

Chapter 6: The Coffers of Abram

Genesis 14:17–24

Satan has many strategies for tempting us to disobey God. Primarily, though, he begins by insinuating that God is not good. The very first question that the serpent posed to Eve in the garden of Eden followed this pattern: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). The serpent made no direct accusation. Instead, he planted a seed of doubt in Eve’s mind about whether God might actually be stingy, miserly, and oppressive. Nothing could be further from the truth, since God had instructed Adam and Eve to eat in abundance: “[16] You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, [17] but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). God abounds in generosity; however, through this initial questioning of God’s goodness, the serpent eventually leads Adam and Eve into their infamous rebellion against their gracious Creator.

Ever since then, the human race has fundamentally believed that God wants to keep us from good things. Whenever God forbids us from doing something, or requires us to do something, or asks for us to wait for something, we struggle to trust his intentions. Instead, we interpret those trials as yet still more evidence that God wants to control our lives and keep us from things that will make us happy. In Genesis 14:17–24, Abram faces this exact dilemma. Does he actually believe that Yahweh, God Most High, will be good to him? Can Abram trust Yahweh to fill his hands with good gifts? Or, should Abram diversify his plans for enriching himself by seeking alternative revenue streams apart from Yahweh’s promise? What if those plans are at odds with Yahweh’s commandments? In this story, Abram demonstrates an important principle for walking by faith: *Faith may lead us to empty our hands, but faithlessness will leave us empty-handed.*

Empty Hands (Gen. 14:17–18)

Our narrative picks up where the last narrative left off, right after Abram’s extraordinary military victory. The Mesopotamian armies swept through Transjordan with seeming effortless. They conquered the Rephaim, Zuzim, Emim, Horites, Amalekites, and Amorites (Gen. 14:5–7), and then they routed the alliance of five Transjordanian city-states who had rebelled against the mighty Chedorlaomer (Gen. 14:8–10), taking loot and pillage from their conquered enemies for their journey back home (Gen. 14:11–12). Even after this great display of military might, Abram defeats these armies in a night raid with only 318 of his own men and a handful of allies who lived near him (Gen. 14:13–15). Warfare is outside of Abram’s characteristic pattern of activities, but, by the grace of God, Abram wins. Even so, one major task still awaits him as he returns back to the land of Canaan. Specifically, Abram must decide what to do with the great wealth that he has recovered from the plundering Mesopotamians.

Two Contrasted Kings

During Abram's return, two kings come out to meet him: the king of Sodom and the king of Salem:

[17] After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). [18] And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) (Gen. 14:17–18)

The narrator tells us first about the approach of the king of Sodom in Genesis 14:17. Still, the narrator does not tell us much about Sodom before turning his attention onto the other king. While we already know name of the king of Sodom (Bera; Gen. 14:2), the narrator does not use this name either here or at the end of this chapter in Genesis 14:21–24. The namelessness of the king of Sodom is striking in contrast with the way the narrative names Melchizedek, the king of Salem (Gen. 14:18). More than that, the namelessness of the king of Sodom is remarkable in a the wider context of Genesis 14, a chapter filled with names of kings and places. The narrative lists the name of the Mesopotamian kings twice (Gen. 14:1, 9), with the name of Chedorlaomer appearing five times (Gen. 14:1, 4, 5, 9, 17). By contrast, the names of the Transjordanian kings appear only once (Gen. 14:2), even though "the king of Sodom" appears six times (Gen. 14:2, 8, 10, 17, 21, 22). The wicked, sinful arrogance of the people of Sodom arises as a great offense to God in heaven (Gen. 13:13), but the name of their king only appears once in the annals of history. By naming Melchizedek, but referring to Bera by title only, the narrator draws an immediate contrast between the relative glory of these two kings.

