

## **"The Pilgrimage Is Perilous But The LORD Is Powerful"**

Have you ever noticed how often we use the language of warfare to describe the struggles of life? We say things like, *"He's fighting depression, she's fighting temptation, he's battling cancer, they feel defeated."* The imagery comes naturally. The Bible also refers to the struggles we face in life as battles we have to fight. As he faces his own imminent death in **2 Timothy 4:7**, Paul sums up his whole Christian life by saying, *"I have fought the good fight."*

That's helpful because **Genesis 14** could seem like it's just an ancient account of a battle that has little to do with us. But we remember, **2 Timothy 3:16** says, *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.* So it's essential, as we study a passage like this, to ask not only what it is telling us happened long ago but how it applies to us.

The background for the story is that an alliance of four kings from the northwest was ruling over five kings in the area of the promised land where Abraham and his nephew Lot were living. After 12 years of oppression, the 5 kings near Abram rebelled. The four kings from the North led a campaign to suppress the rebellion. They conquered everyone in their way and captured a tremendous amount of wealth and people. Their captives include Abram's nephew Lot and his family. This brings Abraham into the story. Abraham organizes an armed force, launches a mission to recover his lost family member, and devises a strategy to compensate for his smaller numbers. He attacks at night, wins the victory, recovers all that had been lost, and returns to the formerly defeated cities with the rescued captives and the recovered wealth. You might think that would be the climax of the story. But the story continues and builds to the climactic recognition of God as the one who actually was behind the victory of Abraham and the recognition of Abraham as one blessed by God. <sup>1</sup>

In a future message I want address in more detail this mysterious character named *Melchizedek*. Our focus in this message is on this truth: ***Our pilgrimage is perilous but the Lord is powerful. We must be willing to fight knowing that the Lord is the one who brings victory.*** That's the principle embedded in the story. It was important for the first readers of the book of Genesis in their day; it was important for God's people throughout history, and it's important for you and me.

## I. BECAUSE OUR PILGRIMAGE IS PERILOUS WE MUST BE PREPARED TO FIGHT.

Abraham was living in peace and had faith in God. He was also prepared to fight if needed. **Verse 13** mentions that Abraham had *allies*. So he had entered into alliances as a precaution. **Verse 14** says he had “*trained men*” in his household. Abraham was prepared to fight. We also need to be prepared to fight if necessary.

*This is true physically and spiritually. This may be controversial for some. Others may feel it goes without saying. However this is the first battle in the Bible so it's worth noting...*

### **A. In an imperfect world, sometimes fighting is the lesser of two evils, and even the people of God must be willing to fight.**

**1.** The sixth commandment: “*Thou shalt not kill*” is not talking about self-defense, capital punishment, or justifiable warfare. It uses the Hebrew word for a premeditated murder. That doesn’t mean we should ever be callous about war or killing of any kind. But it is a fact that the Scripture does not command pacifism. At the end of **Genesis 14**, the Priest, Melchizedek, representing God, blesses Abraham, endorsing his action in fighting and giving God credit for his victory.

**2.** The Bible's teaching on war is sometimes summarized and described as “*The Just War Theory*.” The idea is that war is never good in itself, but sometimes it is better than the alternatives. Sometimes, it is necessary to ensure a lasting peace, to correct flagrant injustice, to liberate oppressed people, and to protect innocent lives. A just war is waged *under* legitimate authority *for* a just cause and *in* an ethical manner. Do those principles answer every question? Are they easy to apply? No! But they give us important guidelines. They tell us that the Bible does not endorse war under any circumstances by any means, but it doesn't endorse unconditional and absolute pacifism either. Sometimes we have to fight.

*But for most of us the more immediate application is spiritual...*

### **B. The most predictable, universal, and critical battle we all face is not in the physical realm but in the spiritual.**

When Paul wrote to Timothy, the younger pastor, he was mentoring and encouraging, early in the letter in **1 Timothy 1:18**. He says, *This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage*

*the good warfare.* At the end of the letter in **1 Timothy 6:12**, he says, *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.* In that verse, he helps us understand that the way we fight the good fight is by taking hold of the eternal life to which we've been called. Really embracing the new life and holding on.

The apostle Paul sees his battle with sin in his own inner life in terms of warfare. In **Romans 7:23**, he writes, *but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.* **Ephesians 6:10-11** says, *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.* Here's the ultimate adversary. How clearly do we understand the fight we're in?

