

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER
GENESIS 14

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

It is a sad thing to see people who claim to be Christians stray away from the faith. It can happen to people of all ages, but young people are especially susceptible to this danger. As a youth pastor for a number of years I saw teens get messed up by drugs, peer pressure, alcohol, and sexual immorality. Sometimes I saw them get back on the right track. Sometimes I did not.

One fellow in particular stands out in my mind. Steve was in college when I first knew him. He was a likable guy. He had a teddy bear kind of personality. He was a big guy physically, but he had a gentle personality. He went to a Christian high school where my wife had gone. Then he went to college. He got involved with the singles group at our church, and he was a positive addition.

Steve also had friends who were not a good influence. On two different occasions Steve disappeared from church for a while. Each time a couple of guys from church went out of their way to bring him back. Then a third time Steve dropped out of sight, and he seemed to become ensnared by the influence of these bad friends.

Probably most of us have known people like Steve. Some of us have had Steves in our family. They have professed to be Christians and have shown spiritual interest, but they have strayed away from the faith. They have caused us considerable exasperation and heartache. What is our responsibility toward this kind of person?

We recently finished up a study on Sunday mornings of the New Testament Book of Galatians. In #6 v. 1 (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 6:1) we encountered this admonition from the Apostle Paul: **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”**

Paul says that Christians, especially Christians with some maturity, have a responsibility to do what they can to bring straying Christians back into a right relationship with God. But they are to do it with gentleness, realizing that they are also capable of messing up. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Galatians 6:1 is the New Testament principle that expresses our responsibility in these situations. Genesis #14 is the Old Testament illustration of what is involved in putting the principle into practice. Last week we saw that prosperity brought strife to Abraham and Lot. Both men were faced with a decision. Because Abraham's trust in God was growing, he offered to let his nephew Lot choose which part of the land of Canaan he wanted his clan to occupy. Lot should have let Abraham choose first. Abraham was the

leader of the entire family. He was the recipient of God's promises. But Abraham let Lot choose.

Lot made a bad choice. (PROJECTOR ON--- ABRAHAM'S PASTURES) He chose to move to the Jordan valley north of the Dead Sea. The land there promised abundant water and vegetation for his flocks. It looked like it would provide economic prosperity. But the people who lived in the area were very immoral. Lot soon brought his family down to Sodom, a city occupied by people whom God called "great sinners against the Lord."

I.

So in the first twelve verses of #14 we find that THERE IS DISCIPLINE FOR GOD'S CHILDREN WHO STRAY. (I. THERE IS DISCIPLINE FOR...) Lot seems to get caught up in pursuit of what the world has to offer. He had a genuine faith in God, as the Apostle Peter indicates in his Second Epistle. But he got off track. Perhaps he thought that his spiritual slide would not hurt anyone else. But it did. It affected him, his immediate family, his larger clan, Abraham, and even friends of Abraham. In the end Lot's poor decisions also posed a further test for Abraham's faith.

The text tells us that there were four kings from the north and east who formed an alliance. (NORTHERN ALLIANCE MAP) There is some uncertainty about what and where Ellasar and Goiim were. We know that Shinar was a name that was later used for the land of Babylon in the Tigris-Euphrates River valley. Elam was the name for a region further to the east of Babylon.

This northern alliance apparently forced the city-states of the Dead Sea region to pay money to them each year. (CITIES OF THE VALLEY) The five city-states of the southern region were somewhere in the southern Dead Sea area. Some scholars think that Sodom and Gomorrah were in an area now covered by the Dead Sea. Some have identified ruins to the east of the Dead Sea as the locations of Sodom and Gomorrah. The remains of five cities have been found in this area that date to the general time period of this story. In every one of them a thick layer of ash has been discovered. (Bible.org, 8/26/2009)

In the thirteenth year of this forced arrangement the southern city-states decided to stop paying their taxes. So the next year the northern alliance showed up to remind the southerners about who was in charge. According to v. 5 they first beat up on other city-states somewhere to the north of the southern alliance.

Then the northerners came to the southern Dead Sea region. The five kings and their armies came out to meet Chedorlaomer and his northern alliance. The southerners were soundly beaten. Verse 10 notes, "**Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country.**" So in this southern region of Israel invaders from the outside beat up badly on these occupants and took some of them captive. After 4000

years how much has changed in terms of conflict in this area? The descendants of Abraham are still getting attacked.

