

War and Worship

By Steve Zeisler

We are surrounded by men and women who in response to Christian tradition and the truth of Scripture are taking a stand to impact the structures of our society. The most recent winner of the Nobel Prize for peace, Desmond Tutu, gave a stirring speech at Stanford University concerning the suffering caused by apartheid in South Africa. Across our nation, people have been commemorating Martin Luther King's birthday and his place in our history. This week marked the anniversary of the Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, legalizing abortion on demand. Christians have decried this decision, urging the powers of government to do something about this terrible blight on our land. Some Christians in their concern for the refugees from South America have defied the law to act in accordance with their conscience. Christians are calling upon the government and other structures in society to be righteous, to be concerned for the needy, to be merciful, and to reflect the truth rather than lies.

I want to consider here the call of the word of God to be involved in the affairs of our nation. We ought to be involved in the events of our day, working to bring about justice, mercy and righteousness. In recent decades, evangelical Christians have had difficulty knowing how to respond to the call of Scripture for involvement. At times, we abandoned our responsibility and chose isolation.

More recently, we have seen activity and involvement on the part of evangelicals that has become idolatrous. The love of power and its influence over government has been sought for its own sake. Thus, we have gone back and forth, trying to have an impact on the world of our day, yet not knowing how to go about it.

In our continuing study of the life of Abram, we have come to Genesis 14, which gives us a helpful commentary on our involvement in the affairs of the world. This chapter will lay before us, in the life and model of Abram, an example of what it means to be involved, changing things in the world. Then we will go beyond that to a much more important issue. Look at Genesis 14:1-16:

And it came about in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal King of Goiim, that they made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these came as allies to the valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but the thirteenth year they rebelled. And in the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim and the Zuzim in Ham and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their Mount Seir, as far as Elparan, which is by the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and conquered all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, who

lived in Hazazontamar. And the king of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah and the king of Admah and the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) came out; and they arrayed for battle against them in the valley of Siddim, against Chedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim and Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Allasar—four kings against five. Now the valley of Siddim was full of tar pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and they fell into them. But those who survived fled to the hill country. Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply, and departed. And they also took Lot, Abram’s nephew and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom.”

Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram. And when Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. And he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people.

Most scholars are convinced that this record of events introduced into the Scripture was first recorded in a secular source somewhere else. When Moses wrote the book of Genesis, he had access to written documents and oral tradition, all of which had come down through the people of God. It was their memories that Moses gathered together when he wrote Genesis. But I believe in this case he also had access to a document that was not from the tradition of the people of God but from something like a contemporary *Time Magazine*—a secular remembrance of the battle of Chedorlaomer and the kings of the east against the kings of the Jordan valley. Since Abram figured in the story, Moses, inspired by the Holy Spirit, included the account even though the original source was unusual.

I mention this because what we have here is typical war reporting, something that has not changed over the centuries. In Gen.14:13 when Abram is called “the Hebrew,” although we have already met him and know who he is by the time we get to Gen.14, he is introduced like this because in this account the important men are named by their city, region or background. If Chedorlaomer is recognized as the king of Elam, then Abram is the Hebrew. This is the story of Abram, the great warrior, winning a battle with the brilliant strategy of diving his forces by night to overcome a larger force. Even though the report is accurate (and to be trusted as with all Scripture), it originated with the kind of war report we might have received from an intrepid journalist of the Vietnam era who traveled with soldiers and took pictures of all the events to be flashed on the 6 o’clock news.

Three kings of Mesopotamia, the east, were allied with a fourth, named Chedorlaomer who had controlled the main trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt for twelve years. This route connected the two most fertile regions of the area, the valleys of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates rivers. In order to trade with one another, caravans would travel through the land of Canaan. Of course, whoever controlled these routes was in a position to make a tremendous fortune. Chedorlaomer had succeeded in his control for twelve years before the people of the region of Sodom and others further south rebelled against him. Therefore, he came with his army

which included his three associates to squelch the rebellion and won a remarkable series of battles.

War reporting in ancient days, as I said, differed little from what we have today. We are given the same grim details—the sensational exploits, the love of spoils, the humiliation of the defeated, “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” This passage includes these kinds of details. We are told of the mysterious tar pits which swallowed up soldiers running from the battle. Mention is made of Mount Seir, the great high place of what would later become Edom, considered impregnable to outside forces. Yet the report declares that Chedorlaomer and his armies defeated those who remained in Mount Seir. We are also told in verse 5 that this king defeated the Rephaim, Zuzim, and Emim who were races of giants of whom Goliath was probably a descendant.

Armies from various cities and regions had fought against the tyranny of Chedorlaomer but could not defeat him. Then this remarkable Abram the Hebrew and his friends from the high country followed the victors northward and won a brilliant victory at night. As we can imagine, Abram’s face was probably pictured on the cover of the contemporary version of “Time”. The names in the passage are all generals of armies, the men who take all the credit and get all the blame, just like we read today in reports of wars.

