easily vanquish four, but it doesn't work out that way. Even after his long march from the east and even after doing battle all the way, Chedorlaomer and his forces apparently have no trouble defeating the rebel kings. In fact, the only details the text gives us about the battle is the fact that the king of Sodom and his friends ran away and Chedorlaomer and his allies sacked their cities, taking away their riches as tribute and their people as slaves. Look at verses 10 to 11.

Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way.

If you've been wondering what all this has to do with Abram, look now at verse 12:

They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.

When we last saw Lot he was heading down from the hill country to setup camp in the neighbourhood of Sodom. It was not a wise choice and it shows a character flaw in him that he would choose land so close to a city known for its great evil. But at least he only moved into the neighbourhood; maybe

he had no intention of actually associating with the people of Sodom. Now we find out that that's not the case. Eventually he left his herdsman to deal with his flocks and herds in the country and moved his family directly into the city. And, of course, when Chedorlaomer sacked the city, he took Lot, his family, his slaves and hired hands, and all his good as booty.

Verse 13 now tells us that one of the survivors ran to the hill country to tell Uncle Abram what happened. What's interesting here is that these details in Chapter 14 fill in some of the gaps about Abram and who he was. So far we might have pictured him as something like a Bedouin nomad, travelling across the desert with his wife, a couple of slaves and hired hands, and some horses or donkeys and a small flock of sheep. Even as he left Egypt we're told that he was wealthy, but I think we're still prone to seeing him as a solitary guy wandering in the wilderness. What we see here paints a very different picture. Look at verses 13 and 14:

Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram. When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

Abram's hardly a lone desert wanderer. If he could muster 318 trained fighting slaves it wouldn't be hard to imagine there being a thousand people in his household. And note that he's prepared. These are men who have been trained for this sort of thing. So he, along with Mamre and his brothers, head off to rescue Lot. Three hundred and eighteen might not seem like a lot, but consider that he had three allies with him and each could have had an equal number of men. And while the city-states of those days could muster ten or fifteen thousand, we also have evidence that at least in some circumstances a force of three hundred men was ideal for foray

expeditions.¹ It's also entirely possible that Chedorlaomer's force wasn't so much an army of tens of thousands, but something more like a large raiding party.

Whatever the case, Abram chases them to the north and catches them unawares at night. It immediately brings to mind Gideon's midnight raid on the Midianites. With his little band of three hundred men he destroyed and drove off the entire Midianite army. He had started with 32,000 warriors, but God had winnowed his army down to three hundred in order to work a miracle through Gideon and to make sure none would ever forget that it was God who had saved his people. Something like that may be going on here. Later, we'll certainly see Abram attributing the victory to God.

And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people. (Genesis 14:15-16)

Where the combined armies of the four kings failed to protect their own cities and people, Abram and his three friends succeed. The point of the story is to show God at work. This is why we have the long report of the battles and skirmishes that lead up to Lot's capture. Phase one of Chedorlaomer's expedition shows us his army defeated tribe after tribe and city after city all the way down the King's Highway—even passing up the rebel kings—fighting all the way to the Red Sea and back, undefeated. In phase two we see him defeat the combined forces of the five kings. And now we see Abram with his little force of 318 men plus his three allies, who might have had as many men each, defeating the great king from the east and taking care of business while the

¹ Yigdael Yadin, "Warfare in the Second Millennium B.C.E.," in *Patriarchs: The World History of the Jewish People*, ed. Benjamin Mazar (Jerusalem: Massada, 1970), 138.

king of Sodom runs back to hide in his city.

When Abram gets back from defeating Chedorlaomer and the eastern kings he's greeted by two kings just as he approaches Jerusalem. Look at verses 17 to 20:

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). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High,

who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Abram is received in two very different ways by these two kings as he returns with the people, animals, and treasures carried away by Chedorlaomer.

“Salem” is a shortened form of “Jerusalem”, which was not yet the seat of David and capital of Israel. Its king was a man named Melchizedek whom we're also told was a priest of “God Most High”, or in Hebrew *'ēl 'elyōn*.

Who is Melchizedek? Whole sermons have been preached on him alone. Almost nothing is said of him here. We might pass over him quickly except for the fact that his name turns up again in Psalm 110:4 where we read about the ideal king in the line of David being not only a king, but, like Melchizedek, also being a priest. Melchizedek took on an important role in the thinking of the Jewish leaders and especially the Sadducees during the period between the Old and New Testaments. The people went from seeing the ideal king of Jerusalem as both king and priest—like Melchizedek was—but to seeing Melchizedek himself as a Messiah figure. Some thought he was the archangel Michael and others thought that he was Noah's son, Shem. In the

New Testament, the writer of Hebrews picks up on some of these ideas that had become common in Jewish thought when he points to Christ as the ideal king and priest who was better than all the kings and priests who had come before. In that sense Melchizedek does providentially point us to Jesus. His name means “My God is righteous.” He comes from “Salem”, he's the “king of peace”. And some have even seen Christ in Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine to Abram.

That said, if we're faithful to the actual biblical text here—if we let the Bible speak for itself—these aren't the conclusions we come to. Melchizedek was the king of a Canaanite city. *El* was the name of the chief Canaanite god who was often called *'ēl 'elyōn* to denote his senior status in their pantheon. While it's possible that he worshipped the God of Abram, it seems unlikely given that the Canaanites were wholly given over to paganism and that this man seems to be the chief king of a Canaanite alliance. The important thing here is that he recognised that Abram hadn't won his victory on his own. He blesses Abram and thanks the one he calls “God Most High”. In thanks for his blessing, Abram tithes a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek. It's a dramatic illustration of God's promise: Those who bless you I will bless.