*Here are some thoughts from this battle in **Genesis 14**.*

**1. Sometimes, we fight for love's sake.** In the previous chapter, Abraham showed fearless generosity to preserve peace with Lot. But now he goes so much farther. He's willing to risk his life to rescue him! He could have said, *"Lot is getting what he deserves. He chose to pitch his tents near the sinful city of Sodom, and this is what he gets."* Jesus said greater love has no man than this that he lays down his life for his friends. He was speaking of his own sacrifice to pay for our sins and be our Savior, but he was also pointing to the kind of love with which he calls us to love others. Are we willing to fight for them and fight not just physical battles but our own spiritual battles for love's sake? Sometimes, we fight for love's sake.

**3. Sometimes, we fight, facing overwhelming odds.** In this story, Abraham is facing an alliance of four kings that had ravaged 6 tribes (that was in the beginning of the chapter) and defeated 5 kings. Abram could have said: *"I don't have the strength to defeat this enemy. Besides, even if I win this one, they may just come back for revenge in the future."* Stories like this in the Bible encourage us, as they have God's people throughout history, to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might and not to be discouraged when we're up against what looks like an overwhelming enemy.

**4. Sometimes we demonstrate faith by the willingness to fight.** Abraham could have said: *"God is sovereign, if he wants to rescue Lot he can do it without me."* When it came to dividing the land the right

thing for Abraham to do was to let Lot choose first and trust God to provide. When it came time to fight to rescue Lot the right thing to do was to fight while relying on God for the plan and the win.

Here's a question: Are you willing to fight? Some people will fight all kinds of outward enemies, but they will not fight with passion and perseverance against unbelief, bitterness, pride, discouragement, anger, selfishness, or laziness. Are you willing to fight for spiritual victories? Are you willing to fight for the cause of Christ in your life, in the church, and in the world?

*Because the pilgrimage is perilous, we must be prepared to fight. The second lesson is also important. It is this...*

## **II. BECAUSE THE LORD IS POWERFUL WE MUST RELY ON HIM.**

Beginning in **verse 17**, the Scripture tells us about two individuals who come out to meet Abraham after his victory. The king of Sodom and the king of Salem. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, speaks first. ( He is a fascinating figure, and we will look a little more carefully at him in a future message.) **Verses 18-20** say: *And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was a priest of God Most High.)<sup>19</sup> And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;<sup>20</sup> and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"*

- Why did Melchizedek bless Abraham?  
*Because Abraham fought the good fight.*
- Why did Melchizedek bless God?  
*Because God gave the victory.*

Notice what this tells us. It tells us that...

### **A. When we rely on God, we fight the fight, but God delivers the victory.**

You need to take responsibility to fight the good fight in your life, but -- as you take responsibility, you must not rely on yourself; you must rely on God. You see these two truths of God's provision and our responsibility brought together repeatedly in the Bible. On the one hand, God is Sovereign. An all-knowing and all-powerful God has ultimate control over all the events in the world.

Does that mean that we are not responsible? No! God's sovereign

provision and our personal responsibility go together in Scripture. The Bible says that the message of Christ must be preached, people must be invited and persuaded to believe, prayers must be offered in Christ's name, and individuals must choose to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. And as all of that human responsibility takes place, God works in and through our efforts to open the hearts of people and bring them to Himself and help them grow. So, in our spiritual battles, we fight the good fight, and God delivers the victory. Be committed, have courage, keep fighting, but as you fight the good fight, keep depending on God. Don't rely on your own strength or wisdom rely on him.

In 1982, the military government that was then ruling Argentina Invaded and occupied two British territories in the South Atlantic. Argentine military government claimed the territories as part of Argentina. The United Kingdom said, *"No, this is a British territory,"* and they went to war. During one battle, the battle for Goose Green, the battle was going badly for the British. They faced an enemy that outnumbered them three-to-one, were dug into strong defensive positions, fronted with a minefield, and held 112 islanders hostage. They were not being supplied. The British battalion was taking casualties. There were seventeen dead and thirty-five wounded. Then, the commanding officer was killed. A major named Chris Keeble took command. In his account of what happened, he said he felt *absolutely desperate*. They had been fighting for 15 hours, and the midwinter night was bitterly cold, wet, and snowing. His men were looking at him as if to say what are we going to do. He said give me a few seconds, and he went off just a little way to be alone for a minute, and he remembered a prayer that he carried in his pocket. He knew the prayer, and he knelt down on the gorse, and he prayed, here's the prayer: *"My Father, I abandon myself to you. Do with me as you will. Whatever you may do with me, I thank you, provided your will is fulfilled. I ask for nothing more."* And as he recounted the story, he said, at that very moment, *"I suddenly felt absolutely clear about what I needed to do! I felt joyful, I felt warm, I did not feel frightened, and I returned back down to the company commanders and said, 'I now know what we need to do.'"* He sent a message to the Argentinians, telling them that *they needed to surrender to him*. Although the Argentineans outnumbered them three to one, they surrendered. Over a thousand prisoners surrendered, and many casualties were avoided. Chris Keeble credits prayer and the grace of God both for the victory won and the lives saved. Do you believe that a Christian fighting to fulfill his mission, protect his men, rescue hostages, and avoid unnecessary casualties could pray and experience the reality of a God

who intervenes to answer the prayers of his children? No matter what kind of battle you face, don't try to fight the battle in your own strength. Trust in God. Rely on God. Prayer is the most fundamental way that we express our reliance on God as we fight the battles we face.

