

WHEN YOU NEED A FRIEND

by Ray C. Stedman

To many, the Christian life appears prosaic, dull, uneventful. It is anything but that! If it appears to be so, it is almost certainly a life out of focus with true spirituality; in other words, a carnal Christian life. We have seen already that whenever Abram is found with a tent and an altar in the land of Canaan, he is a wonderful picture of a Christian living in the power and enjoyment of his pilgrim life, in this world but not of it, daily judging self by the cleansing of the cross. Lot, on the other hand, is a picture for us of the carnal Christian, flesh-governed, living for self. He has forsaken the place of fellowship with Christ. Lot left Abram up on the hillside and moved down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain. He was drawn by the allurements of the world and began to live for himself and for the pleasures of life. He pictures a Christian who is born again, but enmeshed in the enticements of the materialistic, commercialized world around.

Now, suddenly, a shattering experience breaks into Abram's quiet, pleasant existence. Life in the Spirit is like that. We are never permitted to rest beside the still waters very long, nor would we want to, for life there soon grows dull and uninteresting. In Genesis 14, we are introduced to the first war ever recorded in Scripture. It is a stirring account, vividly contrasting the blustering armies of earth with the quiet, overcoming power of faith. We get our first glimpse of these earthly armies in the first three verses.

In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal the king of Goiim, these kings made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). And all these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). (Gen. 14:1-3 {RSV})

The spade of the archaeologist has amply verified the historic existence of the kings named here. Long before the rise of the Babylonian Empire, these kings made a military foray into the land of Canaan, perhaps to defend their trade routes with Egypt, or to subdue the warlike tribes of the area. The account here could have been taken from the daily newspaper of Sodom; the city was aware of the threat to its welfare and liberties, and was much alarmed.

As the account progresses, we learn that Chedorlaomer is the chief of the invading kings. Historically, he is identified as the Elamite dictator, from the land east of Persia, which is now known as West Pakistan. He came with his satellite kings against the confederacy of five kings from the cities of the plain.

His coming in this manner is representative of the world's power to harass and enslave Christians. But more than one type is required to portray the whole aspect of the enmity of the world. Sodom, for instance, is a picture of the world in its lust for sensual pleasures. In contrast to this, this invasion from the east is a portrayal of the world in its naked power to enslave and tyrannize and take away the physical liberties of man.

These forces are often found opposed in history. Our own beloved nation of America is already enslaved to the forces of materialism, greed, and sex. These forces are dominant throughout our national life. But it is also threatened by an outside force, Communism, which ruthlessly seeks to destroy our physical liberties and reduce the nation to literal slavery. Here are two differing forces, yet both arise out of the fallen nature of man. One is a desire for material gain, economic advancement, luxury, ease, and sensual pleasure. The other is sheer naked tyranny, threatening our very physical existence.

This is exactly what confronted the cities of the plain, and Lot especially, as he now dwelt in Sodom. Lot is already enmeshed in the blind commercialism of Sodom, but has kept himself free from the sexual degradation of the place. Now he is threatened by a circumstance that would deprive him of his basic liberties.

In terms of our experience today, this might be some form of legalism, or perhaps some vicious habit such as

alcoholism or self-abuse. It might even be a sickness that renders one a bedridden invalid -- although, all such sickness is certainly not of this nature. Whatever may be the difficulty, it is some outward circumstance that threatens physical or spiritual liberty. Here is Lot, a carnal Christian, caught between the jaws of vice -- the materialism of Sodom and the tyranny of Chedorlaomer.

Verses 5-7 reveal the apparent invincibility of this enemy:

In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and subdued the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their Mount Seir as far as El-paran on the border of the wilderness; then they turned back and came to Enmishpat (that is, Kadesh), and subdued all the country of the Amelikites, and also the Amorites who dwelt in Hazazon-tamar. {Gen 14:5-7 RSV}

Rephaim and Zuzim were families of giants. It is from this group, later in Israel's history, that Goliath came, whom David decapitated with his own sword. These were men eight to ten feet tall, a mighty race who were greatly feared by the people around them. Yet the invading kings swept even these giants before them.

The territory mentioned here is quite extensive, covering from the north and west of the Sea of Galilee, down the Jordan Valley, all the way south to the Red Sea. Here, then, was an enemy, seemingly invincible, relentless, unstoppable, striking fear into every heart as they carried all before them.

