

War of the Kings

Genesis 14:1-16

In some ways, our text this morning is one of the hardest passages I've ever studied in sermon preparation, not because it is difficult to understand, but because of the subject itself. It's a description of a military battle taking place between alliances of kings and kingdoms during the days of Abraham.

The difficulty was in preparing a sermon on some subject other than military strategy! Any of you with any sort of military interests might find such strategy interesting, but we aren't studying the history of the military. I'm not a professor in the Army War College or the Naval Academy. Rather, we are studying the history of redemption, the history of God's people, the history of God's plan and purpose for the salvation of the elect and the condemnation of the wicked.

We're studying about the covenant God made with Abraham which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So what does this passage have to do with all that? That is my great challenge in preaching to you this morning.

Now, let me emphasize my conviction that we are, in fact reading history. These are historical kingdoms and historical kings. This is not fiction, as many liberal commentators wish to describe it. But my sermon is to be more than bare history lesson, for all Scripture points to Christ and to God's plan of redemption. So keep in mind the immediate context, that is, what we finished with last Sunday. We ended Chapter 13 with a description of the covenant promise made to Abraham.

13:14-17

It's the covenant promise of,

Gen. 12:1 "Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

That is God's purpose. That is God's eternal plan, the counsel of his own will. But the conspiracy of those four kings threatened the fulfillment of God's purpose. After all, God promised Abraham the land. But how could he get it if mighty kings controlled the land, such as we read in,

v.1-2

The reality is that,

I. DESPITE GOD'S PURPOSES, NATIONS WILL DEMONSTRATE THEIR WICKED REBELLION.

Shinar is Babylonia, and some people have identified Amraphel with the great King Hammurabi, though that is somewhat doubtful. We don't know the historical identity of the other kings, though Chedorlaomer is the obvious leader. They all lived northwest of Israel, and swept down toward Israel taking the other nations captive.

v.3-4

The point is, as true then as now, that,

A. Confederations of men may appear to threaten God's purposes.

Humanly speaking, and let me emphasize that, humanly speaking, God's plans for that land were in jeopardy. Those kings had no concern for the Lord nor for his will. They had no concern for anyone but themselves, no objective other than the solidification of their own power.

I immediately think of the words of Psalm 2, words that are so appropriate for our day, though written in a very different day. The psalm speaks about the confederations of nations who conspire together ultimately to resist the authority of God! The psalm begins with a question,

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing?”

Then a description of what is happening,

v.2 “The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

Of course, such an attempt is futile.

v.4 “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”

And then Jesus the Messiah speaks,

v.7 “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

And the psalm ends with a warning to those nations,

v.10 “Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.”

We could apply those words to this great confederation of kings in Genesis 14! And we could apply it to the godless arrogance of our own country today as well as the nations of our world so often at war with one another. Nations will demonstrate their wicked rebellion against God’s purpose, and the reason that I call it wicked rebellion is because they do not acknowledge the kingdom of God. Thus it may well appear that God’s purposes are threatened, because,

B. Confederations of men may appear to demonstrate great power.

This passage is one describing great military prowess. Those four great kings conquered and virtually enslaved the five kings of the Jordan Valley, and ruled over them for 12 years.

v.1-4

And when the enslaved kings conspired to rebel, they were squashed.

v.5-7

They controlled the whole land, the whole land which God promised to Abraham. When threatened, they had the military might to put down the revolt. They had great power.

In a fascinating discovery, archaeologists can trace the exact location of these battles. A well-known and respected archaeologist, Nelson Glueck, writes this: “The rebellion of the small kings of the cities on the east side of the Dead Sea against what must have been the extortionate rule of absentee suzerains was brutally crushed. This comparatively minor insurrection was thereupon utilized as a pretext to settle old scores and to raid and ravage with unleashed ferocity for as much booty as could possibly be won... From southern Syria to central Sinai, their fury raged. A punitive expedition developed into an orgy of

annihilation. I found that every village in their path had been plundered and left in ruins, and the countryside laid waste. The population had been wiped out or led away into captivity. For hundreds of years thereafter, the entire area was like an abandoned cemetery, hideously unkempt, with all its monuments shattered and strewn in pieces on the ground.”

None of these nations, on either side, had any interest in proclaiming the glory of God. None of them had any interest in, or even knowledge of, God’s purposes. They seemed to have great strength. But what will happen to men and nations who rely upon their own strength? We see that in the description of what happened to those five kings who had attempted to rebel. They were destroyed.

v.8-12

You see, God was still in control. This land was still promised to Abraham, and the apparent power manifested by those kings would not thwart God’s eternal purpose. Instead,

II. WITHIN GOD’S PURPOSES, WICKED NATIONS WILL EXPERIENCE DESTRUCTION.

This is an accurate description of the destruction of God’s judgment. Judgment upon those who rely upon their own strength. Judgment who think themselves invincible in their own pride.

v.8-9

What proud, self-sufficient arrogance. Those five kings, representing five relatively small city-states, took on the great enemy. And they paid for it dearly.

A. Men in their own strength are destroyed by their own foolish pride.

And destroyed they were. That destruction is what those five

kings should have been thinking about, but instead, they were thinking about how to fight back in their own strength. What foolish pride.

And they were destroyed because of it. Their own pride was insufficient to withstand the assault of the other kings.

v.10

What a pitiful picture of pride leading to destruction. It appears from the description that the kings actually took refuge in the ever present tar pits, and the bulk of the soldiers had to retreat into the mountains. What a disgrace to military leadership! Those proud, self-sufficient kings lost everything they had.

v.11

Even Lot was carried away.

v.12

Let’s look again at those same events from a slightly different perspective. Look at the cowardice of those kings claiming such pride. Look at their cowardly inaction, their cowardly unwillingness to get involved in fight on behalf of principle or truth. They fought only when actually compelled to do so, and then, only with a pitiful attempt at defense.