**Ephesians 6**, Scripture concludes the great chapter on spiritual warfare, exhorting us to take *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, always praying in the Spirit*. Holding fast to God's word, praying always, depending on the Spirit we rely on God.

## **B. When we rely on God, we demonstrate the quality of our faith in the choices we make.**

These two characters represent two very different characters you meet on the pilgrimage of faith. Melchizedek's name means king of righteousness; he is the king of Salem, which means peace. The first word out of his mouth is "blessed." The king of Sodom comes from a city whose name has come to represent sin, violence, and materialistic excess. He represents the perspective of the world's culture and its worship of false gods. The first word out of his mouth is "give."

**1. Faith can be expressed in what you give.** Verse 20 ends with Abraham giving a tithe, a tenth of everything, to God. Why did Abraham do that? Because he believed in God. He believed God had given him all he had. He wanted to acknowledge his faith and express his continual reliance on God by giving to God.

**2. Faith can be expressed in what you refuse.** Abraham demonstrated his faith not only in what he gave but also in what he refused. In **verse 21**, the king of Sodom says to Abram, *"Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself."* Notice how different Abram's response is to this king. **Verse 22-24:** *But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, <sup>23</sup> that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.' <sup>24</sup> I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share."* Abraham receives bread and the wine from the king of Salem. He refuses to accept anything from the king of Sodom, because Abraham, in faith, is radically relying on God as his ultimate resource in life. Isn't this the deeper conflict, the battle, the fight with which we are all continually faced? It's the choice to turn from dependence on the world to totally rely on the riches and the resources of God.

In the battle for sexual purity, for integrity in the workplace, in the cultural battles, in the relational conflicts we face with friends and family, in the inner conflicts of the heart and mind, the pilgrimage we are on is perilous, not only because the world is dangerous but because the offers of the world are seductive. We have to choose over and over to rely on God. After Abraham demonstrated his reliance on God. God spoke to Him again. It's easy to miss this because of the break in the chapter. But look at **Genesis 15:1**. It says: *After these things, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."*

## CONCLUSION

Is He your shield and your very great reward? The grace of God by which he offers himself as our shield and our very great reward is seen throughout the Scriptures. Its ultimate expression is the story of Jesus Christ. What Abraham did for Lot in rescuing Him from his enslavement is nothing compared to what Christ has done for us. Like Lot, all of us have made the wrong choices and ended up enslaved. Christ didn't ask whether we deserved to be rescued or redeemed. He came for us because of His own love, and he fought for us, the battle that we could not fight. In order to rescue us, he didn't just risk his life he gave himself up on the cross for us. His death and resurrection were the pain-filled but powerful means by which he graciously delivered His undeserving people.

He calls and convicts us by his Holy Spirit, and when we trust in Him, He sets us free, forgiving our sins and giving us not only spiritual freedom but eternal life. He wants to be, and he deserves to be your shield and your very great reward. Trust in him as your Savior, trust in him as your shield and your very great reward not only for eternity but for now! The pilgrimage is perilous, but the LORD is powerful.

**Amen**

## A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, Thank you for the victory of Jesus! Thank you for being a shield for all who put their faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. I believe that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ he fought and won the battle for my salvation. He rescued me from sin and judgment. I turn to him in repentance and trust in him as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

## A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

O, Lord. I confess I have too often fought the wrong battles with pride and passion and failed to fight the more important battles with the courage of faith. Teach me to rely on your strength. Teach me also to give my all to secure your purposes. Give me courage, endurance, grace and grit to fight the good fight through prayerful dependance on your power and your promises. In Christ name, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt From Genesis, Bruce K. Waltke: <https://books.apple.com/us/book/genesis/id1159479976>

*"One might expect the climax to be Abraham's successful attack and routing of the enemies. But the story actually builds to the climactic recognition of God, unmentioned previously in this scene, as the battle's true victor and the subsequent blessing and affirmation of Abraham by the priest-king Melchizedek."*