Beyond the issue of Bera's namelessness, the narrator skillfully piles up many points of shame in regard to the king of Sodom. First, we read that the king of Sodom "went out" to meet Abram (Gen. 14:17), the same language used to describe how the king of Sodom (along with his Transjordanian allies) "went out" into battle with the Mesopotamians (Gen. 14:8).¹ Bera was humiliated the last time he "went out," and he will be humiliated again. Second, the king of Sodom is silent when he arrives, so that the narrative moves immediately to focus on Melchizedek (Gen. 14:19–20). Third, when the king of Sodom does speak, we learn that he comes to *take* (Gen. 14:21), while Melchizedek comes bearing gifts of bread and wine (Gen. 14:18). On these last two points, Gordon Wenham writes, "In both words and deeds Melchizedek appears more generous than the king of Sodom."²

Generosity is not the only important lesson we should glean from the giving of Melchizedek in comparison to the taking of the king of Sodom. While Melchizedek brings Abram gifts of bread and wine, Sodom is *empty-handed*. In this, we see the ultimate fruit of the king of Sodom's way of life. He lives to enrich himself with whatever worldly goods he can acquire for himself. Even so, he must come to Abram empty-handed, begging to have something of his possessions restored. Right from the beginning of this narrative, we should recognize that choosing between God's good gifts and the world's good gifts is a false choice. We are not making a straightforward exchange of one kind of good for another. Rather, by choosing what the world has to offer, we will ultimately forfeiting *all* the good gifts in this world. The king of Sodom has devoted his life toward filling his hands with whatever he could acquire, and yet his faithlessness has left him empty-handed.

Melchizedek, the King-Priest of Salem

As we turn our attention to Melchizedek, the other king in this passage, we learn very few details about him. In fact, everything we know about Melchizedek appears almost exclusively here in Genesis 14:18. Whatever else he may have done in his lifetime, we only have (1) his name, (2) that he is a king, (3) the name of the city he rules, (4) his gift of bringing bread and wine, and (5) that he is a priest of God Most High. Additionally, we may infer from Melchizedek's blessing to Abram (Gen. 14:19–20), and from Abram's tithe to Melchizedek (Gen. 14:20), that (6) Melchizedek is superior to Abram in some way (cf. Heb. 7:4, 7). Let us learn all that we can from these few details.

Literally translated, the name *Melchizedek* means “My king is righteousness.” The author of the book of Hebrews translates this name into Greek in roughly the same way: “king of righteousness” (Heb. 7:2). Melchizedek is the king of Salem (*shalēm*), which means “peace” (e.g., *shalôm*). Therefore, the author of Hebrews points out that Melchizedek is not only the king of righteousness, but he is also the “king of peace” (Heb. 7:2). This city is almost certainly *Jerusalem*, a connection the Bible makes explicit in Psalm 76:2. The difference between this name *Salem* and the longer form *Jerusalem* is probably explained by the fact that prefix *Jeru-* is an ancient Sumerian word that means “city.” Therefore, the full name *Jerusalem* means “City of Peace,” with the shorter form, “Peace.” Later, the names of two important inhabitants of Jerusalem have names that seem related to *Melchizedek*: the king of Jerusalem during Israel's conquest is *Adonizedek* (“My lord is righteousness”; Josh. 10:1), and the name of the high priest in Jerusalem during the reign of David is *Zadok* (“Righteous”; 2 Sam. 8:17; 15:24–36; 18:19–27; 19:11; 20:25; 1 Kgs. 1:8–45).⁴ Even though we read nothing further about the life of Melchizedek than what we find here in Genesis 14:19–20, we perhaps see echoes of his influence in our later dealings with Melchizedek's city, Jerusalem.

When Melchizedek comes out to Abram, he brings with him a gift of bread and wine (Gen. 14:18). Now, if we are familiar with our Bibles, we know that the author of Hebrews identifies Melchizedek as a forerunner of Jesus Christ (Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20–7:28). From this information, it seems natural to jump straight from this meal to the sacrament of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper that our great high priest gave us on the night of his betrayal. Nevertheless, there are two reasons that we cannot make this jump as cleanly as we might like. First, the Hebrew word for *bread* (*leḥem*) is a general word that encompass all kinds of food.⁵ So, we do not even know if the *leḥem* Melchizedek brought out to Abram is actual *bread*. Second, John Calvin's observation is worthy of our careful consideration: “But the Apostle, while in his Epistle to the Hebrews, he most accurately collects, and specifically prosecutes, every point of similarity between Christ and Melchizedek, says not a word concerning the bread and wine.”⁶ Indeed, if the author of Hebrews even assesses the absence of Melchizedek's genealogy or date of death (Heb. 7:3), then why did he avoid making such an obvious connection between Melchizedek's bread and wine and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

