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Two Kings, Two Responses (Genesis 14:14-24)

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If there is one thing I love about studying the life of Abraham, it is to see how God's dealings with Abraham illustrate so clearly His dealings with believers in every age. Abraham lived nearly four thousand years ago, in a very different historical and cultural setting than ourselves; yet the events of his life are as instructive today as ever before in what they teach us about the life of faith. We learn much here about how God grows the faith of His servants by subjecting their faith to trials of various sorts. In this way, God prevents his servants from becoming spiritually complacent or self-reliant-- by overwhelming them with difficulties that make them feel their own weakness and helplessness. Thereby, he purifies their faith and makes it fruitful as adversity causes them to cling to the Lord for help. Is that not what we see God doing with Abraham in chapters 12 to 14 of Genesis? From the moment he leaves Haran in Mesopotamia, we see God continually subjecting Abraham's faith to a process of testing, so that it might produce fruit. First, God tests Abraham's faith by sending a famine on the land of Canaan, and when Abraham fails that test by dishonoring God in Egypt, God overrules his failure by producing in him the fruit of repentance and humility. Then, when God tests Abraham's faith again by means of a conflict that arises between his herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen, he produces in him a spirit of generosity toward his nephew. Then, when God tests Abraham's faith once again by calling him to pursue a foreign army in order to rescue his nephew Lot from captivity, he produces in Abraham a spirit of courage and boldness. Step by step, we see God forming in Abraham a Christ-like character through trials. He transforms him from the worrier of chapter 12, whose fear for his own safety leads him to act deceitfully, to the well-doer of chapter 13, who puts his nephew's interests ahead of his own, to the warrior of chapter 14, who exhibits a spirit of Christ-like courage as he engages in battle with the forces of evil to save his nephew from slavery.

Now, as we come to the end of chapter 14, we see another test that Abraham must face, by means of which God produces in him another fruit-- the fruit of worship. Abraham, the one-time worrier and well-doer and warrior, now becomes Abraham the worshipper. Of course, Abraham has worshipped the Lord before now; but now his worship takes on a new dimension as he consciously approaches God through the ministrations of a priest that God sends him. This priest, sent at a crucial moment in Abraham's life, serves as an agent of divine

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

blessing to him, and in so doing, he serves as a foreshadowing type of our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want us to consider three things this morning about the mysterious encounter that took place between Abraham and this priest, whose name was Melchizedek. First, I want us to consider the temptation that Abraham faced after winning a tremendous victory in battle over the Mesopotamian king, Chedorlaomer. Second, I want us to consider the mercy that God sent to Abraham at that moment in the form of a person-- person who came to him as an agent of divine blessing. Third, I want us to consider Abraham's response to the two kings who approached him.

I. The Temptation Abraham Faced-- Let's begin by looking at the temptation that Abraham faced after his victory in battle. That temptation was twofold. First, there was the temptation to become puffed up with pride after carrying out successfully a brilliant plan of attack against formidable enemies. Abraham's victory here was nothing short of amazing, for his brave band of commandos was far outnumbered by the army of Chedorlaomer. Abraham only had 381 men, whereas Chedorlaomer had the combined fighting force of four large cities. Abraham's troops triumphed, therefore, not through strength of numbers, but through strength of courage and through the genius of their military strategy. By attacking at night under cover of darkness and from different directions all at once, they sent Chedorlaomer's army into a panic, so that they fled, leaving everything behind them.

The triumph was more spectacular than anyone could have hoped, for everything that had been stolen was recovered. We read in verse 16, "So he (Abraham) brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people." At such a moment, it would have been so easy for Abraham to fall into an attitude of pride. He could easily have said to himself, "What a brilliant strategist I am! How cunning! How invincible! People had better be careful not to mess with me, for I am Abraham the mighty, the fearsome warrior of God!" This was a dangerous moment spiritually in the life of Abraham, for he could so easily have exalted himself before the Lord, and set himself up for a terrible fall. There was a second temptation that Abraham faced at this moment, however, very closely related to the first. If on the one hand, he was tempted to pride; on the other, he was tempted to view this moment of triumph as an opportunity for selfish gain. Were Abraham a power-hungry man, he could have used his newfound prestige to seek his own personal enrichment and worldly advancement. He could have been seduced by the cheers of the crowd and set his heart on those things that the flesh desires-- money, popularity, and worldly influence. How so? Keep in mind that at this moment, Abraham was being viewed as a hero by the Canaanites. Were Abraham an ambitious man, he could have exploited the

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

occasion by insisting on continuing honor and tribute for himself. But he chose not to, by the grace of God. He chose to resist the temptation to self-adulation, on the one hand, and self-promotion, on other, because God at this moment intervened in his life to remind him of his identity in the Lord and the true source of his blessedness.

