

Trusting God

"The Sovereign Lord"

Genesis 14:17-20

January 31, 2010
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This is a story about how God's election of Abram and Sarai worked. God elected Abram and Sarai. This means that God "chose" them to be his chosen people through whom God would eventually work on behalf of the entire world. The point of this choice of God or this "electing" of God is that the purpose of it and the reason for it remains hidden in the heart and the purposes of God.

We don't know why God chose Abram. He wasn't anything special. There wasn't anything in his life as we heard from these passages that made him really better than anyone else. The whole point is that when God chooses, when God elects people for God's purposes, it begins with God and comes to them. It isn't a matter of people seeking out God it's a matter of God seeking out people. This teaches us so much about who God is and the first thing it teaches us is that God is free.

God acts always in freedom according to his nature and God's nature is total goodness, love, righteousness, justice, and completeness. That's who God is and God acts freely according to that nature at all times. God is free to choose whomever he wants. We aren't that free.

Do we have a free will, by the way? The answer is, yes, but that free will is really quite limited. Let me put it this way. If you are so free why aren't you perfect yet? If we have free will then why can't we act "according to the better angels of our nature", as President Lincoln once put it. Because we're not completely free. We are bound by the habits of sin; either the sins of our own—our sins, or the sins of our neighbors.

Let me ask another question. If you're so free, if we have free will, can you fly? Could you jump off that balcony and fly to the chancel? No, you couldn't. Why? Because you aren't free from the laws of gravity either. You can only be in one place at one time, in one particular way. Our

freedom that God has given us is limited. Only God can set a human being free. God does set people free from sin—from what binds us by his great and incredible power. And this is what God’s choosing and election of Abram and Sarai is really all about. It’s about God setting people free.

Here’s the way it works. God chooses Abram through whom he will create a world-changing kingdom of people, eventually named as Israel, to be in a unique relationship with God—but not for their own sake. The choosing of Abram and Sarai is for the sake of the world. Let’s get this down to the practical level for us.

God’s gift of salvation is for all people, not just a few people. It’s for ALL people and God’s gift of salvation works by the principal of God choosing or God’s election by one person originally being chosen to be the means of God’s saving grace to others. We need to drill down underneath this for just a moment and look at what is going on when God chooses and when God elects Abram and Sarai for the sake of the world.

Here’s what’s going on. This powerful creator God who is so powerful that he has created the entire universe by the power of his speech—you remember Genesis 1 when God says, “Let there be light”—the light appears. You can’t do anything but respond with a “Yes” to God’s call. However you want to look at it that’s powerful speech. God calls the entire universe into existence. What power is there in God’s ability to create everything that exists? But then that world, according to Genesis, gets really messed up. We call it sin, okay? It’s messed up according to that story.

Here’s the good news (we see it early in the Bible). That God whose power has created the universe takes that incredible power and focuses it like a laser on the work of salvation. Of redemption pulling that messed up creation back into the place God wants it to be. The way God works, the way God focuses all of his creative power upon salvation is to choose some people through whom he’s going to work for the sake of the rest of the world.

Understanding this; understanding that God’s focus of salvation and that work on behalf of the world, works through people who are chosen to be the means of his saving grace to others, protects us from a serious error on this point; an error that we are chosen by God as some kind of special privilege. Those who get into this viewpoint, that we are chosen by God or elected by God because we’re something special, make a serious, non-Biblical error. These are the kinds of people who spend inordinate amounts

of time trying to figure out who's in and who's out. Let me paint it very bluntly. These are the people who think they know who's going to heaven and who's condemned to hell.

They spent all kinds of time on this. When God has said, "You need to leave that to me. The point is, if you are chosen by me, then you are a recipient of salvation, that's true, all of my creative power is turned to you to save you, to save your life, but the whole point is this: you are elect, you are chosen, you are saved to be the means of my grace reaching other people, and that is the point of being chosen." We are elected by God for salvation and for service. Whenever we lose sight of that, we lose sight of the Gospel.

