

“Sodom or Salem?”
Genesis 14:17-24
July 10th, 2016

On June 27th, 1976, armed terrorists for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) surprised the 12 crew members of an Air France aircraft and its 91 passengers, hijacking it in Athens, Greece and then taking off for a destination unknown. The plane was tracked heading for Central Africa, where it eventually landed under the congenial auspices of then Ugandan President Idi Amin. And there the plane remained apparently secure at Entebbe Airport, where the hijackers spent the next 7 days preparing for their next move. The hijackers were by all estimates in the driver’s seat.

However, 2,500 miles away in Tel Aviv, Israel, three Israeli C-130 Hercules aircraft were secretly boarded by a deadly force of Israeli commandoes who within hours attacked Entebbe under cover of darkness. In less than 60 minutes the commandoes rushed the terminal, gunned down the hijackers, and rescued 110 of the 113 hostages.

The next day, July 4th, Israel’s Premier Yitzhak Rabin triumphantly declared the mission “will become a legend” – which it surely has.

When we studied the first 16 verses of Genesis chapter 14 last Sunday, we learned of another raid that took place ages before the one in Uganda. Abram, the ‘father’ of God’s people, led an army of 318 skilled warriors on a night raid to rescue Abram’s nephew Lot and his family from the clutches of wicked kings. It, too, has become legend, far greater than the Raid on Entebbe.

The last eight verses of **Genesis 14:17-24**, today’s text, reveal what took place after Abram and his entourage returned from their raid. This episode focuses on the relationship of Abram with two kings in the land of Canaan. Abram is faced with the decision on which of the two kings he will identify with. It is a passage with much application for us.

Genesis 14:17-24:

¹⁷ And the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that *is*, the King’s Valley), after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who *were* with him.

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he *was* the priest of God Most High.

¹⁹ And he blessed him and said:

“Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
²⁰ And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.”
And he gave him a tithe of all.

²¹ Now the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself.”

²² But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, ²³ 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’—²⁴ except only what the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who went with me: Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their portion.”

These kings represent two very different worldviews. Abram must choose between them, and so must we.

MP 1 – The King of Sodom (v. 17, 21);

MP 2 – The King of Salem (v. 18-20);

MP 3 – Sodom or Salem? What is your choice?

“Sometimes (we) face (our) greatest spiritual dangers after (we) have won a battle. For instance, it was after the capture of Jericho that Israel’s self-confidence led it into defeat at Ai (**Joshua 7**); and it was after his success on Mount Carmel that Elijah panicked and ran away in fear (**I Kings 19**). As Scottish pastor Andrew Bonar put it, ‘Let us be as watchful *after* the victory as before the battle.’” (Wiersbe, 37)

The first king to meet Abram upon his return from rescuing Lot is the **King of Sodom** (verse 17). The name Sodom means “burning.” It is possible this king is a new king of Sodom if the former ruler was killed in the raid. He is mentioned in verse 10 of this chapter, where we read, “Now the Valley of Siddim *was full of asphalt pits*; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; *some* fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains.”

Regardless, this king of Sodom goes out to greet Abram to show his gratitude and to give him honor and spoils as the victor. It is important for us to remember that the king of Sodom was the king of an evil empire. When Lot and Abram divided up the land in Genesis chapter 13, we were given this concise report on the people of Sodom (**Genesis 13:13**): “...the men of Sodom *were* exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD.”

Before the King of Sodom makes his pitch upon greeting Abram, the text introduces us to the **King of Salem** in verses 18-20. He is also known as “Melchizedek.” Literally, Melchizedek means “king of righteousness.” He was also referred to as the “King of Salem.” Salem means “peace.” It was also an early reference to the city of Jeru...salem.

We note that Melchizedek, too, goes out to greet Abram as he returned home from the raid. Melchizedek brought with him wine and bread, an unmistakable reference to the elements of the New Testament Lord’s Supper/communion. In **John 6:50**, we learn that bread is the symbol of life, and, certainly, God is the source of life. Wine is the symbol of joy as the psalmist teaches in **Psalms 104:15**, and, certainly, God is the source of joy.

In the communion service, which we celebrated last Sunday, and the first Sunday of each month, Jesus said of the bread, “This is my body which is for you,” and of the wine, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” (**I Corinthians 11:24-25**)

We also see from verse 18 that Melchizedek serves as a priest, in addition to serving as king. This is the first time in the Bible anyone is declared to be a priest.

While Melchizedek’s hands were full of gifts, his lips were full of blessing. Notice, again, his words in verses 19 & 20:

“Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;

20 And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Three times the text contains the Hebrew reference to God *el elyon* (which we sang earlier in *El Shaddai*). It means “the Most High God.” Melchizedek is a priest of the Most High God who pronounces God’s blessing upon Abram, and Abram was a son of the Most High God who received the blessing.