That brings us to the second point in our outline-- the mercy that Abraham was sent.

II. The Mercy Abraham Was Sent-- That mercy came to him in the form of a person with a most unusual name, Melchizedek. Melchizedek is described in verse 18 as the "king of Salem." In that day, the land of Canaan had a number of settlements which were essentially self-governing communities that scholars refer to as "city-states." In each of these communities, a leader would emerge whom the people would declare to be their ruler or king. Melchizedek was one of those leaders. The city he ruled was named Salem, and Salem is an ancient Canaanite word meaning "peace." It's equivalent to the Hebrew word "shalom." This city of Salem was located near the valley of Shaveh where Abraham went after defeating the army of Chedorlaomer. According to Josephus, this valley was located about a quarter mile from the city of Jerusalem; and both the linguistic and biblical evidence suggests that Salem was in fact the ancient name for Jerusalem.

The linguistic evidence is fascinating. The oldest Middle Eastern language of which we have any written record is called Akkadian. In ancient Akkadian, the name for Jerusalem was "Uru Shalimmim." "Uru" means city, and "shalimim" means peace. This was later transformed in the Canaanite language to "uru salem," and then in Hebrew to "Jerusalem." So the name Jerusalem literally means "the city of peace."

Psalm 76 confirms the fact that Salem was another name for Jerusalem. In the opening verses of that psalm, we read, "In Judah God is known; His name is great in Israel. In Salem also is His tabernacle, and His dwelling place in Zion." Here we have unmistakable confirmation of the fact that Salem and Jerusalem are the same city, and that leads us to a fascinating conclusion. In the time of Abraham, there was already dwelling in what would become the city of Jerusalem a ruler name Melchizedek who was a forerunner of the Davidic kings who would rule there. This Melchizedek is a fascinating figure, because he was not a pagan idolater like the other kings of Canaan, but a worshipper of the one true and living God. That is evident from what he does for Abraham. We read in verse 18 and 19, "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.'"

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Now, we are struck with amazement by the prayer this man, for it is not at all what we would expect to hear from one of the Canaanite kings. This tells us something very important about God's work of grace in the ancient world. Although in general, the peoples of the ancient world were given over to idolatry, yet God in His sovereign freedom preserved for Himself certain favored individuals who possessed a knowledge of the true God and who, by God's grace alone, served and worshipped the true God in truth. Melchizedek was one such individual, for he is described here as "a priest of God Most High." Whether or not there were others like him in the ancient world, we do not know, but what this shows us is that the knowledge of the true and living God, which was preserved on the ark by Noah and his sons and later disseminated throughout the world when the nations were divided at Babel, had not entirely disappeared from the earth by the time of Abraham. There were still living certain individuals like Melchizedek who knew God truly and who acted as intercessors on behalf of their fellow men. Of course, it is possible that Melchizedek became a worshipper of God through Abraham's witness, since Abraham had been living in Canaan for some time now. What is clear is that he was a true worshipper, for Abraham recognized as such. His presence in Canaan at this time testifies to God's sovereign freedom in calling men into a saving relationship with Himself.

When Melchizedek learned of Abraham's victory over Chedorlaomer, he went to greet him in the Valley of Shaveh bearing gifts and eager to pronounce a blessing on him. Let's consider the significance of these gifts and the blessing that was pronounced.

A. The Gifts-- The gifts he brought Abraham were very simple gifts. He did not shower on him gold and silver and other precious metals. He did not give him sheep and oxen and donkeys and household servants such as Pharaoh had given to him in Egypt. He brought him simply bread and wine. What was the significance of that gift? First, it was an expression of good will and generosity. There were no strings attached to this gift. Melchizedek was seeking nothing in return. His only desire was to refresh Abraham after his exhausting warfare. He was saying to him, "Welcome back, brave warrior! Be refreshed and strengthened with food and drink." Second, the bread and wine were an expression of honor, since they were the type of gift that might be given to a king, to honor him. When Jesse sent his son David to minister to King Saul in his palace, we read that "he took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent them by his son David to Saul" (v. 20). Jesse honored King Saul with these gifts, and so this bread and wine from Melchizedek honored Abraham, and recognized his position of authority in Canaan.

