



Lesson 4 | Faith that Fights an Army

Genesis 14:1-24

Hebrews 11:34 boldly proclaims that through faith the heroes of the Old Testament chased entire armies. The Old Testament contains several wars that were won through faith, but the first time we see this happen in Scripture is with one man, his servants, and a few allies. Against all odds, Abram and his rag tag group take on a powerful coalition that has been untouched throughout a massive campaign against the land of Canaan and its inhabitants. Abram steps forward boldly in faith and in doing so he finds tremendous success.

The story we find in Genesis 14 is both strange and captivating, but above all it is a story of faith. Abram, who has made the faith-filled decision to let Lot take the best land, now has to come to the rescue of his captured nephew. While a quick read of this chapter might leave the reader confused as to why this chapter is included in the Bible, careful meditation will show its important role in the life of Abram.

Consider asking your group why they think this story was included, read through the account together and, and then give them a chance at the end to share their suggestions.

For example, we see in this chapter just how strong Abram's faith in God has become, and what an incredible difference that faith can make. We will see that sometimes the initial test of faith – rushing to battle – can be quickly followed by another test of faith – responding rightly to tremendous success. Another thing we will see in this lesson is the way the choices that Abram and Lot made play out. Lot's decision in chapter 13 has negative consequences almost immediately, whereas Abram's decision to trust God has left him in a place where he's able to rescue Lot. Throughout this chapter we see a portrait of Scripture's premier champion of faith as he continues to face the challenges of life by trusting God.

The Background – Five Kings Versus Four (14:1-12)

Genesis 14 begins by taking a somewhat unexpected turn. After focusing on Abram, Lot, and their families, we suddenly come across a catalogue of long dead kings and kingdoms engaging in an ancient battle. The level of detail is surprising, and the whole section is perhaps a little confusing. It quickly becomes clear that the reason this story is being included is because by the end of it Lot is captured, and in response Abram rushes to attack these kings.

Canaan against Mesopotamia (14:1-7)

The reader of this section is bombarded with names and places which are strange and no longer make sense to us. The names we read we haven't been able to precisely locate in the history of the world, but that isn't surprising given how much we don't know about the distant past. The general outline of what happens is clear enough, however, even if we can't nail down the details exactly.

At the beginning of this chapter we read about five kings in Canaan who were vassal states of a king named Chedorlaomer, who lived near what would later be known as Babylon. After making tribute payments for twelve years, these kings decided to rebel against Chedorlaomer and not send in any money. In response, Chedorlaomer gathered three allied kings and a couple years later came down to teach these rebels a lesson. On his way down, he attacks group after group and handles them easily. We get the sense reading the account that this is a powerful king and he is leading a formidable army that can take out whoever they want. By the time he shows up to fight Sodom, Gomorrah, and their allies we get the feeling that things will not go well for the rebellious federation.

The Canaanites Are Defeated (14:8-12)

Most of the Old Testament history sees smaller countries serving larger countries, only to rebel and later be crushed. It was a delicate game at the time – making sure you didn't get conquered but also trying to minimize the amount of gold flowing out of your country to more powerful neighbors. Nations frequently found out the hard way that their overlords were more powerful than they thought they were, and here is no exception. The kings of the south lose badly and flee for their lives, and their soldiers fall into slimepits, also known as tar pits or bitumen pits. Leaving behind the soldiers the kings from the north take the stuff they find in Sodom, including Lot and his possessions.

The passage makes a very keen observation here that can be easy to miss – Lot is *dwelling* in Sodom. He's no longer just a shepherd letting his flocks graze in that area, he's actually living in the city. Lot had joined himself to Sodom in the hopes of getting wealthy. But now Sodom's problems were his problems. Instead of building a massive fortune like he had hoped, he found himself as a prisoner of war. We similarly need to be careful, because when we look to the world and start following it hoping that we will be successful, we too will find that the world's problems become our problems.

What are some ways that people follow the world hoping to become successful?

Abram's First Test of Faith – Courage to Fight an Army (14:13-16)

Shortly after this disastrous outcome news of Lot's situation reaches Abram. The courage and faith by which Abram responded sets a strong example for all of us. As we watch Abram spring into action, there are several lessons about faith worth considering as we look at our own lives.

Abram's faith demonstrated courage (14:13)

This has been covered already, but what Abram is attempting here is incredibly bold. The whole story up until this point has emphasized the power of these kings and the fact that they are all but untouchable. For starters, they are from Mesopotamia, an area that was known for being a powerful center. Babylon would later come down and attack Israel from this same general location. Not only that, but these kings don't just take on the rebelling kings, they stop along the way crushing a number of other groups. Yet in spite of all of this Abram rushes out to take them on.

Fear looks at the obstacles. Faith looks at what needs to be done and trusts God for the right outcome. Fear says "I can't," while faith says "I can't, but God can." The same faith that led Abram to leave behind Ur and Haran and to give Lot the first choice is the same faith that leads him to take on an army. Every step of faith trains us that God is worth following and that He will come through when we need Him.

