

The Life of Abraham

The Courage of Faith – Learning to be Victorious Genesis: 14-15

Good morning. Last week's broadcast on the Truth for Today programme revisited the life of Abram and explored his faith, and the failure of his faith. This week, we learn how Abram achieved and handled the military success that unexpectedly came to him, and the important gospel truth that came out of Abraham's asking God about his childlessness. We read about these episodes in his life in Genesis chapters 14 & 15, in the Bible.

To introduce these chapters I have to recap a bit. Last week's talk explored how God called Abram to leave his home city of Ur, in the far south of Mesopotamia, and go to a country that God would show him. His directions were no more exact than that.

When Abram at length reached Shechem in central Canaan, God said to him, *This is the land that I will give to your descendants*. This was equivalent to God saying, *Stop*. And Abram stopped. He had reached the land that God said He would show him. Abram's total journey from Ur of the Chaldees had been about 1300 miles.

But unfortunately, Abram didn't stop there for long. A famine overtook the land of Canaan. God didn't tell him to move on to where there was more food. But Abram didn't regard God's silence as instruction to stay where he was. That would have needed a degree of faith that Abram didn't yet possess. Instead, he took his own decision to move to Egypt. Once again he took with him his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot.

It was a very bad move. Abram, terrified of Pharaoh taking a fancy to his wife and killing him in order to be able to marry her, got Sarai to tell Pharaoh they were brother and sister. As a result Pharaoh showered Abram with wealth, but when God intervened with plagues Pharaoh couldn't wait to get rid of Abram; and turfed him out of Egypt. Abram returned, wealthily but dishonourably, to the land of promise that he never should have left.

And when **we** make faithless decisions without reference to God, they have consequences for other people too. Abram's move to Egypt certainly did, not only for his wife Sarai but also for Lot. Lot also came back to Canaan a wealthy man, and his mind was now focused on how to manage this wealth. The arid uplands of Palestine provided insufficient pasture for both his flocks and Abram's, so they decided they would have to go their separate ways. Wealth drove a wedge between them. Ever heard that tale before? Realising they had to separate, Abram gave Lot first choice of pasture-lands.

Lot chose the well-watered plains near Jordan; but also, ominously, near the city of Sodom. Sodom's citizens are tersely described in Genesis 13 as *exceedingly wicked and sinful before the LORD*. Was that the kind of environment to want to bring up a family in? But that wasn't Lot's priority. He saw a rich rate of return in pasturing his flocks on those succulent meadow-lands, and pitched his tent where it could benefit from the defensive shelter of nearby Sodom. In fact, shortly afterwards, Lot moved into the city of Sodom itself.

This is where our part of the narrative for this morning begins. It comes from Genesis chapter 14, where you can check up on the accuracy of my summary.

Lot's move to the pasture lands near Sodom was soon to prove a bad idea. Sodom was one of five tiny city-states at the southern end of the river Jordan, near the Dead Sea. Unhappily, and probably unbeknownst to Lot, these five city-states were in a spat with Chedorlaomer, the mighty king of Elam. Elam was a great ancient kingdom roughly in present-day Iran. Twelve years previously the king of Elam had (it says) subjugated these five petty kingdoms to himself; and after the twelve years these petty kings decided they had had enough, and rebelled. Unlike Abraham, they obviously hadn't been in Mesopotamia, and seem to have had no idea of the military might they were challenging. The result was all too predictable. Chedorlaomer of Elam returned the following year with three powerful allies, and, we might say, made mincemeat of the five petty kings of the lower Jordan valley, including Sodom.

Following their crushing victory, the successful Mesopotamian monarchs plundered the area for the wealth worth taking back home with them. Healthy livestock are a useful form of mobile wealth, so Lot's livestock was seized. So much for Lot's prudent investment! The very lusciousness of the well-watered meadows that had made Lot choose them for rearing his livestock on, put them right in the path of Chedorlaomer's looting parties. More than that, Lot and his family were seized along with the livestock, presumably to be the slave-shepherds of the flocks whose habits they knew so well. Lot's investment choice had suddenly landed him in slavery. When once the Christian starts making his own choices in life, leaving God out of them, things will go wrong – maybe not financially, but in other ways, such as family life.

Genesis 14 verse 13 tells us, however, that someone *who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew* of this disaster. The nickname, *the Hebrew – Abram the Hebrew* - is significant. *Hebrew* was a word used by non-Israelites for Israelites; so it signifies that Abram was still regarded as an outsider in Canaan. Anyone who truly follows the Lord Jesus will also be regarded as an outsider in today's world.

