

BROTHERS IN ARMS

GENESIS 14:1-16 DECEMBER 8, 2021

In 1991, José Basulto - a CIA trained political dissident¹ - founded *Brothers To The Rescue*. They sought to liberate Cubans oppressed by the tyrannical Castro regime. In its early years, *Brothers To The Rescue* focused on saving rafters who were trying to float to Florida - a trip that was often lethal. After US immigration policy shifted, no longer giving shelter to Cuban refugees, *Brothers To The Rescue* pivoted to become more confrontational against the Cuban government,² dropping pro-democracy leaflets into Havana. ³ The struggle came to a head in 1996 when a Cuban Air Force MiG shot down two *Brothers To The Rescue* planes, killing the 4 rescue workers aboard. José Basulto has said, "Everyone has a mission in life...we were hunting to save lives."⁴

In our text tonight we see brothers going into battle, not with a desire to kill, but a desire to save lives. It's a rescue that happens because a Believer is there and is ready to be used by God. It's a daring mission. Abraham puts his life on the line to save those who don't deserve saving. And, through his example, we're able to learn precious things about our own walk with the Lord.

Genesis 14:1-4 - In those days King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim ²waged war against King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, and King Shemeber of Zeboiim, as well as the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³All of these came as allies to the Siddim Valley (that is, the Dead Sea). ⁴They were subject to Chedorlaomer for twelve years, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled.

This is the first recorded war in the Bible. We see an alliance of 5 kings from the land of Palestine rebel against Chedorlaomer. He ruled in what we now call Iran.⁵ He gathered up a coalition of 3 other kings from the east. We can identify Shinar as modern day Iraq.

The city-states of Palestine were under his thumb for more than a decade. Whether due to his distance (Chedorlaomer's kingdom was hundreds of miles away) or that they thought they were strong enough to defend themselves, they decided to rebel. At first it seemed like the plan worked. A year went by with no consequences, then another. But Chedorlaomer was simply gearing up.

Genesis 14:5-7 - ⁵In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶and the Horites in the mountains of Seir, as far as El-paran by the wilderness. ⁷Then they came back to invade En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and they defeated the whole territory of the Amalekites, as well as the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jos%C3%A9_Basulto

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brothers_to_the_Rescue

³ https://www.miamiarch.org/CatholicDiocese.php?op=Article_101029145212328

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

Chedorlaomer was not to be trifled with. This campaign became an unstoppable flood of brutality and destruction, not just in 4 or 5 cities, but throughout entire regions.

Dr. Nelson Glueck was a leading biblical archaeologist in the 20th century. His work led to the discovery of 1,500 ancient sites, including those being discussed in this passage.⁶ Here are a few of his comments about what they found:

*"[These] civilization(s)...had flourished...till [they were] savagely liquidated by the kings of the east...they gutted every city and village...from southern Syria through all of Trans-Jordan and the Negev to Kadesh-Barnea in Sinai. The rebellion of the small kings...was brutally crushed. This comparatively minor insurrection was...utilized as a pretext to settle old scores and to raid and ravage with unleashed ferocity...I found that every village in their path had been plundered and left in ruins, and the countryside laid waste. For hundreds of years thereafter, the entire area was like an abandoned cemetery, hideously unkempt."*⁷

To grasp just how powerful this fighting force was, take note of verse 5: They defeated the *Rephaim*. Remember those guys? They were a race of monstrous giants that we talked about back in Genesis chapter 6. They also brought down the Horites. They lived in "the inaccessible [and] virtually impregnable fortresses and rock cities" in the mountains.⁸ But all were swept away.

This should plant two ideas in our minds: First, the power of providence. Abraham was there, in the midst of this region. He had no walls or citadels. He lived in a tent, out in the open. He had no chariots, no war elephants. And yet, despite the crumbling of kingdoms, we see him safe and sound, secured by the power of God - shielded in the Lord's providential plan.

Second, we should realize just how strong a foe Abraham would be facing. Chedorlaomer was no blustering windbag. We're talking about giant killers who were crushing whole peoples at will.

Genesis 14:8-9 - ⁸Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out and lined up for battle in the Siddim Valley ⁹against King Chedorlaomer of Elam, King Tidal of Goiim, King Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar—four kings against five.

As they saw the fight approaching, the five kings of Palestine picked a spot to stand their ground.⁹ It seems they did so for a particular reason.

