

Shield and Reward

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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The fifteenth chapter of Genesis begins with these words. "After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.'" The Lord promised Abraham that He would be his "shield and his exceedingly great reward." What did He mean by that? What does this have to do with us? I hope by the conclusion of our study today that each one of us will have embraced that promise as sons and daughters of Abraham by faith, and know that He is our shield and reward.

For the sake of convenience, long ago chapters and verses were inserted into the Bible. The prevailing opinion is that Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (he died in 1228 AD) is the one who contributed the chapter divisions in the Scriptures. Chapters were further divided into verses by Robert Stephens in 1551. It does make it nice to be able to find specific scriptures more easily. But sometimes a chapter division can separate thoughts that really should be seen as being united. Such is the case with the chapter division between chapters 14 and 15 of Genesis. When the verse begins, "after these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward,'" we really have to know what "these things" were in order to appreciate the significance of God's words to Abram.

That leads us to review the story presented earlier. Note that Abram was given that name by his parents and retained it until he was 99 when God changed his name from "Abram," meaning "father of heights," to "Abraham," meaning "father of a multitude," the name by which we know him today. In chapter 12 of Genesis we find that he was called by God to leave his comfortable surroundings in Ur of the Chaldees and be a pilgrim in a country occupied by the Canaanites. Traveling with him, along with many servants, was his nephew Lot. In chapter 13 we see that as their flocks became so large, the two had separated, with Lot choosing the fertile plain of the Jordan and eventually settling in the city of Sodom. His unwise choice in that regard would be costly in a couple of ways. It never pays to disregard the counsel of the Lord, Who had made it plain that "country living" was the better environment to live in.

Because of this, Lot was a resident in the city of Sodom when the story unfolded in chapter 14 took place. It's the events of this chapter that form the "these things" which provide the context of God's promise to Abraham in chapter 15. What exactly happened in chapter 14? We find that some of the local kings had joined together to form a confederacy which bullied their neighbors. Of these kings, Chedorlaomer, king of Elam took the lead. For twelve years those who had been subjugated by his power were content to divvy up the annual price of peace, the tribute money.

But then in the thirteenth year they decided enough was enough and didn't forward on the required treasure.

So it was in the next year, the 14th year that Chedorlaomer and his partners came against the hold-outs; “the Rephaim in Asteroth Karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh Kiriathaim, and the Horites in their mountain of Seir, as far as El Paran, which is by the wilderness.” Genesis 14:5, 6. Then other kings got into the battle against Chedorlaomer. “And the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is Zoar) went out and joined together in the battle in the Valley of Siddim against Chedorlaomer king of Elam” and his friends. Genesis 14:8, 9.

It did not go well for the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and their side. The enemy conquered them and “they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods and departed.” Genesis 14:11, 12. It was at this point that someone who had escaped the sword and the shackles of Chedorlaomer reported to Abram what had happened.

What would Abram, the man of God, do? Would he raise his righteous finger and wag it solemnly toward his nephew and say, “I told you so! That's what you get for disobeying the Lord”? Would he shake his gray head in sadness and say, “This is tragic news, but as a man of faith I'm not obliged to actually do anything about it. War activities are not really what I'm about. I wish you well, Lot!”

What does the Bible say? “Now when Abram heard that his brother (that's interesting!) was taken captive, he armed three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people.” Genesis 14:14-16. Notice in this part of the narrative that the one in need, technically his nephew Lot, is identified as his “brother.” But wasn't Lot really Abram's nephew? Yes, but in this circumstance of need, he is spoken of as being his brother.

This is the attitude that Cain lacked when he angrily retorted to the Lord's question, “Am I my brother's keeper?” This is the way of thinking that the lawyer needed who asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” The story that Jesus told about the Good Samaritan makes it clear that it is the one in need, of course! The fact that the younger Lot was technically his nephew is lost in the moment when he has been captured and taken away. He has become Abram's “brother” at that point, and Abram is indeed “his brother's keeper.” We might ask the question, “Who is my brother?”

It is interesting to note that the 318 servants in Abram's household are described as being “trained” servants. In fact the word “servants” isn't really there. These were “trained ones” who served Abram. In what were they trained, We might ask? Obviously they had been instructed in those household duties that accompanied the nomadic life led by Abram. But also, from the context, it is clear that they were trained in defense and warfare. Though he was the “man of

faith," Abram did all he could to be ready to fight the enemy. He trained his servants "for such a time as this."

Nor was Abram a stranger to strategy. "He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them." This was a move later shadowed by Gideon, with a similar number of troops. God blessed the efforts of Abram and he recovered all the booty taken by the armies of Chedorlaomer and brought them back safely. Then, when given the opportunity to retain some of the spoils, Abram graciously refused, taking only as much as to pay a tithe to Melchizedek, king of Salem. Everyone else, the ones who had gone with him, he freely gave the chance to profit from the successful raid.

