

The Life of Abraham - Part 3

by W.F. Anderson

The sermon explores Abraham's love and integrity in rescuing Lot, highlighting the importance of selflessness and God's blessings in our lives.

Scripture: Genesis 14:11-12, Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 4:29, Hebrews 13:15

Topics: "Faith Formation", "Biblical History"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by referencing the story of the capture of Sodom and Gomorrah by four kings who were against their rule. These kings were determined to collect money and goods from the rebellious nations, including Sodom and Gomorrah. The battle resulted in the capture of Lot and his family, along with the people and goods of Sodom and Gomorrah. The speaker then goes on to discuss various books, including one about Charlie Colson's conversion, and recommends reading it. The sermon concludes with a call to turn to the book of Genesis, specifically chapter 14, for further study.

Transcript

Morning. I just want to be sure you're here. Yeah.

I was surprised to learn that a number of folks have left since Sunday. Maybe they didn't understand that I was speaking all this week. But I hope those of us who stayed are going to have a good time around the Word of God.

I'm always interested in books, as you remember from last year, and I'll be mentioning various books during the course of the week. If you haven't read this story of Charlie Coulson, please get it. Born Again.

There are some of those remarkable individuals that seem to be marked out as God's spokesmen because of the very drama of their conversion. It's not that God loves Charlie Coulson any more than he loves any one of us. But it's like Saul of Tarsus.

You have such an outstanding man who is so well known that when he's converted, people are listening. And this is one of those outstanding stories. It's a fascinating book.

Not only because of what was going on in Washington, but because of what happened to this man by the grace of God. So if you haven't read it--and by the way, it's reduced from 895 to 675. Thank you.

I knew I was going to forget that. So it'd be good to make excellent reading for you. Then for those of you interested in doing some study.

There's a growing controversy in the land over the doctrine of election and predestination, Calvinism in general, and theology. And this book, *God's Strategy in Human History*, in my judgment, is the best thing written on the whole subject. It's the best thing because it agrees with my views.

But this, to me, is a biblical presentation of the whole idea. It is not a Calvinistic view, I'll tell you that right now. To me, it's a biblical view.

I do not stand in the train of Augustine and Calvin as far as the ideas of election are concerned. This, I think, gets at the whole biblical idea. The handling of Romans chapter 9, for example, to me is absolutely beautiful.

So if you're interested in doing some serious study, here is an excellent book, *God's Strategy in Human History*. So if you haven't read it, you want to do some good study, make the wheels in your mind turn, get you into the Word of God, get that book. Now, this morning, let's turn to the book of Genesis again, chapter 14.

Chapter 14 in the book of Genesis. Again, I'm reading from Revised Standard. Translation may be a little bit different, but I hope it won't confuse you too much.

I want to begin reading about halfway down the chapter, in verse 11. You remember the story of the capture of Sodom and Gomorrah by the four kings against whose rule Sodom and Gomorrah and a number of the nations around the land of Palestine had revolted. They refused to pay the annual tribute.

Well, these kings are not going to put up with that nonsense. They want the money and the goods, and so they make a general sweep through the land of Palestine, subduing these rebellious nations and finally coming to Sodom and Gomorrah. And you remember the battle that ended in disaster for Sodom and Gomorrah, the capture of all the people and the goods, including Lot and his family.

So we begin to pick up the story in verse 11. So the enemy took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.

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 Adar. These were allies of Abram. When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he said, that's just what he deserves.

Oh no. He led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went and pursued as far as Dan. And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and routed them, and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus.

Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his goods, and the women and the people. After his return from the defeat of Keter Laomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Sheba, 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, maker of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hands. And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

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 sworn to the Lord God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would 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 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. How we treat those who have turned away from us may be the greatest test of our Christianity. It's easy to love those who agree with you and who stay with you.

It's much more difficult to love those who have turned from you and your ideas. And yet that may be the real test that we face. One of those rare occasions in the life of our Lord Jesus, when the Spirit of God notes that he loved someone, came in such an occasion.