In contrast, is the king of Sodom:

And the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.” But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share.” (Genesis 14:21-24)

Gordon Wenham puts it very well: “The meanness of the king of Sodom stands in stark contrast to Melchizedek's warm

generosity. Sodom brought nothing, whereas Melchizedek brought out bread and wine. Melchizedek blessed Abram. Sodom makes a short, almost rude demand of just six words: “Give me people; take property yourself.” There is none of the customary courtesy here.”² Whereas Melchizedek experiences the fruit of God's promise to bless those who bless Abram, we're going to see fairly shortly that the king of Sodom will experience the fruit of the other end of God's promise to Abram: Those who curse you I will curse.

What's interesting is that Abram ends up handing the entire spoils of the war over to the king of Sodom. Mamre and his brothers are allowed to take their portion, but Abram claims no more than the food his men had eaten. Why? Because God had promised him blessing and here Abram, walking by faith, wants to make sure that God gets the credit. Even though it was God who had won him the victory with his band of 318 men, Abram's still concerned that when people see his riches they might attribute his blessing not to the hand of God but to the generosity of the king of Sodom. Abram would rather be poor and keep trusting God to make good on his promise than have people think he got where he was because of a pagan king. And so Abram calls on God and pledges not to take so much as a sandal strap. And I imagine him looking deliberately to Melchizedek as he makes this pledge. Melchizedek has attributed Abram's victory to “God Most High”, to *'ēl 'elyōn*. Now Abram makes his pledge not simply to “God Most High”, but to the “LORD, God Most High”, to *Yahweh, El elyon*. Again, Abram wants the credit to go where it's due: not to himself and he certainly doesn't want anyone thinking it was due to the God Most High of the Canaanites. The credit goes to the LORD, to *Yahweh*, who is the *true* God Most High.

Now, what's important about all this? We need to remember, again, that this isn't so much Abram's story as it is God's story. God made a promise to Abram and each of these stories has

² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), p. 318.

shown us some kind of obstacle in the way of that promise. We learn something about God as we see the story unfold and as we see Abram respond—whether he responds in faith or in unfaithfulness—we learn something about the practical application that follows from what God is telling us about himself. Neither Chapter 13 nor Chapter 14 gives us the whole picture. They show us the obstacles to God’s promise; we won’t see God’s solution to these problems until Chapter 15. But what we do see is God’s faithfulness to his promise and in both chapters we see Abram’s faith in God at work. Because he had faith that God would make good on his promise of the land, Abram was willing to be gracious with Lot. And here we especially see his faith at work in giving up what he had a claim to.

Think about the implications of Abram’s victory over Chedorlaomer. This mighty king from the east had passed through the eastern border of Canaan and then looped down to the extreme south and back up to the Dead Sea, conquering every tribe and city he encountered. He was claiming Canaan for himself. And then he was defeated by Abram. That means that Abram has the right to seize control of all those lands that Chedorlaomer and his allies had conquered. Here was his chance to take what God had promised. And yet Abram knew somehow that this wasn’t the way God had in mind. Abram knew that having the land given to him by pagan kings wasn’t God’s plan and so he defers to Melchizedek and to the king of Sodom. I’m reminded of David, who, twice had the opportunity to take Saul’s life, but knew that murdering the king wasn’t the way to receive God’s promises. And I’m reminded of Christ, who, when he was offered all the kingdoms of the world by Satan, turned down the offer, knowing that God’s promise would come only as he humbled himself as a servant.

Is our faith as strong as Abram’s?—or as strong as David’s or Christ’s? As we do the work of the kingdom, are we willing to wait on God, his timing and his plan for bringing his will about? Or do we feel compelled to help him along

by compromising our faith or our ethics? How often do we try to bring God’s promises to fruit in our lives by trusting in our own power or ability? God promises us our daily bread, but how often are we willing to do questionable or even dishonest things to get it? How often do we act out of greed rather than out of faith and trust? Jesus reminds us, “Seek *first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). And speaking of seeking the kingdom: how often do we compromise with evil men at the ballot box in misguided efforts to bring God’s kingdom by political force? And how often, even in the work of the Church and in our evangelism, are we tempted to grow the kingdom by compromising our message or by compromising who we are as the body of Christ? We fear to talk about sin or we play down the uniqueness of Jesus as *the way, the truth, and the life* or we compromise the witness of the Church by allowing rank unholiness to remain in our midst, all because we’re afraid that if we communicate the unadulterated Gospel, if we truly preach the Scriptures, and if we call our brothers and sisters to true commitment and accountability we might drive people away.

Dear Friends, remember that God is sovereign and that he is faithful. He declares this to us loudly and clearly from the pages of Scripture. Like Abram, we need to walk with him in faith, trusting that he will do what he has said. Our task is to seek his kingdom and to live in righteousness; his task is to bring his promises to pass. When we get those two things reversed we only get ourselves into trouble. Have faith. Wait on God. Remember that God’s timing is not our timing and God’s methods are not our methods, but as we steep ourselves in his Word and as we live in communion with him, he will lead us into paths of righteousness and as we walk with him we will see his kingdom unfold before us.

Let us pray: Lord, we asked earlier in the Collect “that your grace may always go before and follow after us and make us continually committed to all good

works.” We ask that again. Give us grace to walk by faith and not by sight that we might seek first your kingdom and your righteousness, trusting you to bring your promises to fruit. In Jesus’ name we ask this. Amen.