At this point we have the first mention of Lot in the story. If it were not for him, we would know nothing at all of these events, because the Bible never takes any cognizance of human history except as it relates to the peoples of God.

Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim with Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar, four kings against five. 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 mountain. So the enemy took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way; they also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed. (Gen. 14:8-12 {RSV})

It is specifically called to our attention that in the valley of the Dead Sea there were many tar or bitumen pits, filled with natural asphalt. If you have visited the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles you will know just what is described here. These open pits of asphalt would be covered over by the desert sand as the wind blew across them and they would appear like the surrounding ground. But anyone venturing into such a pit would be held by the tar and his body would be imprisoned for centuries. The bones of dinosaurs and other beasts have been found in the La Brea Tar Pits, having been encased in tar for many centuries. Evidently the five kings of the confederacy felt that this area would be the best place for battle, as the pits would be a natural defense. But instead, they turned out to be a trap. As the tide of battle turned against them, they fled to the mountains in head-long haste, and many of them, falling into the pits of tar, were destroyed. In the ensuing capture of Sodom, Lot and his family and all his goods were carried away by the invading army.

Perhaps you have had an experience of falling into just such a circumstance as this. You have tried to fight back but nothing seems to avail. The very defenses upon which you rely become threats against you. You have the choice of capture or falling into the slime pits, one or the other. And perhaps, as Lot, you have found yourself captured against your will by some evil habit or power that enslaves you.

Then notice what happens! The Holy Spirit shifts the scene to Abram up on the mountainside, so that we might see the overcoming power of faith. All hope for Lot now lies in Abram's hand:

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. {Gen 14:13 RSV}

A messenger comes to Abram, doubtless sent by Lot. At the last moment before his capture, he must have hurriedly sent this man out to slip through the lines and find his way to Abram. It is likely that he barely escaped from the clutches of the enemy with his life. He finds Abram in Hebron, the place of fellowship. With him are three men who are his allies.

Mamre, as we have noted before, means "fatness or richness." *Eshcol* means "a group or bunch," and *Aner* means "an exile, one who withdraws himself." Taking these three names together, I see a prayer meeting here! Here, symbolically, is a group of people, living in the richness of fellowship with Christ, who have withdrawn themselves from the ordinary demands of life for a specific purpose. This is exactly what our Lord bids us do, in Matthew 6:6a: "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father ..."

Abram, the Hebrew, is leading the meeting. Since this is the only place in Scripture where Abram is called a Hebrew, it must have some special significance. The word *Hebrew* means "passenger," or "pilgrim." The Spirit of God would highlight for us the character of the ones to whom Lot looks for rescue. They are led by the man who holds lightly the things of earth, the man of the pilgrim life.

To this band on the hillside comes the message that Lot is in trouble. When Peter, in the New Testament account, was put in prison, we are told that the church prayed for him without ceasing. As a result, the doors of that prison were flung back, the iron gates were opened, the shackles fell off and Peter was led out by an angel. When a child of God through ignorance or selfish folly has fallen into something that enslaves and grips and holds him, the only answer is the believing prayer of the people of God. That is what we have here.

Now let's see how victory is achieved:

When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. And he divided his forces around them by night, he and his servants, and routed them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. (Gen. 14:14-15 {RSV})

Here is the key to victory -- three hundred and eighteen men, trained for warfare! This was not his entire battle force. There were other men belonging to Abram's allies, but this is the hard core of trained, disciplined men he relied upon to lead his little army into battle. He had only three hundred and eighteen, but that was all he needed! It might have seemed a pitiful handful beside the vast armies of those four kings who had come out of the ancient east, sweeping everything before them as they came. But if we will learn the lesson taught us here, and all through Scripture, we need never be discouraged by overwhelming numbers again. The lesson is simply this: God's victories are never won by force of numbers! Never! "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts," (Zech. 4:6b {RSV}).

I tell you, if three hundred and eighteen people were to gather to pray, that would be a red letter day indeed. And if those three hundred and eighteen people knew how to pray, were trained in the warfare of prayer, they would shake the powers of evil around the world! Three hundred and eighteen would put to rout all the vast armies of the enemy.