The rich young ruler, who hearing our Lord's demands, turned sorrowfully and went away. It's of that man that the Spirit of God recorded that Jesus, looking on him, loved him. He used the term of affection just outside Gethsemane when Judas Iscariot came to betray him.

Friend, and it's a term of affection. Friend, why did you come? Our Lord did not live by bruised feelings, as it's so easy for us to do. Our Lord lived by love, and since he is love, his love is not caused by the conduct of people outside himself, and it is not stopped by the conduct of people outside himself.

We can neither cause his love, nor can we stop it. There isn't anything that you can do to make Jesus Christ stop loving you, because there wasn't anything you did to start his love for you. Our love, however, so often not kindled by his, has its limits.

There are those whom we find it very easy to love. There are those whom we find it very difficult to love. It depends upon our likes and dislikes so often, instead of the fount of God's love flowing through our hearts by the Spirit of God, and reaching out to others.

By the way, and I'm wandering off the subject for a moment, one of the things that has shut my mouth in criticism of those with whose theology I may disagree, is that very often I have found among them this quality of love. And I have just shut my mouth. I still don't agree with their theology, it may be, but my mouth has been closed as far as any criticism is concerned, because there I have seen this kind of love.

It's the kind of love that Abram displays right here. That love for Lot, who had turned away from him, had gone down to Sodom and Gomorrah, and gotten enmeshed in the politics of the whole country. And now he's paying, I don't mean that you get involved in politics, you pay the consequences, but because he lived down there, he had to be subject to what happened there.

And when those cities were embroiled in war, then he suffered the consequences. And he became what would be one of the most unfortunate positions to assume, or to take, or to have forced upon you in the Near East in the 20th century before Christ, and that would be to be a prisoner of war. There were no Geneva Conventions, there were no Red Cross rules for help, and to be a prisoner of war in the 20th century before Christ was a terrible, terrible position.

And Lot was now a prisoner of war. But we come to this dear man Abram. What was Abram's response to all this? Now I think what I would have said is just what I read into the text that isn't there.

Good, that's just what he deserved, maybe he'll learn a lesson this time. I think that would have been my response. You made your choice, you made your bet, you got to lie in it.

All the other kinds of expressions we have that say, okay, you've got what's coming to you. I would be inclined to say that about Lot. You had your choice, you made it for Sodom and Gomorrah, now you take the consequences, may God help you to learn the lessons.

Fortunately, that wasn't Abraham's response. It could have been, but it wasn't. Abram's immediate response was to get his 318 armed servants and make his plans to rescue Lot from that desperate situation in which he found himself.

Now, a couple of things come immediately. If Abram is able to muster 318 armed servants, those who know the culture and history of that day tell us that he must have had at least a thousand servants in his household, and it gives us some idea of the vast wealth of this man by this time. But he can muster 318 armed servants and go out in a night raid against the armies that are now returning home after their victories through the whole land of Palestine.

He would do, of course, what was very, very typical in those days, and conduct a night raid. Yigal Yadin, the Jewish scholar who has written two volumes on the art of biblical warfare, tells us that this was not an unusual thing, that the armies in those days very often were broken up into groups of 300, and then those 300 would be divided into three groups of 100. And one of the things an army on the march feared was an ambush and a night attack, and that's exactly what Abram did.

He took his 318 men, broke them up into three groups of 100 each, and fell on the camp at night. Now, that army, having successfully defeated all its enemies on the way home, in all likelihood would never have posted any sentinels. There wouldn't have been any guards out at night watching for any reprisal.

They had devastated all their enemies. They were going home victoriously, undisturbed. They didn't know anything about Abraham and his 318 servants, and his allies, Aner and Eshkol and Mamre.

They knew nothing of those. And what a surprise attack would consist of is waiting until the middle of the night, falling on the sleeping forces, cutting down the tent pegs and letting the tents fall on the army. And in the mass confusion that followed, the only thing that happens is the army begins to run.

Who's going to stop to get the good? All the captives. They know nothing about the size of the attacking force. All they know in the mass confusion, in the darkness, is they've been attacked, and they're all caught in the ropes and the skins of the tents.

