

Lesson 10

Genesis Chapter 13 & 14

World War

On his return to Canaan from Egypt, we find that Abraham and his nephew Lot are so rich and prosperous that the land cannot support them if they stay together. They must separate. Who gets what? Decisions, decisions, who goes where? Like the character in the Indiana Jones movie says, "Choose Wisely".

In chapter 14 we see an account of the very first world war. Four kings go to war against five, and Abraham's family ends up in the middle. The story takes on a surprising twist when we meet the most mysterious man in the Old Testament, Melchizedek.

Read Chapter 13, then work through the following questions.

What is the first thing that Abram does when he arrives back in the land God had called him to? What do you think is the significance of that?

Abram's return to the first altar he had built, at Bethel, and his calling on the name of the Lord suggest that he desires to make a fresh start in the life with God he had begun. Because of the plagues on Pharaoh's household, surely he was aware that the Lord was displeased with his behavior in Egypt. He perhaps feels the need to demonstrate that he wants to live in a way that brings honor to God's name. It is a beautiful picture of the appropriate response of men when they stumble into sin. Unlike Cain, who let his sin turn into wholesale rebellion against God (Gen. 4:6-8), Abram returns and does what is right.

Abram had by this time become a very wealthy man. Do you think this wealth was an asset to him?

Abram's wealth meant that he and Lot could not dwell together on the land. This created strife in the family, which leads to a separation. It is worth taking note that this first mention of great wealth in the Scripture is associated with unhappiness and lack of peace. This will become a constant theme in the rest of Scripture. It is no surprise, then, when Jesus tells His followers not to bother laying up treasures on earth. If the heart of man is so closely connected to his treasures, better that he should build treasures in heaven, where there can be no threat to happiness or peace (see Matt. 6:19-21).

What kind of man does Abram appear to be as he settles the dispute over the land?

Abram seems to strongly desire peace in his family. He generously offered Lot the first choice of the land. Being the head of the family and Lot's elder, he could rightfully have laid claim to the first choice and best of the land. He seems to prize peace more than good land. He is not a selfish man.

What motivated Lot's choice of land? What ominous sign does the text give about the choice Lot made?

Lot's eyes told him to choose the land that looked like Paradise (vs. 10). He wanted for himself the land that appeared to be the absolute best. The text tells us that the valley that looked so beautiful to Lot was the home of Sodom, a city of great wickedness. The language here is reminiscent of the scene in Eden, when Eve sized up the forbidden fruit. Looks can be deceiving.

God renews the promise He made to Abram to make a great nation of him by telling him to take a good look at the land itself. He urges Abram to look with his eyes and to walk through it, examining it carefully. Why is this land so important for Abram to see? What might have been in his mind as he was looking at it?

If Abram's descendants were ever to become a "great nation," as God had promised, the first thing they would need was land. Tribes of people without land of their own remain just that—tribes of people. God told Abram to take a good look at the land itself. This was the concrete reality that lay before his eyes. The land was real to him; the promise of descendants to fill it was still a hope, which depended entirely on God's trustworthiness. This is reminiscent of God's use of the rainbow with Noah. He uses here a concrete reality within nature as a sign of His promise to act. In the Church, God continues to do this in the sacraments. Abram may have been thinking the same kind of thoughts we think when we approach a sacrament. "All I see here is land—dirt, rocks, bushes. God says this will be the home of my great nation. I don't have any kids, and my wife is barren. Can I really believe this?" In the sacraments, we are always faced with these very human questions. "This is just water on a baby's head. Is this child really being washed from original sin and given the Holy Spirit?" "This looks and tastes like bread and wine. Can I really believe that I am eating the Body and Blood of the Lord and that it will give me eternal life?" When we think those thoughts, we are much like Abram, walking through that desert land, pondering the promises of God. That is why his response will be of interest to us.

Read Heb. 11:1-3, which is a definition of faith. How is Abram's response an example of this kind of faith?

The verses in Hebrews tell us that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Picture Abram walking through the land of Canaan, observing all its physical characteristics and trying to imagine his descendants living there as a great nation. When he builds an altar to the Lord, he is giving evidence of a trust in unseen realities. He performs an act of confidence in God, believing that He will do what He has promised. This is the essence of faith. It is like what Noah did when he built an ark on dry ground. It acknowledges that God, Who cannot be seen, can nevertheless be trusted completely. The sacraments call forth just such faith. When we exercise that faith, we are standing with Abram, the father of faith, allowing what we can see to confirm what we can't.