Genesis 14:10 - ¹⁰Now the Siddim Valley contained many asphalt pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, but the rest fled to the mountains.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Glueck

⁷ Nelson Glueck *Rivers In The Desert*

⁸ John Phillips *Exploring Genesis*

⁹ J. Vernon McGee *Thru The Bible (Genesis)*

They thought their asphalt pits would serve as *protection*, but they ended up being pitfalls. The words suggest that two of the kings themselves fell into a sticky grave,¹⁰ along with many others. That which was meant to be a defense became a snare. This happens to human beings, not just in battles like this one, but in the course of life. We're warned by God about this very danger. Psalm 106 talks about the danger of mingling together with the nations. Not just being around unbelievers, there's no way to avoid that, but adopting the ways of the world. It says:

Psalm 106:36 - [The people of God] served [the] idols [of the nations], which became a snare to them.

This is a spiritual principle that we should take to heart. Wealth does not make us secure. Worldly systems don't make us secure. It is the love of God that covers us like a mother hen keeping her chicks under her wings. He is our Refuge and Strength. Sadly, Lot and his family are a historical object lesson that drives home this principle.

Genesis 14:11-12 - ¹¹The four kings took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food and went on. ¹²They also took Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, for he was living in Sodom, and they went on.

Last time we saw Lot we were told he set up his tent "near" Sodom. Now we see he was living *in* the city. He had become one of them, very friendly with these desperately wicked people - and not just with *them* but with their way of life. And so, he was swept away. Even though it doesn't seem like he actively joined the fight. He was at home while they were battling it out. But he had thrown in with these guys instead of staying under the providential protection of God, and the result was disaster.

After weeks of uninterrupted victory, the kings from the east took something they shouldn't have: *Lot*. I was watching a *Wheel Of Fortune* clip the other day. The guy was on a streak. In a single turn he had racked up over \$30,000 and decided to go for *one more spin* only to hit bankrupt and lose it all.¹¹ These kings are going to experience the same thing - along with violent assault, of course.

Genesis 14:13 - ¹³One of the survivors came and told Abram the Hebrew, who lived near the oaks belonging to Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshcol and the brother of Aner. They were bound by a treaty with Abram.

Whether sent by Lot¹² or God's grace, either way here's something to consider: Abraham was the kind of man you could run to for help. He was no Ebenezer Scrooge. He would take you in.

We find him still living by this forest where he had settled down in the last chapter. And here we discover that Mamre isn't a *place*, he's a *person*. Abraham had made an alliance with him and his two brothers.

¹⁰ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHa3fLHh0K0>

¹² Ray Stedman *When You Need A Friend*

Now, for all that's going on in this chapter, verse 13 by itself is *packed* with all kinds of things to think about. First of all it says, "the oaks belonging to Mamre." But did they? God Himself had told Abraham more than once that all that land belonged to *him*. Abraham had to live as a guest in his own inheritance. He had to ask *permission* to live there. Again we see him being a man who did not demand his own rights as he walked with God. He trusted God and he understood that what he was *really* hoping for wasn't going to be found on *this* side of eternity, but on the other side.¹³ Though it was all his by Divine decree, he chose to live as a pilgrim and not pout about it.

As Christians, we've been made many promises by God. Some of those promises deal with the here and now and many deal with the not yet. Hebrews talks about them being things we see from a distance. That better reality, the perfection of the heavenly city, is being prepared for us. Meanwhile, though we're not there yet, we are to consider *that* place our true homeland. We are temporary residents on the earth, always mindful of the end of the story and where we're headed.

Verse 13 also gives us the first use of the term "Hebrew." For as important as this word is, there isn't agreement on what it exactly means. There are two main theories. One is that it refers to the sons of *Eber* - the great-grandson of Shem. Remember: Genesis is the story of God narrowing His focus to select a particular line of people from whom would come the Messiah. Shem is the son of Noah that God chose to use for this purpose. The name 'Hebrew' might be highlighting that lineage.

The other theory is that the word 'Hebrew' is related to a verb that means "immigrant," or, "one who crosses over."¹⁴ Both ideas are telling as we study Abraham's life. In *this* context, the word reminds us that Abraham was *not* an Amorite, or an Elamite. He's not a Sodomite or a Gomorron. He is something different - a man called out by God, living a life in view of God and directed by God.