And Abraham conducted such a night raid, and he pursued his advantage until there was little likelihood of their turning around to re-attack. And when the army fled, then he took the people and the possessions and swiftly began to return them home. And that's what he did.

Abraham, instead of saying to a fallen brother, you've got what you deserve, risked his own life to rescue him. Because he did risk his own life. He was going against a far superior force.

But without hesitation, without thinking for a moment of the insult that Lot had given him, without thinking for a moment of the difficulties and the dangers, he moved into the situation to rescue Lot. He did what John tells us we should do. He laid down his life for his brother.

Now, John is not thinking in his first epistle of dying for each other. That may come. But what John is thinking of is living the way our Lord Jesus lived.

As someone else has translated it, putting his life at our disposal. We are to put our lives at the disposal of our brethren. And that's what Abraham did.

He put his life at the disposal of Lot. And Lot's need was met by Abraham putting his life at Lot's disposal. It's the way we are supposed to live.

But it's so difficult to live that way, particularly toward those who have fallen. If a brother be overtaken in a false, ye who are spiritual, teach him a lesson. Now, ye who are spiritual, restore such an one.

In the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. That's God's love flowing through us. It's the heart of the shepherd, as I suggested, somebody who is always going out after the sheep that went astray, and who never tires of it.

That was Abraham going after Lot. But the real test comes not in that battle, but in the return. And there are two other figures we have to look at rather quickly.

And one is Melchizedek, and the other is the King of Sodom, and what each meant to this man Abraham. First of all, Melchizedek. Well, the first one mentioned is the King of Sodom.

When Abraham was returning victoriously, the first man who made a move to meet him was the King of Sodom. But before he got there, Melchizedek met Abraham. Now, all of you are probably familiar in the letter of the Hebrews with the typology of Melchizedek and our Lord Jesus Christ, and I do not intend to spend time on that.

Let me say from my own viewpoint, what I understand Hebrews chapter 7 to be saying is this. Not that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God, or that he is the Son of God, so much as that the Spirit of God has deliberately left the record empty of what everywhere else was necessary for a man to serve as priest. That is a genealogy.

How important it is in the nation of Israel, for instance. No priest could serve, no one could be high priest unless he could prove his genealogy, his descent from Aaron. It was absolutely essential that it be recorded.

And so you have a succession of high priests. Death comes in, and it has to be the son of the preceding high priest who takes over. He must be in that line of Aaron, but as terrible as the Spirit of God is to record all that in later books, when you come to this priest, the Spirit of God omits it.

We know nothing about his genealogy. We know nothing about who he was, who his parents were. We know nothing about anybody who succeeded him in office.

Nothing. And I take it what the writer of the Hebrews is saying is the Spirit of God has deliberately left all that out to make him a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I'm sure all of you are aware that the typology of Melchizedek shows our Lord Jesus primarily in his person, who he is, as the eternal Son of God.

Yet not exclusively, because Melchizedek has a ministry to Abram here. He has a work. And while the typology of Aaron shows our Lord Jesus Christ in his work, but again, not exclusively, but those seem to be the general lines.

But I'm concerned more with what this man does. And before the king of Sodom comes to meet Abram with his proposal, Melchizedek meets Abram, and he blesses Abram, and he blesses God. And our response to God as we praise and bless God is always the result of God having blessed us first.

What we give to him is only our response to what he has given to us. And it seems to me that when we come together, whether it be for the Lord's Supper or in our prayer meetings, there's something wrong with us. There isn't, so often there isn't that overflow, that spontaneous expression of joy and praise and thanksgiving.

Did I say it last year? Sometimes I wish I were a Jew in the Old Testament. Our idea of Christianity is so negative. And how many festivals do we have a year? None that I know of, at least among the assembly.

We don't follow a church calendar year. And God gave Israel seven national annual festivals. Only one of them was a somber occasion, and that was the Day of Atonement.