The universal view of liberal scholars for many years, and still taught in many college classrooms, is that Genesis #14 is fiction. It is a nice story made up hundreds of years after Abraham supposedly lived to glorify the father of the Jewish nation. These scholars could not imagine why prosperous and powerful city-states of the Euphrates and Tigris River valley would want anything to do with this desolate region by the Dead Sea.

(EDOMITE MINES) But then several decades ago archaeologists discovered the remains of a number of ancient cities in this area. They found out that there was a major trade route that went from what was later called Edom to Egypt to the west and to the Tigris-Euphrates valley to the north. Then also remains of copper and manganese mines were discovered which were being operated at the beginning of the second millennium BC in about the time of Abraham.

Also a scholar of the Ancient Near East by the name of Theophilus Pinches (CHEDORLAOMER TEXT) found names in this ancient tablet at the British Museum written with cuneiform letters which contains names very similar to those of the leaders of the northern alliance. One of those names, Arioch king of Ellasar, is a name that appears several times in texts from the Ancient Near East. But it is not found in ancient writings after 1500 BC. So the difficult question that skeptics have to answer is how would someone making up this story 1000 or 1500 years later come up with a name like this that would have been unknown in their time setting? (PROJECTOR OFF)

This conflict in the southern Dead Sea region would have no significance for the Biblical record except for one sentence in v. 12: **“They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.”** The last that we heard about Lot was in #13 v. 12. There we were told that he was living near Sodom. Now we are told that he is living in it. Chapter 13 v. 13 told us, **“Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.”** Such is the place where Lot decided to live. Later we learn that he married off his daughter to men of this city.

If ever there was a man caught in a trespass, it was Lot. He had ignored the spiritual danger posed by the region in which he chose to live. He made unwise choices. But God had not forgotten about Lot. Lot was still one of His children, and the Lord was trying to get his attention. He used pagan kings to do it. He also used this difficult situation to test Abraham's faith and to further develop it.

Lot went to Sodom looking for wealth and prosperity and pleasure. Now he was a POW, perhaps a hostage. His wealth was gone. His life was endangered. He was in a tough predicament.

One of the things that the Lord was doing was disciplining this wayward child of God. He loves those who have become rightly related to Him through genuine faith, and through the gracious calling of God. Genuine love for a child, whether from our Heavenly Father, or from an earthly father, or from a church community includes the element of discipline.

Watermark Community Church in Dallas is a large evangelical church. Several years ago the *Dallas Morning News* had a column that began with this lead sentence: **“Watermark megachurch banned a gay man that it didn’t deserve to have as a member.”** The tone of the column is that these evangelicals are a bunch of intolerant bigots. The back story is that friends and church leaders met with this man for over a year to try to point him in the right direction. But, as Pastor Wagner wrote, **“This friend made clear to us that he no longer believed same-sex sexual activity was inappropriate for a follower of Jesus Christ and no longer desired to turn from it. Like any member whose beliefs move away from the core commitments, biblical convictions, and values of Watermark, it became appropriate to formally acknowledge his desire to not pursue faithfulness to Christ with us.”** So he was dropped from the membership roles.

George Orwell once wrote, **“The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.”** (Breakpoint, 10/26/2016) The experience of Lot shows that there is discipline for God’s children who stray.

II.

In vv. 13-16 of our text we encounter the principle that **THERE IS RISK FOR GOD’S CHILDREN WHO ARE INVOLVED WITH RESTORATION.** (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THERE IS RISK FOR GOD’S...) God uses people to rescue sinners caught in a trespass. But there is risk. For Watermark Church the risk was a lot of bad press. For Abraham it meant possible death.

In v. 13 Abraham reenters the picture: **“Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram.”** Keep in mind that it is only later, when he is 99 years old, that his name is changed to Abraham.

Three of the most commonly used terms for Abraham and his descendants in the Old Testament are “Jews,” “Israelites,” and “Hebrews.” “Jews” is a name that is used for the descendants of Judah. “Israel” was the new name which was given to “Jacob.” This is another example of the Lord changing names for people to have a more effective witness for Him. Now we have the first appearance of “Hebrew” in the Bible. Probably the word had a historical connection to the fact that Abraham was a descendant of Eber, who was a descendant of Shem, who was the son of Noah.