Now what should Abram do about Lot's plight? He could justifiably have felt that the greedy, self-seeking Lot had got his come-uppance. He could have felt that he was not obligated to take any risks on Lot's behalf. Instead he decided to pursue the enemy army returning homeward, and try to rescue Lot. He set out with 318 of his retainers, hot-foot in pursuit of the victorious army of Chedorlaomer and his allies. It was a risky decision, even if he was aided by three friendly Canaanite chieftains. Their combined forces will have been tiny compared to the large Mesopotamian army now returning victorious and plunder-laden to their homelands. It seems from Genesis 14 verse 15 that Abram and his allies made running guerrilla-type attacks at night-time on the units of Chedorlaomer's armies. These skirmishes took place over more than 150 miles until the enemy had reached a town called Hobah, north of Damascus. By that point Abram had retrieved not only Lot, his family, and their possessions, but also **all** the plunder that had been seized from Sodom, and **all** the people abducted from Sodom.

Mission accomplished, Abram headed back south with his allies. En route they passed by Jerusalem, making this the first mention in the Bible of that great city. There the king of Jerusalem (or Salem, as it is called in Genesis 14 verse 18) greeted them with bread and wine. His name was Melchizedek, and he is described as a priest of God Most High; and more than the bread and wine, he blessed Abram in the Name of God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth. The blessing of a godly person is worth much.

Travelling on a little, Abraham and his allied chieftains reached the devastated city of Sodom. The king of Sodom was no doubt astonished that Abram had managed to rescue all the people and possessions from Chedorlaomer. In this mood, which certainly would not have lasted, he was

minded to let Abram have all the retrieved goods so long as the rescued people of Sodom could freely return to their dwellings.

Here was Abram's opportunity. He could in that moment have transformed himself from a prosperous nomad into one of the super-rich of Canaan. Instead, Abram's reply in chapter 14 verses 22-23 is remarkable. He told the king of Sodom,

I have raised my hand to [Yahweh], God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal-strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, I have made Abram rich.

Abram at that moment had the upper hand; but he used it entirely to the glory of God. Firstly, He testified to the greatness of God before the idolatrous king of a city stained by wickedness and sin. He stated to that monarch that his God, Yahweh or Jehovah, is the Most High God, the Possessor of heaven and earth. He thereby implied that his God was God of the king of Sodom too. That took a bit of courage. Do we take our opportunities to bear witness to the greatness of God? Sadly, we often muff them! Let's learn from Abram!

Next, Abram refused to accept any of the retrieved booty. That took faith. A little bit extra for a rainy day is always appealing. But how could Abram in one breath honour God as the Possessor of heaven and earth, and in the next ask for a subsidy from the sinful and idolatrous people of Sodom? Moreover, Abram knew only too well the wily heart of the king of Sodom, that would soon be claiming the credit for making him rich. Abram had once before accepted much wealth from a monarch – from the Pharaoh of Egypt – in very dishonourable circumstances. And the end result of this had been a lot of trouble for Abram. He had learned that lesson: never again was he going to accept a heathen monarch's favours. Do we too learn lessons from our mistakes in the path of faith? Abram had, and now he knew better than to place himself in the debt of a wicked man. This was a greater victory than his remarkable recovery of all that Chedorlaomer and his allies had plundered.

We too should be pursuing the life of faith – living in order to please God and not ourselves or worldly values. How do we do that? We follow Jesus. The old question, *What would Jesus do?* is not a bad one when we have morally difficult choices to make. But we need faith in God to keep us, if we are going to live that life. The life of faith is one of listening for what God is saying to us, and, once we have identified this through prayerful reading of His word, the Bible, acting on it without delay.

Don't be like Lot. After his uncle's rescue of him Lot just returned to his house inside the walls of Sodom, even though these very walls had so recently been proved useless at keeping him safe, and being inside Sodom was certainly very bad for his family as later events proved. Abram had learned through the experiences of life to trust God. Lot had learned nothing about God from his experiences of life, and could only hope for better luck next time, and keep trusting in man rather than in God. But Jeremiah 17 verse 5 says

Cursed is the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm, whose heart departs from the Lord. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert...

What about Abram? After he had refused the king of Sodom's reward, he no doubt returned to the airy uplands where he, metaphorically speaking, *walked with God*. And God spoke to him in a vision, saying

Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.

That's Genesis chapter 15, verse 1. Who needs the walls of Sodom if he has God for his shield? Who needs the wealth of Sodom if he has the living God for his reward? But God's promise didn't answer a puzzle which had no doubt plagued Abram ever since he had entered Canaan. The problem was this. God had promised to make a great nation out of him, and to give the land of Canaan to his descendants. That's Genesis 12 verses 2 and 7. The big snag with this was that Abram and Sarai had no children. More than that, they were both old and, naturally speaking, there was no possibility of them having children. So at last, at this point in his life, Abram summons up the courage to bring his puzzle to God. Abram says, in Genesis 15 verse 2,

Lord GOD, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?

Eliezer of Damascus was Abram's head servant, but no relative of Abram's. God's initial answer must at first have seemed to Abram like no answer at all. No, God said, Eliezer of Damascus would not be Abram's heir but *one who shall come from your own body will be your heir*. How could that be? God didn't tell him how. Instead God took him out of his tent and told him to look upwards. Evidently it was at night-time when this conversation between God and Abram took place. When Abram looked up he saw the magnificence of the night sky. You and I can see it too. Every time we look at the night sky on a clear night, especially out in the country, we see the very same night sky as Abram saw. There is no visual experience that so impresses us with the unimaginable greatness of God as looking at the night sky. I am convinced that atheism has taken the hold that it has partly because most people cannot see the night sky for street lights. But God says something more specific. Could Abram *count* all the stars? No. Then, Abraham, that's how numerous your descendants are going to be. Not just one descendant, but, through that descendant, a multitude of descendants.