All the others God said, Rejoice! Let your heart be glad! Enjoy yourself! In fact, he told them if they lived too far from Jerusalem on those occasions when they had to come to the sacred city, they didn't have to bring their animal and their goods. God says, Turn it into money! Sell it where you live! Carry the money down to Jerusalem! And then buy whatever you want and rejoice before me! Have a feast and rejoice before me! And in some sense, I'd rather be a Jew. In their religion, they had a good time.

And one of the things that struck C.S. Lewis, that sober Cambridge scholar, a member of the Church of England, particularly in his comments on the book of Psalms, is the exuberance of the psalmist and the people of Israel. He wasn't quite sure it was proper, but he had to admit it was there. They didn't just praise the Lord.

They shouted. It was always noisy with instruments, loud instruments, with dancing. It was only King Saul's daughter, Michael, who felt that David made a fool of himself.

When he danced mightily before the Lord, when the ark was returned to Jerusalem, I'm not exactly sure I want to follow in the train of Saul's daughter. But there was great appreciation for what God had done. And that appreciation was not just that God had redeemed them out of Egypt.

That appreciation was for what He was doing right then in their own national life and in their own individual lives. The harvest festival. We don't have such a thing.

Of course, we're too industrialized anyhow. But I don't know whether assemblies in agricultural areas would even have it. But the harvest festival, when with great joy they gave God thanks for the abundant harvest and all the good things they were going to eat during the winter season.

And somehow we have narrowed our thanksgiving and our praise down to Calvary. And, of course, you can never exhaust that. But that isn't all that God has done for us, is it? Isn't God at work in our lives now? Isn't Jesus Christ a living reality to us now? Hasn't He given us deliverances this past week? Isn't He meeting our needs now? Where is that note of joy and praise and delight and thanksgiving where you just can't keep quiet? Where you don't have to manufacture it.

And I sometimes think we sing hymns and quote scripture because we have to memorize what somebody else has said and we haven't got any of our own. I know that's not always true, but sometimes I get the impression that's what's happening. Maybe we have lost the sense of God's blessing on us and that's why our blessing of God is so sparse.

Melchizedek blessed Abram and then blessed God. The God in whose name he blessed Abram and whose name he blessed was God Most High. That particular combination is found again only in the 78th Psalm, though these terms themselves are found in other combinations.

And in the 78th Psalm it is used of God redeeming His people. That's the God who redeemed. And what Abram, of course, realized, it wasn't he and his 318 armed servants who brought the victory.

It was God. He's the one who redeemed Lot through Abram, but God was the one who did it. Maybe we've lost that.

The realization that behind all the temporal good that we receive is the hand of God. Again, a lesson that Israel had to be taught in Deuteronomy chapter 8. God warned them, when you get into that land and you dwell in cities you didn't build and you get olives and grapes from orchards and vineyards you never planted, and when you become rich, don't forget, I am the one who gave you the strength to get it. I am the one who provided all that.

Don't lose the blesser in the blessing. And Melchizedek did a tremendous service for Abram in that blessing. But he met Abram before the king of Sodom met Abram.

And doesn't our Lord Jesus so often do that with us? I think of what Paul wrote in what Guy King in his little book on 2 Timothy calls the dying letter of the apostle. 2 Timothy. When Paul had to go in before Caesar, at my first offense Paul says, No man stood with me.

They all forsook me. It would be a dangerous thing to be identified with Paul as he went in before Caesar. It would cost you your life.

Paul says he prays that it won't be held against them. But he says, Nevertheless, the Lord stood beside me. And the result of that, I was delivered out of the mouth alive.

Before Paul met Caesar, he met Jesus Christ. And before Caesar ever summoned him in to be judged, Jesus Christ had summoned him to be blessed. And Jesus Christ met Paul before he went before Caesar.

I rather suggest that since we never know when we are going to meet our own king of Sodom, it's a good thing to stay in touch with our Melchizedek. It's best to meet him first before we meet our own king of Sodom. Just as Paul met him before he met Caesar.

But turning to another dimension of this man Melchizedek, I want to look at him simply as a human being. Sure, he's a type of Christ. Hebrews leaves us no doubt about that.