There was a very similar word in this part of the world whose root meaning was “one beyond,” that is, a foreigner. The Canaanites used this term to describe anyone who was not a native. So Abram got lumped into this category by the Canaanites with all of

the other foreigners. In the Old Testament the word “Hebrew” is used when Canaanites are present. That was the term which they tended to use.

So now someone has escaped from the scene of battle and has come to tell Abraham about what has happened. Perhaps he was a man who worked for Lot and knew Abraham and knew that he was staying in Hebron. (GENESIS 14 MAP)

To live where Abraham was living it was apparently convenient, or even required, to make some kind of agreement with the native Amorites, who were part of the broader ethnic group that inhabited the land and who were called Canaanites. Perhaps Abraham had even influenced these Amorites toward belief in his God.

After Abraham heard the sad story from this fugitive, he had to make a decision. Abraham had good reasons not to get involved. He had helped out Lot before, and Lot had blown it. He had made his choice to settle in the Dead Sea region. Abraham was getting to be an older man. After all what could Abraham do anyway? The northerners had a powerful army that had defeated a number of city-states. Why should he risk his life and the lives of the people with him to do something that might well be futile and foolish and costly?

But v. 14 tells us, **“When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.”** In addition to these 318 men in his clan, we find out later that there were Amorites who came along to help. Perhaps there were as many or more Amorites who helped out as there were members of Abraham’s tribe. But still their numbers must have paled in comparison to the combined armies of five city-states.

(DAN BETHEL MAP) These good guys pursue the victorious army as far as Dan, along a major trade route known as the King’s Highway. The northern alliance was loaded down with prisoners and captured booty. They were a happy bunch. Probably there were celebrations in the camp at night. Probably many or most of the soldiers got drunk. They had no reason to think that they were in any danger, given the fact that they had wiped out all of the city-states in the whole area.

But Abraham and his forces were on their tail. In a night attack they totally surprised the northern alliance. The larger force was thoroughly defeated and fled in disarray. It was a great victory for Abraham. Most importantly to him, his nephew Lot was rescued. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Abraham risked much to win back his errant nephew. It could have been a costly adventure. Lives could have been lost. But he stepped out in faith and did it.

In Galatians #6 v. 1 the Apostle Paul speaks about Christians who have been taken captive by sin. In the chapter preceding that he speaks of sins of immorality and jealousy and outbursts of anger and drunkenness and carousing. The encouragement is that the Lord doesn’t give up on believers who are ensnared by these things. In fact he

is looking for spiritually minded people who will be instruments of restoration, who will take the risk and pay the cost that is required. Perhaps it could cost us resentment or rejection by another person. But it could be a great help to that individual.

In our church's involvement in prison ministry over the years we have seen Christians take risks in trying to help prisoners behind bars and prisoners who have been released from prison. Some have done well. We have had one who even became an elder. Sometimes we have seen relapses and people we have helped have ended up back behind bars. But we serve a God who gives us second and third and fourth chances.

III.

There is risk and cost for the instruments of God's restoration. In vv. 17-24 we learn also that THERE IS TEMPTATION FOR GOD'S CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE SPIRITUAL VICTORY. (PROJECTOR ON--- THERE IS TEMPTATION FOR GOD'S...) In times of great spiritual victory the children of God are often susceptible to spiritual attack by the forces of evil. Thus it is that Paul writes (GALATIANS 6:1) **"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."**

Abraham won a great physical and spiritual victory in his defeat of the northern alliance and rescue of Lot. His faith paid off. (JERUSALEM MELCHIZEDEK) Now on his way home he meets Melchizedek, whose name means "king of righteousness." We are told that this mysterious figure is king of Salem, which means "peace." Apparently Melchizedek was king of the city-state that was later to become Jerusalem. But v. 18 also tells us that he was priest of God Most High. This man is no follower of the Canaanite gods. He is no idol worshiper. He is a monotheist. In fact, he is a worshiper of the one true God. This priest-king blesses Abraham and blesses God. He also offers the tired warriors food and drink. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Abraham is greatly encouraged by this fellow believer. He responds by giving Melchizedek a tenth of all. In Hebrews #7 v. 4 this is further described as a tenth of the choicest spoils. It is not described as a tenth of Abraham's annual income. So I think that we need to be a bit cautious about seeing in this an instruction about a specific pattern of giving.