On top of all this, verse 13 reveals that Abraham made an alliance with these 3 Amorite brothers. In later Hebrew history, this would be a no-no. But God had not given any such prohibition from what we can tell. It gives us a sense of how Abraham conducted himself as a Believer in an unbelieving world. He did not *assimilate* as Lot had, but he also didn't *isolate* himself. John Phillips says he was "separated, not secluded." That's the tension we're supposed to live in. God doesn't want us to go live in an isolated commune or monastery. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5 that we're going to be associating with unbelievers, but our goal is to bring them *into* the family of God, not be conformed into the image of the world. We don't need to recoil constantly, but grow in love.

So, Abraham brings in this escapee. Here's what happens next.

Genesis 14:14 - ¹⁴When Abram heard that his relative had been taken prisoner, he assembled his 318 trained men, born in his household, and they went in pursuit as far as Dan.

Why did Abraham get involved? I'm sure he had heard news of the widespread attacks. Maybe he even saw the smoke rising as he looked out from his tent. In the end we must conclude he was

¹³ Hebrews 11:9-10

¹⁴ NET Study Bible Notes

motivated by the Holy Spirit to get involved, but the reason given is that he “heard his relative had been taken.”

This gives us another insight into how Abraham lived *in* but not *of* the world. He wasn't an interventionist. He didn't go *looking* for ways to assert himself. He didn't make it his business to go to war because he knew better than others. The nations of the world duking it out really had nothing to do with him. But once Lot was involved - the literal term there used is *brother* - then Abraham got involved. And he got involved in a *big* way. Moses uses vivid language for where we read *assembled* (or your version may say *armed*). Abraham *emptied out* his men. He *unsheathed* them.¹⁵ He held nothing back, even strapping on a sword himself. And in this we see the kind of moral courage God can fill our hearts with. For the sake of one brother (and his family), Abraham risked everything. The three Amorite brothers joined in *because of their treaty with him*, but it wasn't their idea - even though the whole territory *their* people had suffered the same fate. They were content to let *their* kinsman suffer and die, as long as they were safe in the forest.

Consider for a moment what this verse reveals about the *size* of Abraham's estate. He had 318 battle-ready, male servants. This is a *huge* household. It's like a small city. And, not only were they willing to risk big to try to save those held captive, they also put forth a serious effort. They marched *120 miles* in pursuit.¹⁶ That's the distance from us to Monterey, as the crow flies. Their mission was not *revenge*, but *rescue*. At the same time, we see that Abraham recognized there would be no negotiating with Chedorlaomer.¹⁷ No diplomacy. Sometimes evil needs to be contended with personally and without compromise, giving no quarter.

Genesis 14:15-16 - ¹⁵ And he and his servants deployed against them by night, defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah to the north of Damascus. ¹⁶ He brought back all the goods and also his relative Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the other people.

It was God's victory. That's made clear in the next passage. But Abraham was the agent of rescue. This is like the work God sends us out to do - rescuing people from the kingdom of darkness and showing them the Light of the Gospel.

We see here the tender mercy of God and how it filled Abraham's heart. Lot was getting what he deserved, right? As the great Augustus McCrae said, “You ride with an outlaw, you die with an outlaw.” Thank God for His mercy. We - all of us - are outlaws, worthy to be swept away in the wrath of God. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace.¹⁸ Therefore, since we have been shown mercy, we do not give up. We live on, renouncing sin and proclaiming the truth, letting light shine in the darkness, and allowing the power of God to operate in and through our lives.¹⁹

¹⁵ NET Study Bible Notes

¹⁶ CSB Study Bible Notes

¹⁷ John Phillips *Exploring Genesis*

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:4-5

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:1-7

Not only do we see the mercy of God in the way Abraham saved Lot, but in how he saved *all the others, too*. These pagan Sodomites and Amorites. These people who were strangers to Abraham still had value to God. God loved them, even though they were lost. And though He would soon judge them for refusing to turn from their sin, we see Him here reaching out with mercy and grace and help in their time of need.

As we close and think of application from this passage, there's a good question we can each ask ourselves: Are you ready to be unsheathed by the Master? These 318 men had a lot of different jobs in Abraham's house. And, even though Abraham was no mercenary, he *still* prepped himself and these servants to be ready to do battle if need be. Each one of them knew how to handle a sword and were ready to be poured out when the moment came. They did not cower or flinch.

Of course, the weapons of our warfare are not physical, they are spiritual. Our sword is the Word of God. Do we know how to use it? Are we training ourselves to understand what God has said? And are we ready to be called upon by God to be brothers and sisters to the rescue? Pouring ourselves out that others might be saved? We can be. It's what God wants. And we want what God wants.