Having completed his mission successfully, the weary Abram retired to his tent. It is at this point that our verse appears. "After these things (the attack against Chedorlaomer and his return) the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.'" We'll consider first God's promise to be his shield.

Why did God say that He would be his "shield"? Try to put yourself back in that time period, about 3800 years ago. There was no "border patrol." There were no sheriffs, no police. There were no marines or army troops. In the type of life that Abram lived, he (at least from the human point of view) was pretty much on his own. His portable tent was a rather thin protection against the sword of an intruder. Later, his descendants would live in walled towns; various kings of Israel would multiply horses and chariots for defense, but these things were not there for Abram. Nor were they needed. When Israel left Egypt four centuries later, God gave specific counsel that they should not gather to themselves chariots and horses, because by so doing they would come to depend on the arm of flesh rather than the arm of the Almighty.

Said Moses in his farewell speech, "He (the future king over Israel) shall not multiply horses for himself." Deuteronomy 17:16. Sang David, "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the LORD our God." Psalm 20:7. It was when Israel began to assemble the weapons of war that trust in their divine Deliverer waned.

As Abram began to reflect on the events that took place, Satan pressed the thought into his mind, "What have I done! Now Chedorlaomer will come back in reprisal against me with an even greater army. What will I do then?" It was at this time that God answered his unspoken question by promising him, "I am your shield." It was good that Abram had trained his servants, but he needed to be reminded that God was the One Who brought him victory.

We need that same lesson today. We are Abraham's children by faith. God's promise is as valid to us as it was to him. We need the Lord to be our Shield. We live in a very wicked and dangerous world. Of course it's wise to take simple precautions. We need locks on our doors; fences around our property. It's a shame, and a sad commentary on our society that in some places proprietors and homeowners have to put bars on their windows and doors for protection against thieves and vandals. It's as if we've put ourselves in prison rather than the criminals.

But ultimately we need to trust God for protection. This “shield” that God wants to provide us will protect us. I know that some of you have had dramatic experiences in which you have come to know personally the protection of the Lord. There have been a couple of times when I know that my life has been miraculously spared through divine intervention. What are we told about the ratio of those visible episodes, those situations of which we are aware, and those we can't see, those of which we have no knowledge? We are told that the invisible rescues outnumber the visible ones by 1,000 to 1. Someday when we meet our guarding angels, they will have much to share with us concerning these times of salvation of which we were unaware!

Savor every word of this Bible promise: “The angel of the LORD encamps (by the way, that's a military term; it means to bivouac. It doesn't mean recreational camping at Yosemite) all around (this means being totally surrounded with no gaps) those who fear Him (there's special, additional protection given to the one who makes a commitment to Christ), and delivers them.” Psalm 34:7. You may have a note in your Bible like I do that suggests that the word “angel” could be capitalized. The angel who smote the armies of Sennacherib, 185,000 strong, is there for our protection as well. The same angelic hosts encamped around the hills of Dothan when the Syrian forces threatened Elisha are there for us too. One morning when he was frightened by the army of the enemy, the prophet prayed for his servant and was given the ability to see this angelic militia.

That's why it's important to pray each day for divine protection. When you get in your car, before you turn the key, ask the Lord for His presence and protection. He will be your Shield. We're told that the Lord “put the fear” in the enemies of His people, so that they didn't touch His anointed ones. Moses informed the people of God, just before they entered Canaan, “This day I will begin to put the dread of fear of you upon the nations under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you.” Deuteronomy 2:25. “No man shall be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will put the dread of you and the fear of you upon all the land where you tread, just as He has said to you.” Deuteronomy 11:25.

We need His protection in the things of everyday life, and even more in our spiritual battles. This “shield” will give us victory over the enemy whose mission it is to destroy us. There is a very real devil who delights in separating God's children from Him. He revels in presenting allurements and temptations to draw our minds from our Father in heaven. It is his goal to turn our minds away from the great sacrifice made in our behalf and get us to focus on these things of this passing existence, this world. It is his greatest desire to get us to forget that Jesus is coming soon, and that we are but pilgrims here. We desperately need the shield of faith that God can give to us. Paul advised that we should, “above all take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.” Ephesians 6:16. Moses brought to a close his farewell speech with these insightful words. “Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, the shield of your help and the sword of your majesty! Your enemies shall submit to you, and you shall tread down their high places.” Deuteronomy 33:29. In both the physical world and the spiritual realms God says to us, “I will be your Shield.”

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.’” We've thought about the “shield.” What about the reward? Remember that when Abram had pursued the forces of Chedorlaomer and recovered all the spoils, upon his return he graciously refused to take for himself any of the booty. What kind of thinking did Satan press upon his mind after that? The devil forced upon Abram what today we would call “buyer's remorse.” You know what that is don't you? That refers to the regret a person has after making a deal. We begin to think of all the other options or choices we might have made, by which we could have come out of the negotiation with a better bargain.