But let's go back to the main point. God's saving power and words and work must always be mediated through one person to another. This is the way God has chosen to work. God could probably have done it another way but God hasn't done it that way. Let's bring this home. The purpose of God's choosing, or election is not privilege, it's not a rejection of others on the part of God, it is a choosing of us for the service of the world. Let's bring this all the way home.

If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, guess what—you're chosen by God. That didn't happen because you chose God, but because God chose you. You see, the church, God's people, wherever we are, is now that community of the elect—the chosen—chosen by God to be witnesses to his saving grace in the world. We are placed in this world for a specific purpose by God. We are chosen to serve. We are chosen to bring others into the saving power of God's saving actions in Jesus Christ. That is why we exist. That is why you exist. That's what Genesis 14 is all about.

I love this quote from Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, "God's election is the choosing one to be the channel of grace to his or her neighbor." Listen to what Jesus said in his Last Supper discourse from John. "You did not choose me but I chose you that you should go and bear fruit; and that that fruit should endure." Reflect on what Jesus said there and then let it cause all of us never to say, "I chose God. I chose to have faith." No, God has chosen you. You would never have been able to choose God if God had not previously already reached out to you. God, in absolute freedom and love has given you salvation. Receive it by faith but let no one else here say the following: "Whew got my ticket punched." No, let us instead say, "O Lord, how can I serve? What are you calling me to do? Make me a channel of your grace to everyone around me." Praise God who in freedom, wisdom, justice, fairness, holiness, righteousness—in a kind of love that wants to

reach out and is able to do so to the entire world—praise be to this God who chooses you, who chooses us, to be a part of that.

Let me put it this way. Wherever you go the Gospel goes. Wherever you are the Gospel is there because you are there. Apart from you, apart from me, apart from us, that Gospel does not go anywhere because this is the way God has chosen to work—through his people.

So, Genesis 14, let's come back to that. What does it teach us of being the chosen of God? It teaches us to navigate or negotiate what it means to live in a world that is still messed up. God isn't finished yet. How do we do that as God's chosen people? That's what Genesis 14 is all about and it gives us three ways to do it.

The first is: live how to be in the world but not of it. Have you ever heard that before? Do you know how hard that is? That is one of the toughest assignments you'll ever have. Abram is a sign and symbol of it. In the earlier part of Genesis 14 Abram is in the hill country being a herdsman. The kings for Mesopotamia come and they march down the Jordan River valley. It's going on; he knows about it and guess what? He doesn't get involved. He's in the world, it doesn't mean he doesn't care, but he knows what he's called by God to do. He knows what he's not called to do and what he's not called to do is get involved in everything that comes down the turnpike.

We need to learn what our boundaries are as God's people. That we are in the world for God, for Jesus Christ, for everything that goes on in the world, but we can't do everything. Therefore we need to learn how to pray and listen to God's leading as to where he does call us to be involved. But we are not going to be able to stop some things from happening. This doesn't mean be passive, it means be wise.

But second, and this is very important, realize that being in the world and not being of it; being God's elect in this world that is still messed up means: **as we are God's people chosen for the benefit of our neighbors that it begins at home.** Begin with those whom God has placed in our lives on a regular basis. This is what all these stories about Lot are about in these verses.

The truth is Lot is a problem! In the last chapter Lot has basically given up his identity as a herdsman. Herdsmen have always lived in the hill country and he has moved to the plains where the farmers lived. You can't

graze crops down where the farms are. They won't let you do it. It's as though Lot has said, "I'm not sure; I need to go find myself. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do. I think I'll try the plains for a while." He's giving up who he is. And then he gets caught up in the wickedness that's going on down there in the valley. We're going to learn more about that in future weeks but just know that it has been mentioned. He gets swept up in a war not of his own making and is captured and is about to lose his life. What does Abram do when he learns that this is going on? Abram's response is that he hasn't been involved until now, but now he's going to get involved.

Abram pulls together his household, his employees, his allies and he goes on a military campaign. He intervenes in a battle which was not his own from the beginning and he chases down those kings from Mesopotamia all the way 90 miles to the north and he engages in a fascinating military victory. He rescues Lot. His household, his family member has been swept up in the world around him that is messed up and he's about to lose his life. There is a time when God calls us to do the same and it begins at home.