Abram Goes to Battle

Read Genesis 14:1-16

This battle appears to have taken place a number of years after Lot had separated from Abram. There was an uprising of four kings against five, but they were defeated. In the course of that defeat, the king of Sodom and his people were captured and taken away, including Lot, Abram's nephew. Abram got word of this situation and went to Lot's rescue.

What does it show about Abram that he was willing to undertake a rescue like this? What other reaction might he have had?

Abram had earlier showed himself to be a man dedicated to his family. He shows, by his rescue of Lot, that this love has not diminished and that it is a fearless love. He demonstrates courage and ingenuity in defeating the enemy. Because of the intensity of the battles that had raged, he might easily have talked himself out of such a risky operation. In addition, he could have justifiably left Lot to live with the consequences of choosing to live in Sodom, a wicked city. His decision to go immediately to Lot's rescue, whatever the cost, reveals him to be strong and free in his love for his nephew. He is willing and able to do what is right.

After Abram had defeated the five kings and rescued Lot, he had a meeting with the king of Sodom and "Melchizedek, king of Salem." This person raises a number of questions for us. He could be just another difficult name attached to an obscure place except that the New Testament tells us that Jesus is a high priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (see Heb. 6:20). For this reason, Melchizedek is of great interest to us.

Most modern biblical scholarship sees in Melchizedek a pre-figuring of Christ; some scholars suggest that it was actually an appearance of Christ to Abram. He is a mysterious figure. The early tradition of the Church, which continued well up to the time of the Reformation, was influenced by the Jewish rabbinic teaching that Melchizedek was actually Shem, the firstborn son of Noah who lived a very long time. This is a compelling idea. Shem was the one on whom Noah's blessing had rested. He was destined to be a master over the

Canaanites. His priesthood was domestic; that is, the one who conducted the worship of God and through whom the blessing of God was received was the head of the family. We have seen this in Noah and Abram. This role was passed from father to firstborn son. If, in fact, Shem is Melchizedek (this name is more of a title than a name), as the Fathers taught (even Martin Luther understood and taught this), what can we make of the description of him in Hebrews 7:1-10 (**please read**)?

In Heb. 7:3, he is described as "without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever." In order to understand this statement, we need to know something about the Levitical priesthood in Israel, with which Melchizedek's priesthood is contrasted in the verses that follow. The Levitical priesthood was instituted in Israel at the time of a great apostasy, a grave turning away from the covenant God had made with His people (see Exodus 32:25-29). Before that time, the priesthood had been a domestic one, as we have seen in Genesis thus far, passed from father to firstborn son. Due to the circumstances of its institution, the Levitical priesthood must be seen as inferior to the earlier one. The writer of Hebrews makes this clear. Additionally, by the time of the writing of Hebrews, the Levitical priesthood featured certain restrictions. A man could not become a priest until he was 30 and had to retire when he was 50. He also had to prove his Levitical (of the tribe of Levi) genealogy through both his father and his mother (this had become important when Israel returned to its land after foreign exile, in about 500 B.C.; there was careful attention to lineage in order to prevent any foreign corruption in the priesthood).

The priesthood of Melchizedek was not that way. There was no need for the Levitical attention to parental lineage ("He is without father or mother or genealogy..."). There was no start and end of his service ("neither beginning of days nor end of life"). It would be this kind of royal priesthood that Jesus would have (prophesied of the Messiah long before by King David in Psalm 110:4). His was the superior priesthood of the firstborn son, not the Levitical one. God's own Son became High Priest. Melchizedek was a type of the One Who was to come.

The king of Sodom makes an offer to Abram that has the potential to enrich him with great possessions. Why does Abram turn it down?

Abram does not want to be indebted to the king of Sodom. That kind of debt could present problems for him in a variety of ways, so he turns down the offer for great personal gain.

What significance do you think there is in the fact that both Melchizedek, priest of God, and the king of Sodom, a very wicked city, come out to meet Abram after his successful battle?