Can you think of any examples of when God's faithfulness encouraged you to take bigger and bigger steps of faith?

Abram's faith inspired others (14:14)

That Abram is willing to go after his nephew is impressive, but perhaps more impressive is how many other people are willing to follow him. For example Abram's servants go with him, all 318 of them. While of course doing whatever Abram said was part of their job, there were enough of them that if they decided this was doomed from the beginning they probably wouldn't have been willing to follow Abram to certain death. Even more impressive is the fact that Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner also join him. While this might be easy to miss at first, it's clear by the end of the story that they, too, had followed and helped Abram (cf 14:24). When people are willing to trust God and move forward in faith, there is something inspiring and motivational about that. God can use the faith one person to inspire and strengthen the faith of countless others that are watching.

Why do you think that living a life of faith is contagious?

What would it look like for you to lead your family in faith? to lead in your church in faith?

Abram's faith demonstrated wisdom (14:15)

It's important to note that for Abram, faith didn't mean a lack of common sense. While Abram charged into a battle he had no business winning, he did so as carefully as possible. He still planned out his attack, divided his troops, and attacked at night when the enemy was unsuspecting. Some people confuse boldly following God with taking unnecessary risks. God warns that we should never tempt God by rushing out ahead of Him and expecting Him to cover for our foolishness. It would have been a sin for Jesus to jump to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, not an act of faith (cf Matthew 4:5-7). We want to take big steps of faith, trusting our God to give us the success that only He can give, but that is never an excuse to be careless.

How can you determine the difference between boldly stepping forward in faith and tempting God?

Abram's faith was successful (14:16)

The faith of Abram resulted in a massive victory. Abram did what a confederation of five kings was unable to do – he beat the Mesopotamian alliance. As was mentioned in the introduction, this was probably partly what was in the mind of the author of Hebrews. In Hebrews 11:33-40, the author has finished listing off figures who showed faith, and he draws two conclusions from their lives. In the second half he notes that many people paid a great price for their faith (35b-40), but in the first half he begins by observing that faith has the ability to make a huge impact on the world. Sadly, many Christians never learn the true power of faith because they are too fearful to really trust God and step out in obedience to Him.

Can you think of any specific examples of people who have shown great faith and seen God's blessing?

Abram's Second Test of Faith – Humility to Trust God (14:17-24)

Success can sometimes be more dangerous than failure. “To the victor goes the spoils” is the thinking of many people, and when they are victorious they can all too easily expect and then demand their spoils. Successful people, if they aren't careful, can forget who gave them their success, and can become inflated with poisonous pride. Once Abram won the war, the next battle began – would Abram continue to humbly trust God or would he proudly begin taking what he wanted?

Abram and Melchizedek (14:17-20)

Melchizedek is a somewhat mysterious figure. Although there has been all kinds of speculation about who he is, we should probably take Genesis at face value when it said that he was the king of Salem (Jerusalem) and was priest to God. The fact that he is both a king and a priest, and that he rules in the city later associated with David will make him an important type of Jesus (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 7:1ff). But here the point is that Melchizedek comes and blesses Abram and Abram accepts this blessing and gives tithes to Melchizedek.

Although Abram says nothing in this section, his actions speak plenty loud enough. His respectful acceptance of the blessing and his giving material wealth to God's rightful priest show his humility and gratitude to God for what has happened. Through these simple actions, we see Abram as someone who recognizes that his victory came from God, and God deserves to be honored.

Why might Abram have responded negatively towards Melchizedek?

Abram and Sodom (14:21-24)

We see an interesting contrast here at the end of the story. Lot was doing everything he could to get wealth in Sodom. Abram sets quite a different example. As the king of Sodom is offering Abram great treasure out of gratitude for his deliverance, Abram refuses. Abram doesn't want to owe Sodom anything, and declares that he has already promised God (“I have lift[ed] up mine hand unto the Lord”) he wouldn't take anything from the pagan king. There is a refreshing boldness here. Abram is offered free wealth and simply walks

away from it, trusting God to provide for him. As one commentator put it “Abram is seen ‘in’ the world but not ‘of’ it; ready to fight in a proper cause as a good kinsman (verse 14) and good ally (13c, 24b), but watchful of his calling (20b–24).”¹

The faith that caused Abram to trust God with victory has also empowered him to walk away from the spoils of victory. It can be all too easy to talk as if we are trusting God to meet our needs, but once we see an opportunity to get what we think we want to swerve from what we believe God would have us to do to get what we want. It’s not immediately clear what would have been so wrong about Abram taking this wealth; in fact he explicitly says it’s fine for his allies to take their fair share. But Abram had a conviction (perhaps after the Egypt debacle?) that he didn’t want another king to claim that he had made Abram rich when Abram knew it was God who made him rich. Turning down the wealth that was offered him was a way of saying that his confidence was in God and God alone.

What would it look like today to stand by faith-filled convictions even if it costs us?

How might we be tempted to cave a little on our convictions to get something which we claim to be trusting God for?

¹ Derek Kidner. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: 1967), page 129.