What Abram did brought about a measure of justice, and the secular press of his day remembered him as a military hero and told the tale of his defeat of the four eastern kings. For the love of his kinsman Lot, he became involved in the fighting of a war which ended twelve years of tyranny. Perhaps, too, Abram reacted against the fact of foreign military domination itself in the same way American colonists resisted English control in the late 1700’s. Abram was a hero because he became active in the affairs of his world. Because he did it for the right reasons, he was allowed by God to bring about a good result. He freed the slaves including Lot and his family who had been taken as part of the spoils.

What I want to suggest is that we live in a similar world of pressures and tensions. We ought to expect times when God will call us to encounter and fight against wicked forces in our world. He may ask us to be involved in bringing about justice for those who have been taken captive. We will have to resist the evil structures of our day. Perhaps, facing some danger ourselves, we may encounter liars and tyrants, the forces of wickedness, and be asked to be involved as part of the answer to them. It is right for us to do this.

Some of you know of the ministry of Eli Fongidai and his care for orphans in Indonesia. He has had to fight against the resistance of both the local and national governments to care for these children and to allow Christians from other nations to contribute to their needs as well. He had to challenge the structures that were in place and see them change in order to bring about a good result.

The Scriptures teach that we should expect God to use us as salt and light in order to advance justice, mercy and truth in the world around us. I hope you are willing to be involved. I hope you and I are not the kind people who refuse to care, who hope others will do what is necessary, and who try to hide from the call to make things different. We need to be involved.

A new section begins with Gen.14:17. We are brought back to a record which comes from Moses' usual source of information, the recollections of believers. This part of the passage is more concerned with Abram's heart than his success in establishing justice and defeating tyrants. There is no reason to expect secular historians to care about what happened to Abram next, yet in the long run, these events are more important than what he did in battle. Look at Gen.14:17-24:

Then 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; now he was a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him a tenth of all. And the King of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself." And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will 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 except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share."

Upon his victorious return from battle, two men came out to meet Abram, Two kings, rulers of two different cities, came to him in the King's valley, each with an opportunity to offer. As is so often the case, success and victory bring on their heels a critical moral and spiritual choice.

The first king was Melchizedek. He is only on the stage of Scripture briefly, but what we are told about this man and this incident in his life is so packed with the presence of God that it has caused thoughtful people to wonder ever since. We do not know anything about his background. We are not told of his mother or father or how he came to be a priest of God Most High. Who taught him to be who he was? It is almost as if he burst onto the scene out of eternity.

Everything we are told about Melchizedek is given in pairs or couplets. He is by name Melchizedek, the king of righteousness, and by title the king of Salem, peace (a city which will later become Jerusalem). Thus, the writer of Hebrews called him the king of righteousness and the king of peace. Also, he is both a priest and a king. In their history, the Jews never had kings who were allowed to become priests. He brought both bread and wine to lead Abram in worship, presaging the day when this would be the fullest note of worship—the memory of the crucified Savior. He blessed both God and Abram. For Hebrews, these couplets carried emphasis and suggested fullness and completeness.

This Melchizedek, this extraordinary figure, walked out and offered a simple meal of bread and wine to Abram. But standing next to him was the king of Sodom, concerned only about what this life has to offer. He too had a word for Abram. He said, "Abram, I have a deal for you. Take everything!" He offered to him not only the spoils of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the spoils of all of the others that the eastern kings had defeated. Thus, he said, "You succeeded, and you deserve to be rewarded for your accomplishment. You ought to be on the cover of "Time" magazine because you are a great general. You deserve all the glory and all the riches that go with it." Underlying this statement was the idea that having made riches available to Abram once, the

king was guaranteeing a future alliance. We can see his thinking. Abram came down out of the hills to rescue his nephew because they had an alliance, a relationship of love. Therefore, the king thought, "I want Abram, the great general, to be in debt to me, so that should I ever need him in the future I can call on him." This is why Abram was so insistent "You will never be able to say you made me rich." He knew that his acceptance would imply a future relationship between them.

The king of Sodom declared, "You did it! You won a great victory. You deserve everything you get with riches besides." The king of Salem offered him the simplest of meals and a chance to give God credit. "Blessed be God Most High," was his announcement. Abram had a clear choice to make. He could choose the word of Melchizedek which gave credit to God and fall on his knees in humble worship of the one who had accomplished this amazing victory, or he could choose the message of the king of Sodom which offered wealth as well as fame. This was a tantalizing choice which could not be made any clearer as the two men stood there, each with his offer.

We are told that Abram gave a tenth of everything he had to this priest of God Most High as an act of worship. And he rejected in the most forceful terms the offer of the king of Sodom, saying, "It was the Lord God who won a great victory. The credit belongs to him not me. My only response can be one of worship, giving back to the Lord that which he has given me."

When we are faced with this choice it will involve some decision about our wherewithal. It will never remain in the realm of ideas. It will always be on the basis of the distribution of our time, energy, money, and creativity. Thus, Abram offered a tenth of everything to the king of Salem, and he rejected what was offered to him by the king of Sodom. The same choice lies before each and every one of us continually. Who gets the credit? Who accrues the benefits? Either we claim we did it ourselves and deserve everything we get, or God did it and should receive all the glory, and our offerings.