But don't forget he was a real flesh and blood human being like the rest of us. And I like to think of Melchizedek like that. King of Salem, sure.

Priest of the most high gods. But as real in his flesh and blood as Abram was. And that man came out.

And he supplied Abram and his men with bread and wine, which was the common food of the day. Meat was a rare thing. You couldn't afford meat.

You depended upon sheep for wool, not for meat. In fact, it was a note of the decline of Israel when the rich could eat veal. Have I got the right word? I don't know anything about being a butcher.

But they ate lamb. Is that veal? No? Mutton. Oh, that's terrible.

Not mutton. Whatever it was, it was the lamb. They could eat lamb out of the flock.

That's not veal. No, of course it's not veal. What's the matter with you? That's wasteful.

The prophet is horrified. All the years of productivity cut off. It was the wool they went for.

You couldn't afford to kill sheep. You certainly couldn't afford to kill lamb. And the rich were doing that while the poor had nothing.

So the common food was hardly ever meat. And when Melchizedek brought out bread and wine for this whole company, he was providing for them physically as they returned from that battle, and they would not have paused on the march home. Not that small force.

It would have been a forced march all the way back to Sodom and Gomorrah. Melchizedek knew that, and he came out and provided for them physically. And then he blessed Abram.

I like that. Is it possible that we ourselves can be priests to each other? Aren't we supposed to be? It was a man of flesh and blood who saved Abram from the seduction of Sodom. And I'm sure all of us have found so often that the ministry of our great high priest at the right hand of the majesty on high has been mediated to us through our fellow priests.

How often, like David, our own hands have been strengthened in God by a Jonathan. How often the encouragement, the friendship, the deep commitment of a fellow Christian has kept us from falling. How often the supply of God's grace has come to us through a fellow member of the body of grace to be a priest to each other.

Paul talks about that in his letter to the Ephesians. He talks about our conversation with each other not being the kind of conversation that tears down, but the kind of conversation that builds up. We speak words of edification.

That doesn't mean always quoting the Bible. Sometimes I quote the Bible as a substitute for myself. Or I can use the scriptures to keep me from getting involved with somebody else's problem.

I can quote from a verse of scripture, say a brief prayer and go home. That's not being a priest. There may be times when that's what a person needs.

But what I'm saying is from my own viewpoint, I have to be aware that I am not using that to prevent my own involvement, to defend myself against getting involved in that person's need. I keep myself from being a priest to my fellow Christian. Perhaps when a brother or sister falls, we shouldn't be looking at them but at ourselves.

Did we fail in being priests to that individual? If we had come alongside that person and had committed ourselves to that person, could we have been God's instrument in meeting the need before the fall occurred? Could we have been priests to that brother or sister? That was Melchizedek. And then there came the King of Sodom. Abram's response, you'll note, is couched in the language that Melchizedek had already used.

I've sworn to God Most High. That's the name that Melchizedek had used. And out of that encounter with Melchizedek came what Abraham needed to meet the King of Sodom.

And when the King of Sodom says, you take all the goods and just let me have my people back, there are a couple of things that jump out at me about Abram's response, what it tells us about this man. The first and obvious thing is he was not covetous. Of course, he was already rich, but he didn't want more.

I wouldn't take so much as a shoelace from you. I don't want any of the goods. You take it all, the whole thing.

No rite of conquest here. Abram is not a covetous man. We're warned against the desire to be rich.

And, of course, I always think of that in terms of the rich, but I think probably it's a sin that's open to all of us. A poor man can desire to be rich. It's the desire to be rich that's the sin.

It captivates the heart and begins to direct the life. The sin, as Paul tells Timothy, is not in being rich, but in desiring to be rich. Abraham was rich, but he didn't desire to be rich.

It seems to me, maybe I'm judging a lot, that he desired to be rich. It destroyed his own soul. But Abraham didn't desire to be rich.

He was rich, but that wasn't his goal. That isn't what obsessed him. That didn't determine his value structure.