Therefore, instead of trying to force an overly simplistic relationship between this meal and the Lord's Supper, we will do better to consider the nature of this meal in the context of the Old Testament. Gordon Wenham writes this:

What is being portrayed, however, is the generosity of Melchizedek. Bread and water would have been the staple diet. Bread and wine is royal fare (1 Sam 16:20) and regularly

accompanied animal sacrifice (Num 15:2–10; 1 Sam 1:24; 10:3). Melchizedek, who in traditional Near Eastern fashion combined the offices of king and priest, should have had ample supplies of bread and wine. Here he is portrayed as laying on a royal banquet for Abram the returning conqueror.⁷

This meal, therefore, underscores the dual offices that Melchizedek holds. This is not merely meal for famished warriors, although it is that. This is a royal feast served to Abram by Melchizedek, the king-priest of Jerusalem. By this generous gift, Melchizedek enhances his royal and priestly status before Abram. While the bread and wine Melchizedek brings is not *itself* the Lord's Supper, it certainly functions as a *type* and *foreshadowing* of the Lord's Supper.⁸

Kings, Priests, and King-Priests

Now, this issue of Melchizedek's dual office as king and priest is critical for us to address, especially in light of the rest of biblical teaching on the two offices. In Israel, God did not explicitly prohibit kings from serving as priests. The only section of the Mosaic law that deals explicitly with kings is in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, which does not contain any provision forbidding priests from serving as kings. The only passage that comes even close says this: "And when he [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests" (Deut. 17:18). Even there, there is nothing keeping one priest from becoming a king and then seeking approval of his copy of the law from the other priests.

Instead of making this prohibition explicitly, God does it *implicitly*. First, God establishes an exclusive, covenantal priesthood among the sons of Aaron in the tribe of Levi (Lev. 8; Deut. 33:8–10; Neh. 13:29; Jer. 33: 20–21; Mal. 2:4, 8). Then, when God appoints a Benjaminite named Saul as king (1 Sam. 10:21), God thereby forbids his king from serving as priest by virtue of the fact that he is a Benjaminite, and therefore not a Levitical descendant of Aaron. So, when Saul disobeys God by sacrificing a burnt offering, God removes the kingdom from him (1 Sam. 13:8–14). Next, God appoints a boy from the tribe of Judah as king: David (1 Sam. 16:1–13). Again, since David descends from Judah and not Levi, God likewise forbids David (implicitly) from serving as priest. Later, God also explicitly forbids David from building the temple because of David's lawful bloodshed as God's warrior king (1 Chron. 28:3). This perhaps suggests that the work of kings and priests can sometimes be mutually exclusive.

A King Greater than David

After choosing, and rejecting, a king from the tribe of Benjamin, God establishes a covenant with David for an everlasting kingdom in David's offspring (2 Sam. 7:1–17; 1 Chron. 17:1–15). Therefore, the rightful kings of Israel will *always* come from the tribe of Judah. Furthermore, this means that God's chosen king can *never* serve as a Levitical priest. God indeed gives David a great name (2 Sam. 7:9); however, David has serious limitations, even if we set aside his grievous sins (2 Sam. 11; 24). We see these limitations when David moves the capital of Israel from Hebron (2 Sam. 2:1; 5:3–5) to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:5–9), the city of ancient Melchizedek. When this happens, David becomes "the first Israelite to sit on Melchizedek's throne." After establishing the kingdom in Jerusalem, David moves the ark of the covenant from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–4; 1 Chron. 13:5). By doing this, David is establishing the tabernacle and the priesthood in Jerusalem, to

unify priesthood and the kingdom in the same place—specifically, in the ancient city of Melchizedek. But as David moves the ark toward Jerusalem, God strikes down Uzzah for touching the ark (2 Sam. 6:5–10). Through this judgment against Uzzah, God warns David not to follow in the footsteps of Saul by presuming to usurp the priestly role to himself (1 Chron. 13:12). Even though David rightfully unifies the kingship and the priesthood in Melchizedek’s city, he will never be as great as Melchizedek. David, unlike Melchizedek, will never serve as both king and priest.