Abram has good reasons to be proud and triumphant after his victory. These two kings represent two possible reactions to this kind of human accomplishment. The king of Sodom offers Abram material gain; the king of Salem offers him a blessing, with bread and wine. Abram responds in humility, making an offering of his own. It is a picture of what all of us face as we make our way through this world on our journey home to God. Do we grasp at what we can see and touch, or do we swear allegiance to God Most High, and let go of perhaps the little that we have? Abram shows us the way.

It appears that Abram had a conversation with God in which he had anticipated this offer from the king of Sodom (see vs. 22). When do you think this conversation might have taken place, and why?

It is interesting to see that Abram has an answer ready for the king of Sodom, when the offer for gain is presented. It is possible that when he first learned of Lot's predicament, he spoke to God about it all. Perhaps he asked for God's help in making the rescue. Melchizedek's blessing on Abram suggests that God answered this prayer ("blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hands"). Is it possible that God warned him to stand firm in the face of temptation to be drawn under the influence of the king of Sodom? Abram seems to have understood very well that he would have to appear to be coming to the rescue of the wicked as well as the good. Yet his solemn vow to God ("I have sworn to the LORD God Most High") shows that he was able to distinguish one from the other and to maintain his proper allegiance. This is reminiscent of the temptation the devil laid before Jesus in the desert. "The devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to Him, 'all these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.' Then the devil left him." (Matt. 4:8-11)

In vs. 24, Abram suggests to the king of Sodom that the men who had helped him-Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take a share of the spoils. What practical effect will this have on his relationship with these men?

These three men, recipients of Abram's generosity, would perhaps be more likely to remain his allies, respecting him as a just man. Considering the hostilities that raged in the land, Abram would be wise to consolidate this kind of alliance. In this, Abram is an example of what Jesus, many years later, would teach His followers: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matt. 10:16)

Summary

For most of us, reading the story of Abram and Sarai requires a good deal of effort, due to the fact that they are people of a distant-in-time, foreign culture. We struggle with the names of people and places. We find it hard to really picture the details of their lives. We consider ourselves fortunate if we can follow the story line reasonably well, with the many twists and turns that it takes.

To get to the heart of this story, however, takes something more. It isn't enough to know their lives just as historical characters. This is also a story of intimacy with God, the first of its kind in Scripture. If we learn how to penetrate this story, we will be able to settle into all the rest of what happens between God and men in the drama of redemption.

In these two chapters, we have to read Abram more by his actions than his words. There is very little given to us explicitly about how he communicated with God. We can tell what he's thinking by how he behaves. The trek he made back to that first altar in Bethel, after his return from Egypt, is a strong clue. What was he saying to God along the way? What was God saying to him? His act of calling on the name of the Lord at the altar gives us a picture of a human being like us, one who is aware of his own frailty and cries out to God for help. When God drew near to Abram, after Lot separated from him, to urge him to walk through the land and examine it, what was Abram thinking? How did God communicate these instructions? Did Abram hear a voice or see some sort of apparition? Questions like these are inevitable, aren't they? Our only experience of people who have this kind of communication with God comes from what we know from the lives of the saints. Their knowledge of Him and His will doesn't come in a vacuum. We know them to be people of deep prayer, detachment, and heroic virtue. They experience profound (sometimes mystical) intimacy with God in the context of lives given over completely to Him.

Can it be any different for Abram? The text does not make explicit reference to "prayer" or "contemplation," yet how else would Abram have been able to respond so promptly and valiantly to the king of Sodom's offer of great gain? Previous to his response there must have been an extensive conversation with God in which Abram resolves to do the right thing, fully aware of the dangers that lie ahead as he goes off to rescue Lot. Was he praying as he set out? Did he pray as the battle began? Recall the blessing of Melchizedek on Abram. Plant firmly into your mind's eye this picture of a man of faith- not a perfect man- humbling himself before the priest of God Most High to receive the blessing and to acknowledge his gratitude by giving generously of everything he had. It is a gesture of reverence and of freedom. Abram gives every appearance of a man being drawn deeply into life with God. He has come a long way from his father's house, where "other gods" were worshipped (recall Joshua 24:2-4).

He still has a long way to go.