Our world is threatened by the tremendous power of Communism, and many of our brothers around the world are grievously threatened by fear if they stand firm in their faith. I fully believe God is showing us that the whole secret of the defeat of this terrible enemy will lie in a relative handful of people, who here and there will faithfully get together and recognize that victory does not lie in the might of weapons, of nuclear missiles, or diplomacy, but in men and women of faith who are pilgrims and strangers here in this world, and who will regularly separate themselves from the demands of life and seek the mind and face of God concerning this evil. Then the forces of tyranny will be lifted in many places, and men and women who are now enslaved by the pitiless, ruthless chains of Communism will be set free.

Note the careful strategy Abram employed. We are told he divided his forces by night. The march of Abram and his tiny band is one of the most remarkable forced marches in history. They traveled the whole length of the Jordan River, coming upon the enemy considerably north of the Sea of Galilee. As was the custom with

armies of that day, when the pagan invaders had withdrawn to a place they considered safe, they made camp for several days and indulged in a time of carousing and reveling in celebration of their victory. It was at such a time and place that Abram and his allies found them, and during the night, they divided their forces and surrounded the drunken camp. Abram sent one part of his army one way and one the other, one group perhaps with spears and the other with swords for close combat. At a signal, they sprang upon the surprised host and there was a general rout and a great victory.

This division of Abram's forces into a two pronged attack is suggestive of the Christian's weapons in spiritual warfare. In Ephesians 6, we are reminded that we possess two effective weapons -- the Word and prayer.

And take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication ... for all the saints. {cf, Eph 6:17-18 RSV}

Many a Lot has been delivered from the slavery which bound him by the helpful counsel of the Word of God given through some fellow-believer, and the prayers of the men and women of God who have prayed for him. Thus Abram divided his forces, and using a twofold approach, he set the enemy to flight.

Notice yet a third incident. Abram pursued them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. *Hobah* means "hidden," and therefore signifies a complete victory, even to the point of the enemy hiding himself to escape. Abram never let up. He kept on till the forces against him were demoralized. He pressed his advantage to the utmost. He did not quit fighting, he did not stop praying, at the first little break, but pressed on through until he won a great and tremendous victory. In Verse 16, we see the extent of the victory Abram won:

Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his goods, and the women and the people. {Gen 14:16 RSV}

Now, in all this, the Holy Spirit would drive one thing home to our hearts. We do not lead our Christian lives in isolated seclusion -- we are members one of another, and in circumstances of this nature, one Christian can often be the means of deliverance to a weaker brother. There was nothing Abram could do to deliver Lot from Sodom. Sodom represented an inward choice in the heart of this man. Lot chose to live in the materialistic, sensualized atmosphere of Sodom. If a child of God chooses to be materialistic, sensual, commercial, greedy for things of the world, not much can be done for him. Only Lot could take himself out of Sodom. But from this circumstance that threatened Lot's very life and liberty, Abram's resources were amply sufficient.

James 5:16b {RSV} tells us, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects." There is a Chinese translation of that verse which is excellent: "The earnest, hot-hearted prayer of a righteous man releases great power." That is certainly the case in this incident.

"The prayer of faith," we are told in the same chapter of James, Verse 15, "will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up;" {Jas 5:15a RSV}. Many have been puzzled by this verse, but if we read the context, we see clearly that the affliction here is one that has come because a child of God has permitted himself to be involved in deliberate sin. Such a one is to call the elders of the church together and confess his faults, and then the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord shall raise him up again, and he will be delivered from the thing that has held him captive. It is a wonderful experience, this power of prayer for someone else.

The history of the church is replete with instances of such deliverances through faithful prayer. Recently, a wise and experienced missionary leader, speaking to a group of us on the subject of prayer, took up this matter of some overwhelming sin that so grips the heart as to enslave the life and frustrate all activity for God. He gave some very wise words of advice. "Perhaps some younger Christian," he said, "may find himself in such a circumstance, and the thing he is doing is so shameful that he cannot bring himself to confess it publicly; then let him seek out some older man of God, someone he can trust, and lay the whole matter before him and ask him to pray concerning this." It is wise counsel, indeed. When Lot could not possibly help himself, Abram, separated in heart from the Sodom-like attitudes that rendered Lot so powerless, was able to lay hold of God and effect a great and mighty deliverance.

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