It is then that the king of Sodom tries to cut a deal with Abraham. This king had escaped from the northern invaders and now showed up on the scene after Abraham's overtime upset. In v. 21 he makes what might seem to be a generous offer: **"Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself."** Abraham can keep all of the material goods if the king can have the people back.

By ancient custom victorious leaders in these circumstances would have claimed the people as well as the goods. The king of Sodom was not in a good negotiating position. He had just been wiped out and was facing the prospect of death or enslavement.

Abraham could have decided to be magnanimous and accept the king of Sodom's offer. Certainly his daring raid had earned him the right to at least the spoils of the battle. After all, God had promised to prosper Abraham. Abraham could have regarded this as a blessing from the Lord.

But notice what he says in vv. 22-24: **"I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, 23 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.' 24 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."** I will take nothing. Just let the Amorites who came with me have their share.

Abraham wants to stand out as a man who prospers only as a result of God's blessing. His primary concern is to glorify God. He does not want any entanglements with the evil king of Sodom. He does not want any future problems with this symbol of evil who might somehow lay claim to Abraham's prosperity.

Abraham's physical needs have been more than met. The key to the fulfillment of God's promises is dependent upon having a son. Only God can intervene to provide that.

It was a moment of potential vulnerability for Abraham, a potential entanglement with the king of Sodom. But because Abraham had first met and fellowshiped with Melchizedek--- the king of peace and righteousness--- a type or symbol of the coming Christ, he was spiritually prepared.

That is what we need when we face temptation, whether it is in times of spiritual victory, or times of spiritual defeat. We need to be prepared. We need to have been in fellowship with other Christians and especially with the Lord. That is a lesson that some believers have difficulty learning. It is a lesson that Lot and Steve had difficulty learning. They thought that they could have a divided commitment and still succeed in life. They thought that they could be believers and still find fulfillment from pursuing the lusts of the eyes and the lusts of the flesh. They thought that they were smart enough to avoid the really big dangers that might come their way.

Some of the spiritual attacks that we Christians face are subtle. We need wisdom to handle them. That wisdom can come only from staying in close communication with the Lord. An essential part of that is spending time regularly in God's Word. Regular devotions are foundational to a daily walk with God. Fellowship with other Christians is also essential.

Ultimately the challenge comes down to the kind of person that we want to be. Do we want to be an Abraham--- a man who expected great things from God; who attempted great things for God? Do we want to be a person of faith? Are we willing to take risks to help a straying brother?

I told you last week a little about Dr. John Thomas, the medical doctor who was instrumental in bringing William Carey to India. I also pointed out that he had characteristics of Lot in that he owed many people money, and he dropped out of missionary work because he wanted to maintain a luxurious lifestyle that included having twelve servants around his house. He also misspent money designated for missionary work.

There was a British official in India by the name of George Udney who was a committed Christian man. Dr. Thomas had borrowed money from George Udney and had never repaid him, as was true with too many acquaintances of Dr. Thomas. But when George's brother died in a boating accident, Dr. Thomas sent a note of condolence to George. George Udney then took a risk and invited Dr. Thomas to visit him. He did. During the visit John Thomas admitted some of his wrongdoing. He expressed a desire for a more simple life. So George got him a job working in a smaller town away from Calcutta.

Through this contact Dr. Thomas reconnected with William Carey. This wayward Christian determined to set up a free medical clinic for Indians. He did that. He also went on to help William Carey with his Bible translation work. A committed Christian went out of his way to get an erring brother on track, and in the end the work of the missionaries benefited from it.

Perhaps some of us here have never really developed a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. The Bible says that our responsibility is to trust in Christ as our Savior. We need to recognize and admit that we are a sinner. We then need to personally invite Jesus to be our Savior and the leader of our life.

Perhaps if some of us here this morning were completely honest, we would have to admit that we are more like Lot than Abraham. We have been entangled by the world system around us. We have made unwise choices. Options that looked attractive in the beginning have proven to be less inviting as we have pursued them. Our motives were selfish and not God-centered. Perhaps we sense that we are being disciplined by the Lord. If that is the case, we need to remember that God is not out to do us in. He is a loving Father who disciplines us for our own good. He offers forgiveness. He want us to get back on track.

Perhaps some of us here have a friend or a relative who needs someone to help get them back on track spiritually. Maybe they have messed up more than once, and at our expense. Perhaps you are that person who needs to take a risk. Paul tells us in Galatians #6, **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”**