People today are wishing they had invested in gold ten years ago. “If only I had taken that turn in the road!” Five years ago people were wishing that they had bought real estate a few years before that. Now they are wishing they had not bought that house in 2006 when the market peaked. Buyer's remorse. We've all suffered from it. Abram was being tempted by Satan to indulge in a strong case of it back then. Wasn't the booty taken from Chedorlaomer rightfully his? Didn't he risk his own life and limb to recover his “brother” Lot? Wasn't he entitled to receive the spoils of that victory? Why had he been so quick to refuse? Think of all the good he could have done with that treasure! Oh, if he could only go back and make another decision!

“After these things,” the Lord said to Abram, “I am your exceedingly great reward.” It was as if the Lord said to him, “Abram, don't worry about the trinkets that came from the battle. Don't be concerned about the gold and the garments that might have been yours. You have something much better. You have something much more lasting. You have Me. I am your Reward; your exceedingly great Reward.” Abram was wealthy in this world's goods, and he would grow even more wealthy as time went on. But his real wealth was not in camels and sheep; in servants or gold. It was in his relationship with God; his personal acquaintanceship with the Almighty. That was worth more than whatever Chedorlaomer had.

The Lord spoke through his prophet Jeremiah with these words: “‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches. But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and know Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,’ says the LORD.” Jeremiah 9:23, 24. The “reward” for Abram was in knowing God, the One Who has built the “city with foundations,” the one toward which Abram looked by faith.

Do these words have meaning for us today? Is He our “exceedingly great Reward”? Yes, absolutely! The devil is constantly trying to turn our eyes to the things of this earth. He's trying to make it seem that it's too much of a sacrifice to be a Christian, a follower of the One Who said, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” Satan wants us to think that it's too costly a cross to bear by following in the footsteps of the One Who testified, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Peter said to Jesus, “‘See, we have left all and followed You.’” So Jesus answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a

hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life.” Mark 10:28-30.

Let the Christian know that God is mindful of our physical needs. He who watches the sparrows and counts the hairs of our heads knows all about our circumstances. He has promised to take care of us, if we will trust Him. Have you committed your life to Christ? Have you followed Him in all things? Have you been faithful to Him in returning an honest tithe and generous offerings? Then rest assured that He will not leave His children without the necessities of life. The God who fed Elijah by ravens at the brook Cherith has lost none of His power nor compassion.

He is your “exceedingly great reward,” both in the things of this life and the wonderful hereafter. The reward of the saints! Who can measure it! To step on that cloud and breathe the exhilarating air of eternal life, of immortality! To stand on the sea of glass and receive by Christ's own hand a golden crown prepared especially for you as you wait to pass through gates of pearl into the eternal city! To enjoy the company of saints and angels and inhabitants of the worlds scattered throughout God's great universe; what a privilege! Who can calculate it?

But even the streets of gold and the delicious fruit from the tree of life can't compare with the rapture of being with Jesus! What the Lord promised Abram was exactly true. “I am your exceedingly great Reward.” Take a closer look at the verse that ends Genesis 14. Abram said, I'm not going to take anything for myself, “except only what the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who went with me; Aner, Escol, and Mamre; let them take their portion.” Genesis 14:24. The word “portion” is significant. It refers to a person's “share,” or “inheritance.” In a psalm that reflects closely the thoughts of Genesis 15:1 David writes, “I cried out to You, O LORD: I said, 'You are my refuge (similar to the “shield”), my portion (or reward, inheritance) in the land of the living.’” Psalm 142:5.

The Bible makes it clear that our “portion,” our “inheritance” awaits us in the home above. Speaking of the Creator God, in contrast to worthless idols, we read, “The Portion of Jacob is not like them, for He is the Maker of all things, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; The LORD of hosts is His name.” Jeremiah 10:16. The Lord is my Portion, or inheritance, or exceedingly great Reward, is a theme that runs through the entire Bible. Walking through the rubble of a smoking and fallen Jerusalem Jeremiah confessed, “Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'Therefore I hope in Him.’” Lamentations 3:22, 23.

Fret not because of the gain of evil doers. I heard this week that a certain baseball pitcher for the New York Yankees receives \$161,000,000 for seven years of playing a game. Don't be jealous of those who wallow in the wealth of this life. Don't squirm over decisions that lightened your wallet in the past. Everything here is temporary. Rejoice that you know Him, and that He is your Portion, your exceedingly great reward.

The book of Revelation closes with the promise, “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with me, to give to everyone according to his work.” Revelation 22:12. In the light of our study

today, this is an inevitable conclusion. It would make sense that His reward would be with Him, for He Himself is our Reward. Jesus and the Reward cannot be separated. Oh, to look into His glorious eyes and sense the loving acceptance of the Creator God! To hear the voice that John described as sounding like “many waters” say, “Well done!” To touch the scars in His forehead and hands and know that because of His great love He ransomed us from certain destruction, and now we will be able to enjoy the life that He has always planned forever and forever!

The words were spoken long ago, but they ring true and are rich in meaning for us today, who are on the outskirts of the heavenly Canaan. “Do not be afraid, I am your Shield, your exceedingly great reward.”