The thing to note is that about these gifts is that they were not extravagant in the least. They were not intended to seduce Abraham by

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

appealing to his greed. They were intended to strengthen Abraham by giving him basic food items that would invigorate and refresh him.

B. The Blessing-- In addition to giving Abraham gifts, Melchizedek also pronounced on him a blessing. The notable things about this blessing is that it pointed to God as the Giver of victory. In blessing Abraham, Melchizedek made it very clear that Abraham's triumph was owing, not to his own wisdom, strength, or ability, but to the blessing of God alone. Abraham succeeded in his efforts because God, who possesses sovereign ownership over all creation, had chosen to deliver his enemies into his hand. Had it not been for the Lord's blessing, Abraham would have failed miserably to achieve his goal. It was God and God alone who deserved all the credit for his success, for He had blessed Abraham and was therefore worthy to be blessed. He alone was worthy to be praised.

Now why were these gifts of bread and wine and these words of Melchizedek such a blessing to Abraham at this moment? Because they represented an act of divine intervention at a critical moment in Abraham's life when he was just about to face a strong temptation. At this moment, another king, named Bera, was coming to see Abraham. But instead of bringing food and drink to nourish Abraham's body or words of blessing to nourish his soul, Bera would set before him a proposal of material gain that could easily have ensnared Abraham's heart and lured him away from his pure and uncorrupted devotion to the Lord.

Who was this Bera? He was the king of Sodom, one of the five cities of the plain of the Jordan river which had been attacked by the army of King Chedorlaomer and his three fellow kings from Mesopotamia. Sodom was the city in which Abraham's nephew Lot had chosen to make his dwelling. It was a very wicked city, and King Bera had a very appropriate name to be its ruler, for the name "ra" in Hebrew means "evil," so the name Bera appears to mean something like "characterized by evil." What a stark contrast we see here between Bera's name and the name Melchizedek, which means "king of righteousness." Like these two rulers, the names Sodom and Salem also stand in stark contrast with each other. Salem means "peace," but Sodom means "burning"-- at least, that is what many Hebrew scholars believe-- and Sodom was in fact a city destined to be consumed by fire; it was the original "city of destruction." So the choice that Abraham faced when confronted by these two kings was literally a choice between good and evil. It was a choice between clinging to the Lord as represented by Melchizedek, or clinging to evil as represented by Bera. Would Abraham embrace the blessing of Melchizedek, or the tempting offer set before him by Bera? Would he throw in his lot with the City of Peace, Salem, which from a New Testament perspective typifies the eternal city of God, or would he throw in his lot with the Sodom, the city of burning, by embracing the offer Bera made to him?

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

What was that offer? Bera offered to give Abraham a share of the booty that had been recovered in battle. "Give me the persons and take the goods for yourself," he said to him. Now, what was wrong with his manner of speaking to Abraham? Several things. First, notice how lacking in grace were his words to Abraham. He did not thank Abraham for his heroism; neither did he pronounce a blessing on him, as Melchizedek had done. Furthermore, he did not bring Abraham food or drink to refresh or honor him. Instead, he approached Abraham as if he were a mighty benefactor, condescending to give Abraham something that he had no right to at all. He was acting as if he still owned everything and was in a position to make demands of Abraham. "Give me that, and you take this." That was an arrogant attitude, however, for according to custom of the day, since Abraham was the victor in battle, he had a right to everything-- both the goods and the people. The king of Sodom had no rights. He had lost everything to the enemy, before whom he had fled like a scared rabbit. Bera ought to have approached Abraham in humility, but instead he approached in a spirit of pride, as if he had a right to call all the shots.

The temptation for Abraham was to accept Bera's offer, in order to enrich himself and to ingratiate himself with Bera. If he accepted the offered gift on Bera's terms, he could have become part of the 'in crowd' in Canaan, hobnobbing with all the bigwigs of Canaanites society, flaunting his wealth before men, and rubbing shoulders with the high and the mighty. That could have been a temptation to Abraham, but the visit of Melchizedek which had occurred reminded Abraham of what was truly important; so, by the grace of God, he resisted the temptation.

III. The Response Abraham Gave to the Two Kings He Met

Let us consider now how Abraham responded to each of these kings. These two kings offered him two very different ways of seeking personal prosperity in this fallen world. Abraham understood that, so he responded wisely to what each king offered him, and his choice showed how mightily the grace of God was working in his heart. On the one hand, he rejected the gifts that Bera offered him, along with the false value system those gifts represented. On the other hand, he accepted the gifts that Melchizedek offered him, because he saw him as a heaven-sent agent of blessing. In so doing, Abraham reaffirmed the choice that he had made long ago to walk by faith, rather than by sight. Let me explain what I mean.