Proverbs says, "Rescue those who are being led away unto death." Don't stand by and watch. Intervene! Be bold! Take risks! Go for it—especially if they are in your household. I agree with those who say we need to respect boundaries and we need to be responsible to others and not for them—that's all psychologically healthy but there is a time when people are dying because of their own destructive behavior and God calls you and me, if we know them, to participate and rescue. We're the elect. If we don't do it, who will?

This is why prayer is so important. Make a list of the people in your life. Here's how you do it. Go home this afternoon, sit down and write the name of everybody you can remember. For some of you that will be 300 people. You're a raging extrovert. We love you. For some of you that might mean 4 or 5 people. Who are the people whom God has placed in your path? Pray. You know why? God has chosen you to be in their life. Watch out that you don't intrude in the wrong kind of way, but you will also know when you may need to rescue someone who is being led away to death.

And then third—build bridges into the culture around us. This is what this fascinating story about Melchizedek and the King of Sodom is all about. There is a larger culture in which we live. It's amazing to me that as we negotiate what it means to be God's chosen people in a messed up world,

it's amazing to me that what happened 3,000 years ago in this story is just as important and relevant today as it was then.

The Canaanite culture was really messed up. They lived in fear of the gods that they thought ran things. They spent their whole lives seeking to manipulate those gods or trying to keep those gods from being angry with them. Furthermore, there were the standard wars and violence that went on every spring leading up to the fall that they were caught up in this particular year.

After Abram rescues Lot he brings everybody he has rescued—which is a lot more than Lot—it's everybody from that whole area. He brings them back, but then, even then, he stays out of the tide of the culture in which he's placed, but he does build bridges into it. Melchizedek comes out to meet Abram. Apparently, Melchizedek as the King of Salem, otherwise known as Jerusalem, is probably the most important king in the area and when he gives Abram a meal that means he's honoring Abram. Abram, instead of refusing the honor, receives it and then pays a kind of tribute to Melchizedek by giving him a tenth of the booty and then Melchizedek blesses Abram in a very fascinating way.

The highest god in the pantheon of Canaanite gods was the god, El Elion. The kings of the cities would be considered the priests of the high gods. Melchizedek blesses Abram with the name of El Elion. "The god whom we worship has surely blessed you—blessed you. The creator god is what we call him. He has blessed you." Abram knows in that instant that Melchizedek is simply doing the best he can with the little that he knows. He doesn't know that God is being revealed through Abram. He's going with what he does know. Instead of building a wall between him and Melchizedek by saying, "How dare you bless me with the name of a pagan god, that's the wrong god, I won't have anything to do with it. What are you, some kind of fool?" That would be building a wall. Instead, he receives the blessing because he knows Melchizedek is doing the best he can.

But he doesn't stop there. Abram then refuses to get involved with the King of Sodom and says, "I won't have anything to do with you. You can have your people back. I don't want any money from you and here's why." And he says this in front of Melchizedek and everyone else who was there. Because Yahweh who is El Elion, is the one who has blessed them. The names for God in this passage are the most important part of the whole story.

What Abram is doing is building a bridge into the cultures around him in order to proclaim the truth of the living God revealed in and through his relationship with Abram. He takes the name of God, Yahweh, and he places it upon the god whom they had been vaguely worshipping and says, “This is the true God. Yahweh is the real God. This is the same God who is really the creator of the heavens and the earth. He builds a bridge into their culture in order to allow God’s grace flow into the people around him.

That is the exact same thing that God has called us to do with the people around whom we live who live in honest, genuine, spiritual confusion. Who know very little about the God revealed ultimately through Jesus Christ, for whom YOU are the only Bible most of them are ever going to read—your life, your words, your actions. And they need to know. They need to know the way to God. Will you build a bridge or a wall?

When I think of this passage I think of the phrase from Archimedes who said, “If you give me a long enough lever and a solid place to stand, I alone could move the world.” Here’s the point. This church, this place, your life, because you are God’s chosen and elect, your relationship with God because you are placed wherever you are with your family, neighbors, co-workers, friends, is the place where God stands to move the world.