The five Kings of the Jordan valley sat idly by as the four kings of the northeast conspiracy conquered their way through country after country, the conquest described in verses 5-7. Only at the last moment, did they draw up battle lines. It was too little, too late. The lesson for them, in military terms, is still true in military terms. And it is true in spiritual terms also.

B. Men in their own strength are destroyed by their cowardly inaction.

A military unwilling to act until there is an immediate threat is a weak military, doomed for failure. You could point to many historical examples, not the least of which is the cowardly inaction which allowed the rise of the Third Reich between the two World Wars. Inaction and appeasement is not a sign of strength, and from a military perspective, the same accusation might be justified against the current commander-in-chief of the United States Armed Forces. But this passage isn't merely about military strategy nor political power.

It is a passage about human life, lived before God. Especially relevant to the life of God's people. The principle that refusal to get involved in potential conflict, as that conflict arises, breeds disastrous consequences down the road. For instance, when troubles first surface in a family or in a church, turning a blind eye and refusing to get involved will not make the problem go away. The whole unwillingness to engage in discipline fits right at this point. Parents who remain inactive when their children need discipline are not solving any problems, just letting them get bigger. The same is true for the discipline of the church. Leaving a problem unresolved, in cowardly inaction, will make the problem worse."

On a personal level, problems in your life fall into this same pattern. You have to deal with issues in your own heart, for conflicts that remain unresolved will eventually raise their ugly heads and often bring the fruit of destruction. Men in their own strength are destroyed by their cowardly inaction.

So the basic application is simple. Do not depend upon your own strength, or you will fail. Whatever the issue, whatever the problem. The answer is not in you, it's not in your strength or your wisdom or in your ability. The answer is to look to God, to focus upon him and upon his power. Now, those are simple

words, aren't they? But they are so revolutionary! So life changing. So powerful.

By yourself, whether it's foolish pride or cowardly inaction, you will fail. When troubles hit, if have to look deep down inside yourself for the strength to handle it, you will fail. But if you look to God and to his strength, you will be given grace to help you in time of need.

And the irony of the whole thing, in spiritual terms is obvious. The irony is that you are the strongest spiritually, when you feel the weakest and the most helpless physically and outwardly. That's what all these kings missed in Genesis 13. And that is why sometimes God will actually keep us weak! So that he can make us strong.

2Cor. 12:7 "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The ultimate lesson is obvious. The wicked, self-reliant and self-sufficient, will be destroyed. The righteous shall live. God himself will see to it.

But let's return to the text to look at what happened to Lot. He was now living in Sodom, not merely in a tent nearby, as I noted last week. He was foolishly involving himself in the lives of the

wicked Sodomites, but nonetheless, presumably because of the covenant with Abraham, God delivered him. Despite the worldliness of Lot which we studied last time, he still seems to be numbered among God's people. And what is so obvious here is that,

III. BECAUSE OF GOD'S PURPOSES, HE WILL FIGHT ON BEHALF OF HIS PEOPLE.

It's plain to see that the Lord fought on Lot's behalf.

v.13-16

Actually,

A. Lot represents the righteous living among the wicked.

As I noted last week, Lot shouldn't have chosen to live among the Sodomites. It was a worldly choice, based on worldly values. He chose what looked good in his own eyes and ignored the wickedness of the people with whom he would live. He was wrong to do that. And he paid the penalty for his own foolishness.

v.12

But he was still numbered among God's people.

2Pet. 2:4 For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; 6 and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; 7 and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— 9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust

under punishment for the day of judgment.”

“He delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds).” So Lot was one of God's own, called a righteous man. And God delivered him. God rescued him, despite his own sinfulness. Therefore,

B. Lot represents how God rescues the righteous.

And how does God rescue the righteous?

v.13-16

Now, from a military perspective, Abraham's expedition was absolute foolishness. 318 men. What could they do? He went in pursuit! Against the triumphant armies of that great northeaster conspiracy.

Talk about courage! Or was it foolishness? Well, because he was trusting in God's strength, it became a demonstration of just how mighty God's power really is. The odds were likely comparable to Gideon's 300 men battling against 135,000 Midianites. But God was with them, and that was more than enough.

You can analyze the military strategy all you want. You can praise Abraham's military genius in dividing his small forces so as to mimic a great attack on several different fronts. You can praise the wisdom of such a surprise attack. You can talk about the raw courage to undertake such a mission. But at the root of it all, God was the one doing the fighting. God was the one rescuing Lot from the throngs of the wicked. God was the one acting on behalf of his people.

The expedition was fully successful.

v.15-16

The victory belonged to the Lord. Again, the application for us, from Peter,

2Pet. 2:7 “[If the Lord] delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— 9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment.”

Never is that made clearer than in the great OT example of salvation and deliverance, the exodus out of Egypt. When it came time to cross the Red Sea, we read how Moses answered the people, recorded in,

Exod. 14:13 “And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. 14 The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.”

Those are dramatic words for some 2 million people standing at the edge of a great body of water, fleeing from their oppressors. “The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.”

Going on, we read,

v.15 “And the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward. 16 But lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea. 17 And I indeed will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them. So I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all

his army, his chariots, and his horsemen. 18 Then the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained honor for Myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

Such is God’s power, applied to the deliverance of his people. And in that context, let me end with the great encouragement of,

Ps. 34:15 “The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. 16 The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. 17 The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. 20 He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken. 21 Evil shall slay the wicked, And those who hate the righteous shall be condemned. 22 The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, And none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned.”

That’s the lesson of this war of the kings! Whatever your trial, whoever your enemies might be, God’s promise is sure and certain. “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all.”

“The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.”