And next we get one of the most important verses of the Bible:

And he [that is, Abram] believed in the LORD, and He (that is, the LORD) accounted it to him for righteousness. This quote is from Genesis 15 verse 6.

Could Abram have made the stars? No, God alone could do that. Could Abram make a great nation out of himself? No, God alone could do that. Abram simply believed that the God who made the stars could certainly fulfil His promise to make a great nation out of him. Did Abram deserve this blessing? No. And yet, according to Genesis 15:6 God pronounced him righteous just because he had believed God's word. Recollect that the verse said. *Abraham believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him for righteousness*. This is the first place in the Bible where that very important word occurs – righteousness. Righteousness in this verse means the status that a Judge accords a person who has been falsely accused of some crime. Sometimes the judge will say to a person in the dock who has been completely exonerated by the jury, *You may leave this courtroom without a stain on your character*. That's an example of *accounting someone righteous* in the sense of our verse here. God was acting towards Abram as His great and final judge. And He exonerates him.

Abram hadn't been perfect, as we have seen. He had lied to the king of Egypt out of fear for his life, and told his wife to lie for him too. He had put her in the terrible situation of having to accept marriage with a king she neither knew nor cared for, all to save the skin of Abram who she loved. But God is completely holy. How could He just treat someone with that sort of behaviour on his record, as righteous? Notice that God didn't pronounce Abram righteous because he had obeyed God and left his homeland to travel to the land of promise. God didn't pronounce Abram righteous because he had risked his life in rescuing Lot from the clutches of the Mesopotamian kings. Abram had wrongs in his record that these noble acts could not expunge. But God called Abram righteous, and hence made him eligible to have God's promise to him fulfilled. How could God do

such a thing? He pronounced Abram righteous simply because Abram believed. That's what Genesis 15:6 says, *Abram believed in the LORD, and he counted it to him for righteousness.* For New-Testament confirmation of this, let's turn to Romans chapter 4, verses 1 -3 where the apostle Paul cites this very verse from Genesis 15:6. I'll read the entire first three verses of Romans 4:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our father according to the flesh, has found? For if Abram was justified by works, he has something to boast about – but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abram believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. (Rom. 4:1-3).

Paul confirmed here that none of Abram's actions was perfect. If they had been, Abram would have something to boast about when it came to the judgment day. But in fact Abram would have nothing to boast about.—And we are all like Abram. We can be sure that if Abram sinned, we are all bigger sinners. Yet Paul says in the next verse of Romans after the verses just read, that God *declares the ungodly righteous.* No judge on earth can do that. No judge could simply pronounce a criminal guiltless. That would be an unrighteous act for any judge to do. But God can do it, *righteously*, as we shall see shortly. God could declare Abram righteous just because Abram believed. With that word *righteous* He declared that Abram would never incur His judgment. And, as already said, if even Abraham was among the ungodly who needed to be declared righteous, *we* are all among the ungodly too – listeners as well as speaker. And the God who declares the ungodly righteous can pronounce you and me righteous too. That means you can be someone who will never incur His judgment. There's a little bit more to say here. *How* can God do that *righteously*? *How* can He declare the ungodly to be righteous without being false to Himself? God can do it because He has nothing more that *He* needs to prove about His own righteousness. He proved it all at the cross. Paul tells us this in the preceding part of Romans – chapter 3, verses 21 to 28. At the cross God displayed His own righteousness in regard to our wrongdoings when He even decreed that His own dear Son, Jesus, must die to atone for them. God has on this basis bound Himself to forgive you, pronounce you righteous, justify you for Jesus' sake. Not to justify you would be to dishonour the sacrifice of His own Son, and God could never do that. But you have to honour the Lord Jesus by believing that He died for you. Jesus said in John's Gospel chapter 5 and verse 24 that if you believe in Him you will never come into judgment. God promised to do for Abram what was *naturally* impossible for Abram to do for himself – have a son at his age and his wife's age - and God did it because Abram believed His promise. Likewise God can do what is *spiritually* impossible for us – that is, pronounce sinners like us righteous - if we simply and truly *admit* to Him that we are sinners, and *believe* that Jesus died so that God His Father could pronounce us righteous. There is nothing more you can do and nothing more you need to do.

That's the simplicity of the gospel. But it's a life-and-death, time-and-eternity, hell-or-heaven issue that you can't evade. There is no other way of avoiding God's judgment.

Thank you for listening to Truth for Today, Talk T1113. The Courage of Faith – Learning to be Victorious, Genesis 14-15.

The New King James version of the Scriptures used unless state dotherwise.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.