A. Bera's Offer--What Bera offered Abraham was an immediate and visible reward that was appealing to the flesh. He offered to make Abraham materially wealthier than he had been before, and to give Abraham the prestige he needed to be somebody important in Canaan. Had Abraham accepted Bera's offer, however, he would have become just like the pagan peoples around him in this respect-- he would have been walking by sight, rather than by faith. He would

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

have been setting his heart on visible earthly treasures of money, fame, and power-- treasures that men could give him-- instead of setting his heart on more enduring treasures that God alone could give him. Abraham knew that through the promise of God, one day, he and his descendants would possess the whole of Canaan as their everlasting inheritance. In that day, the land would be cleared of idols, and righteousness would prevail. His seed would be greatly blessed by God, and would become a blessing to all nations. All the families of the earth would be blessed through him. False religion would be uprooted, and the worship of the true God would prevail forever among all nations. But that day was not yet here, so Abraham had to cling by faith to the promise of God, and make important choices consistent with his faith.

Had Abraham accepted Bera's offer, he would have been falling into a trap. He would have been placing his trust in man, rather than in God. He would have been choosing to exalt himself, and so he would have blinded himself to his complete dependence on the Lord for blessing. He would have thought to himself, "I'm somebody important now," and so he would have grown proud and arrogant, just like these Canaanite kings who were filled with a sense of self-importance. He would no longer have leaned humbly on the Lord as his sole Protector and Provider.

Moreover, by accepting Bera's offer, Abraham would have been placing himself in the king's debt, and that was something he refused to do. If he became a debtor to men, he would not be free to make his own decisions, but would feel obliged to please his benefactor. He would become like politicians in our day who accept political donations from special interest groups. By accepting bribes from men, they feel obliged to do the bidding of their owners. Consequently, they become servants to special interest groups, instead of serving the constituents who voted them into office. Abraham could not allow himself to be controlled by men, so he rejected Bera's offer. As he put it in verse 32, "I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich,'-- except only what the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who went with me; Aner, Eschol, and Mamre, let them take their portion." Apparently, Abraham had made a vow to the Lord before ever going into battle, that he would not be seduced by men's offers of material reward. He wanted no man to think of him as a mercenary soldier, governed by the love of money. He wanted to live in such a way that all men knew that what he did, he did out of love for God, that his trust was in the Lord alone as His Helper, and that God's fellowship meant more to him than all the riches men could offer. Why should he trust in riches, when he was a child of God, and heir to the promise of an everlasting

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

inheritance? Why should he look to men as if they were the source of his blessedness, rather than God? For these reasons, he rejected Bera's offer.

B. Melchizedek's Offer-- On the other hand, Abraham did receive Melchizedek's gifts, because he regarded Melchizedek to be God's own servant and His representative on earth. He regarded the food that Melchizedek gave him as God's own gift, given to him by the hand of a mediator for his physical and spiritual nourishment. The bread and wine nourished him physically, but at the same time, they nourished him spiritually, by reminding him that God was the source of his daily sustenance, the One to whom alone he must look for the provision of all his needs.

In like manner, Abraham regarded the blessing Melchizedek pronounced on him as God's own blessing, because it was according divine revelation. God truly was everything Melchizedek said He was. He was the Possessor of heaven and earth. He was the One who strengthened Abraham for battle, and gave him victory over all his enemies. With God, he could slay a multitude, he could run against a troop, he could leap over a wall. Without God, he could do nothing. So Abraham received those words from Melchizedek as from the mouth of God.

Not only that, at the same time Abraham received from Melchizedek, he gave to him, as well. We are told in verse 20 that Abraham gave Melchizedek a "tithe of all," in other words, a tenth part of the booty taken in battle. He did this, not to enrich Melchizedek, but to express the consecration of his heart to the Lord; for what he gave to Melchizedek, he regarded as a gift to God Himself. By giving a tenth, Abraham was not telling God, "A tenth of what I have belongs to you;" he was saying, rather, "Everything I am and have belongs to you, Lord, my body, my soul, and all my possessions, and this tithe is merely a token of my entire consecration to you." Melchizedek was the agent who received this gift, but the gift was given to the Lord Himself.