Abram became involved in the world he lived in for the right reasons. He loved Lot and responded out of this love. He fought a tyrant and saw the hand of God defeat the tyranny. I think he models for us the call to involvement for love's sake to oppose unrighteousness. We must look at the world in which we live—where people are beaten and denied their rights, where children are the victims of horrible abuses, and where the educational system promotes godlessness—and we must take a stand. Not only must we speak out, but we must actively get involved in seeing something gets done. Abram modeled this by going into the battle himself. The Scriptures call us to the same involvement in our world.

Having become involved, we also need to hear the rest of this chapter even more clearly. Jesus said with pain in his heart, "The poor you will always have with you." In every generation there will be wars and rumors of wars. For all the good we do, for all the justice we establish and for all the mercy we show, the next day will bring injustice and sorrow someplace else. We can never ultimately succeed in overthrowing wickedness forever even though we are called to be active. Abram was on the cover of "Time" magazine for one week. Within a few short years, some other aggressor took control of the trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Yes, we

are called to be involved, but there is a much more important message for us, because what we do to save this world or alter its structures will not last forever.

There is a decision of eternal significance we can make that involves worship. Whom do we choose to honor? It is interesting to me that when the world recorded Abram's feat, it thought of his brilliant military strategy. But if this was all that happened, Abram would have never been remembered. All of the extra-biblical records of this event have long since been lost. If this story were not in the Scripture, we would never know about any of these people. New tyrants always supplant the old. But the Bible remembers Abram for whom he worshipped. What makes him such a great man was his decision to agree with Melchizedek, "Blessed be God Most High." He gave credit to the Lord of all in such a way that others heard the voice of God and became believers themselves, and the world was blessed. The decision he made in the King's valley has had never-ending influence. Abram has been remembered for almost 4000 years as an altar builder, not a general.

Every one of us, especially when we have succeeded at something, will be faced with the king of Sodom and the king of Salem. We will be offered the opportunity to take credit for what happened and to gather its benefits for ourselves. We will also be given the opportunity to take the simplest of meals, bread and wine, and worship the one who died for us, giving him the credit. Every day the two kings come before us in the Valley of the Kings and make us the same offer, "You take the credit, or God gets the credit!" And we make eternal decisions when we make this choice. Even if our attempts to do good in this world, to bring about justice and to care for the needy, are forgotten a generation later, the choice we make facing Melchizedek and the king of Sodom goes on forever.

Our last three presidents—Ford, Carter, and Reagan—have all made public claims to evangelical Christianity. I do not have any way of knowing the private thinking of any of them, but history keeps track of all our presidents. They will be considered great or mediocre, wonderful or worthless, at various times by various people. Usually, one opinion will get debunked by a later generation of historians. But there will come a day when the history of this planet will end, when they will stand before God in eternity. No one is going to ask about the relative merit of their presidencies. The questions they will have to answer will concern the issues Abram faced when these two kings approached him: To whom did you give credit? I have no idea how they will respond. Not only do we not know what place in human history these men will occupy, none of us knows which of them is the greater in terms of eternity. These decisions are made in the heart, and for eternity's sake this is where the critical evaluation takes place. The king of Sodom or the king of Salem—whose offer do we accept?

Abram and Lot can be compared to one another in this. Beginning with the end of Gen.11, everywhere Abram went Lot followed. Thus, it is impossible to read this account without seeing the two of them standing next to one another, highlighting their different positions. We are meant to read this story with these two men illuminating one another's life. But we have come to the end of the shared story because from here the account will focus on Abram's existence—his learning, growing, failing and succeeding. Lot will only be a part of the record one more time. He will return once more to play out his tragic end. Lot has chosen a course which he will follow alone.

We have seen in Abram and Lot the proper and improper ways to be a part of the contemporary world. Lot loved what Sodom had to offer. Even when he experienced this defeat and the fear of being carried into slavery, he was not induced to leave. He returned to Sodom and remained there until the end of its existence. He was in the world and he was of the world. Abram stood before the two kings with the same opportunity, but he rejected the king of Sodom in the most powerful terms, "I will not be made rich by Sodom!" What could Lot have thought when he heard Abram's strident reply? Instead, Abram offered himself by giving a tithe as an act of worship to the priest of the God Most High. He gave credit to the Lord God Most High. Lot was a believer, but his life was tragic and his offering in eternity meager.

Each one of us, if we are believers, is becoming more like Abram or more like Lot. Every day, we face the choice offered by the king of Sodom and the king of Salem. Each of us will choose one or the other basis for living. We are called to be involved in the world, but more important even than this is the issue: "Am I becoming more like Lot, receiving all of my sense of life and reality from this world system, or am I rejecting that and choosing to follow Jesus Christ as he was symbolized in Melchizedek?"

I want to close by reading again the words of Abram. May his strong language ring for us with power as he announces his decision.

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'"

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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