So, just who is this Melchizedek anyway?

I once heard a preacher refer to Melchizedek as the “Tom Bombadil” of sacred Scripture. You’ll be familiar with Tom Bombadil if you’ve read J. R. R. Tolkien’s outstanding trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (among my favorites, for sure!)

Tom Bombadil first appears in Part One of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Frodo asks Goldberry (Tom’s wife) who Tom Bombadil is. She replies, “He is the Master of wood, water, and hill. He has no fear. He is Master.”

Like Melchizedek, Tom Bombadil is a mysterious person with little revealed as to his origin.

Scripture doesn’t say much about his origin or his demise. All that we know about Melchizedek is mentioned here in **Genesis 14**, **Psalm 110** (which we read together earlier in this service), and **Hebrews chapters 5-7**. But, we do know that while Melchizedek is referred to with the title of king of righteousness and peace, Jesus is preeminently the King of Righteousness and King of Peace. He is both.

Melchizedek is a type, a foreshadowing, of Jesus Christ. He is a person who actually existed and pointed ahead in his day to God’s promised Redeemer. Melchizedek is the shadow, while Jesus Christ is the reality.

Verse 20 shows Abram giving a tithe to Melchizedek. This is the first mention of tithing in the Bible (the word tithe means ‘tenth’). To tithe is to give 10%, whether of money, farm produce, or animals. When we tithe, we acknowledge that God owns everything and that we are grateful stewards of his wealth. The Israelites paid an annual tithe to the Lord (**Leviticus 27:30-33**) as well as a tithe every third year especially for the poor (**Deuteronomy 26:12-15**).

There is much conversation and debate about how much money Christians should give to the church in which they hold membership, and if you have five Christians talking about it, you’ll likely find five different opinions. Wisely, God doesn’t set an amount; He sets a percentage. That means every believer, regardless of monetary income, should give at least something to the church to which they attend and belong. Our giving should begin at 10% of our income and grow beyond that point as God blesses us. The New Testament standard of giving is spelled out in **2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9**.

You’ll notice our worship bulletin releases guests to our services of worship from the compulsion to put something in the offering plate when it comes around during the Offertory. We don’t expect them to do that; that’s not their responsibility - that is our responsibility. The

work of the church is to be supported by the people of God; that's the precedent we find throughout both the Old and New Testaments. We shouldn't expect, nor invite those outside of the fellowship of God's Church, to give their money to the community of faith to which they don't (yet) belong.

The membership declarations you've taken when you joined the church support this – “Do you promise to support the worship and work of the church to the best of your ability?” This refers not only to worship and ministry, but giving to pay the church's bills, ministry, property, missionaries & the like.

Having received the blessing of God, Abram is now prepared to respond properly to the invitation of the king of Sodom in verse 21 – “Now the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself.” The king of Sodom provides an alternative way to God's way. This statement is aimed at Abram's self-worth, his reputation before others, and the call of the secular world. He would be recognized by pagan nations as a hero.

How does Abram answer? Verses 22-23 again, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, ²³ 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’

Abram remembers his commitment as God's child. He understands that God has withheld nothing from him in providing for all his needs and wants. The lure of this fallen world constantly nags at us to find our contentment in something more than what God has given us. Husbands and wives grow weary of their spouses, and begin to dream of life without the one they've pledged life-long faithfulness to; youth look to spread their wings out from under the protective umbrella their parents are holding over them, and they do things that could drag them away from their family and church.

All we really need, dear ones is Jesus! I love the simple words, yet powerful desire pictured in Fernando Ortega's beautiful song, “Give Me Jesus:”

“In the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus – You can have all this world, but give me Jesus

When I am alone, give me Jesus - You can have all this world, but give me Jesus

When I come to die, give me Jesus - You can have all this world, but give me Jesus”

Many of Abram's family still stand (and do so on a daily basis) before Sodom and Salem. On a daily basis, dear ones, we face the question, “*Where is my sufficiency?*” Will we find it *in the gifts of Sodom or in the bread and wine of Salem? To whom do you belong?* The question of discipleship to Sodom or Salem pops up continually. *How will you answer it today? Tomorrow? Next week? Next Sunday?*

Dale Ralph Davis shares an intriguing illustration in his commentary on this passage.

Matthew Propp always thought he was Matthew Propp until one day when, we might say, he got the props knocked out from under him. He was applying for work in the New Mexico prison system and had to search out his birth certificate.

He discovered the Propps who had mostly raised him were not Propps but Smileys, that they had run off with him when he was 15 months old (1980) when an adoption procedure fell through.

He was actually Anthony Russini, and time was when his biological parents had spent tens of thousands of dollars to try and locate him. And so at age 22, Matthew/Anthony had to decide to whom he belonged.

Which is it, friend? Sodom or Salem?