No doubt, Abraham was grateful for the priestly ministrations that Melchizedek offered on his behalf, and there is a reason for that, because deep down, all human beings feel the need for a Mediator who can bring them into the presence of God. They feel the need for someone to stand between them and God as a heaven-sent agent of divine blessing, whose intercessions can call down on us the blessing of God, despite our unworthiness. Abraham was filled with a sense of his own unworthiness before God, so he was grateful for Melchizedek's priestly ministry. He was thankful for the way that this man brought him nourishing food, on the one hand, and pronounced God's unmerited blessing on him, on the other. For Abraham realized that it was on the foundation of God's gracious favor alone that he must build his hope of future blessedness. He must certainly not confide in what men offered him as a substitute for grace, for all the money in the world could not secure for him a blessed future. God Himself was his only security.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Little did Abraham realize that this priestly figure from whose ministry he benefited was foreshadowing in a prophetic manner a much greater Priest who would come into the world nearly two thousand years later, who by his death on the cross and His resurrection, would become the one and only Mediator between God and men-- even our Lord Jesus Christ. This morning, I do not have time to go into elaborate detail showing all the ways in which Melchizedek foreshadowed our Lord Jesus Christ. Next week, Lord willing, I will do that, as we look in some detail at the seventh chapter of the book of Hebrews.

CONCLUSION

This morning, I simply want to conclude by saying that the choice that Abraham had to make is a choice we must all must make in life, and the choice we make will determine the course of our future. It is a choice we must confirm daily as we walk with Christ, and it is this: will we walk by faith or by sight? When it comes to the major choices we have to make in life, will we base our choices on the clear teaching of God's word-- the values He imparts, the promises He gives us in the gospel-- or will we turn a blind eye to God's Word and act on the basis of what we see before our eyes?

Let me give you a couple examples to explain what I mean. Here is a young Christian woman who has passed the flower of her youth and wants desperately to marry. Because of her age, she fears that if she accepts the next offer of marriage that comes along, she will spend her life alone. Suddenly, into her life steps a charming unbeliever, who sweeps her off her feet and promises her the moon. He asks her hand in marriage, and the hour of decision is now upon her. The question she must ask, that we all must ask, at such moments, is this: on what principle am I basing my decision-- on the principle of sight, or faith? When the world comes and tempts me to walk by sight by thrusting visible riches in my face and urging me to trust in them as the foundation of my security, what am I to do? Clearly, I must choose between delusive offer which appeals to sight, and the sure and certain teaching of God's Word which requires faith to embrace.

Here's another example. A young man, a business major, who graduated with high honors from the university he attended, lands a job at a Fortune 500 company that any of his classmates would drool over. It pays a huge salary, with wonderful benefits and plenty of vacation time; but a few weeks into the job, it becomes clear that his boss is asking him to do something flagrantly unethical and possibly illegal. What will he do? Ignore his conscience and keep focusing on all the earthly benefits he is reaping? Not if he is going to follow in the path of Abraham. Instead, he must realize that no earthly treasure men thrust in our face could ever equal the joy of having the Lord as our treasure. To continue enjoying fellowship with Him, however, may mean that that young man has to go to his boss and level with him. He may have to tell him, as a Christian, I cannot

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

do what you are asking me to do. In so doing, he risks the possibility of being fired-- but that is the only way to experience the Lord's blessing.

Abraham knew that when he rejected Bera's offer, that rejection would no doubt be considered a great offense. From that moment on, he would always be considered a foreigner in the land, despite what he had done to bring blessing on others. Doors of opportunity would be shut to him; and Abraham might well end being shunned by neighbors who considered him a 'goody two shoes,' for turning down Bera's offer. But none of that mattered to Abraham, because he had chosen the Lord as his portion, and it was the Lord's favor and blessing he sought. The Lord would be to him a treasure of inestimable value, greater than all the treasures that men could offer him. His presence would compensate for any losses he suffered because of his faithfulness to God.

S. G. De Graaf writes, "If we want to be sons of God and serve the Lord, we must be willing to face closed doors. We cannot live our lives as unbelievers do, but we are no poorer for that. Unbelievers have no knowledge of the true joys of life. Those joys transcend our understanding, but they are available to us nonetheless if we submit ourselves out of love to Jesus to become instruments of God's love, instruments through whom God blesses others. Then we will begin to enjoy life truly, and be rich in the Lord, but independent of others."

May God make us faithful servants like Abraham, who know where our true riches lie, and who cling to the Lord by receiving that Mediator whom he sends to feed with nourishing food and to pronounce on us the blessing of the Lord, even our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.