And coming from the presence of Melchizedek, he saw the true value. And as we come from the presence of our Lord Jesus, and as we come from the presence of each other, if we are truly encouraging each other, we know what the real values are. And the kind of fellowship that committed Christians know, and I mean committed to each other, makes every value structure of this world valueless.

Who wants to covet the material things our society offers once you have tasted the depth of fellowship among Christians who are committed to each other? Would you exchange one for the other? Would you want anything that would interfere with that kind of a relationship? Because he had come from that kind of an encounter with Melchizedek, Abraham saw the uselessness of everything the King of Solomon had to offer. He wasn't covetous. He was content before God.

Now, lest I leave under all sorts of guilt feelings, I remember that the Apostle Paul says, I have learned in whatsoever state I am to be content. But he was writing as a relatively old man, and he was saying it was something he had to learn. He didn't begin that way.

He ended up that way. And it's a thing that we are learning. So I suppose, as Joe Bailey says, there's hope for me.

If Paul had to learn it, then there's still hope for me. He learned. But there's a second thing that comes to me about Abraham's response to the King of Solomon, and that is he was very clear-sighted.

He could see down the road, and he could see the possible consequences of taking this stuff from the King of Solomon. The day might come when Abraham is standing up at a testimony meeting and saying how good God has been to him, and right in the middle of the testimony, the King of Solomon gets up and says, wait a minute, Abraham, you forgot what I gave you. And Abraham could see that coming.

Lest you should say, I have made Abraham rich. And sometimes when dollar signs are dancing in our eyeballs, we can't see the consequences of our decisions. It's only when we come from the presence of our high priest that we can see clearly.

But he saw the possible consequences of accepting the goods of Sodom. But the final thing that strikes me in Abraham's response to the King of Sodom is his generosity. And I would almost say his own stability.

He is not going to try to impose his own decisions on others. And Abraham is quick to tell the King of Sodom, that's my decision. Whatever agreement Aner and Eshcol and Mamre reach with you, that's their business.

If they want the goods and the rewards for their men who participated in the fight, that's up to them. My decision is my decision. It doesn't cover those three men.

I like that about the man. He has his own convictions before God, but he doesn't go around imposing them on everybody else. He left these three men free to stand before God themselves.

That's great when a Christian can do that. Have deep convictions for himself, but leave other Christians free before their own Lord. To realize that I am not your master, and therefore I cannot impose my convictions on you.

I am free to discuss them with you. I am free to tell you how I arrived at them. And that's as far as I can go.

He left these men free before God. That's a rare man that can do that. It's a rare man.

And if they chose a different course of action, Abraham was not threatened by it. There was no implication for Abraham that he had done the wrong thing. It wasn't confidential.

He let these men have what they wanted. This is a magnificent man. As you watch him grow, oh, he has his failings and his faults, but as you watch him grow, he's a magnificent man.

Now, what do I get out of this? Well, probably what we've already said. There are a couple of things that stand out in my own mind as I think back on this incident in Abraham's life. Am I committed to my fellow believers when they are in trouble? Or am I committed to them only when I see them walking with God? Am I willing to put my life at their disposal to help them when they are in trouble? Or do I sit down first and calculate the possible costs if I get involved? One of those costs sometimes is what will other people think? Have you ever had that run through your mind? What will other people think? Am I unwilling to pay that cost to try to help my brother? The second thing that comes to me when I think of this incident is my need to stay in touch with our Melchizedek because I never know when I'm going to meet the King of Sodom.

He might be right around the corner and I need to stay in touch with Melchizedek so that I'm ready to meet the King of Sodom. The third thing that comes to me is where is my value structure? What things are really

important to me? The last thing that comes to me am I strong enough to let you have your own convictions when they differ from mine? Can I really let you be free before the Lord or do I have to interfere and be the Lord in your life? Can we really serve each other this way? Let's pray. Our Father, we pray that you will help us in our own sphere, in our own lives to be more like this man, Abram.

The strength, the dignity of the man before you. That great freedom he enjoyed because he was your servant. We covet it for ourselves to see ourselves as your servants and thus the servants of each other.

We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.

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