This is where it is important to discuss two additional observations that author of Hebrews makes regarding Melchizedek. These observations come not from what the text says, but what the text does *not* say: “He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (Heb. 7:3). This cannot mean that Melchizedek *actually* has no father or mother or genealogy, or that he *actually* has no beginning or end of life. Rather, the author of Hebrews is drawing on the lack of details against the background of the *many* details of genealogies, births, and deaths in the book of Genesis.¹⁰ In contrast with the detailed genealogies required to establish the legitimacy of a Levitical priest (cf. Ezra 2:62–63; Neh. 7:64–65), the Scriptures record no genealogy for Melchizedek at all. As such, the legitimacy of Melchizedek’s priesthood rests on something *other* than his biological descent. Furthermore, we read nothing of Melchizedek’s death, during which time Melchizedek’s priestly role would have passed on to another (cf. Num. 20:22–29). Therefore, the incompleteness of the text makes it *as though* Melchizedek’s priesthood stands forever.

So, perhaps it is as King David is studying the story of Melchizedek from his copy of the law (cf. Deut. 17:18) when he prophesies the coming of another, greater king (Ps. 110:1; cf. Matt. 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44) who will *also* serve as priest: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps. 110:4).¹¹ The author of Hebrews explains that this verse provides us the source of the legitimacy of not only Melchizedek’s priesthood, but Christ’s as well: “[20] And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, [21] but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever”’ [22] This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:20–22). Neither David nor Jesus could qualify as a *Levitical* priest because they are descended from Judah; however, Jesus qualifies as a priest according to the oath-based priesthood of Melchizedek. Jesus’ dual offices of king and priest are critical, since, as John Calvin writes, the “same Person, therefore who was constituted the only and eternal Priest, in order that he might reconcile us to God, and who, having made expiation, might intercede for us, is also a King of infinite power to secure our salvation, and to protect us by his guardian care.”¹² As David studies God’s word, he looks back and sees the king-priest Melchizedek, and he looks forward to see the coming of King-Priest Jesus.

Interestingly, though, the structure of two oracles in Psalm 110 suggests a different paradigm for our King-Priest Jesus than we might have expected. The first oracle of Psalm 110 deals with the *kingship* of the Messiah: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (Ps. 110:1). So, Psalm 110:2–3 addresses the reign and rule of that king. Then, the second oracle of Psalm 110 addresses the *priesthood* of the Messiah: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps. 110:4). We might, therefore, expect that the rest of the psalm will deal with the Messiah’s priestly activity; however, Psalm 110:5–7 speaks of the Messiah’s kingly execution of judgment and wrath: “He will

execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth” (Ps. 110:6).¹³ The bloodshed of David, a man of war, disqualified him from even building the temple (1 Chron. 28:3). The coming king-priest, however, will necessarily shed blood as an important part of his overall ministry.

Abram the King-Priest

Still, Melchizedek and Jesus are not the only king-priests we discover in the Bible. Abram himself acts both as a priest (cf. Gen. 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18; 17:1–27; 22:1–19) *and* as a king (Gen. 17:6; 23:6).¹⁴ Indeed, it is from Abram whom *both* God’s kings *and* God’s priests come, since Judah and Levi are both Abram’s great-grandchildren. Nevertheless, as we will see, even Abram recognizes that his status as king-priest is inferior to the status of Melchizedek. *All* king-priests are greater than David, but *some* king-priests are even greater than Abram. How, though, can this be? If God has chosen to bless the world in and through Abram (Gen 12:3), how can there be anyone greater than Abram? Why does Abram acknowledge the king-priest Melchizedek as his superior?

Filled Hands (Gen. 14:19–20)

To answer these questions, let us establish where we see Abram acknowledging the superiority of Melchizedek. The text of Genesis continues:

[19] And he blessed him and said,

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

[20] and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Gen. 14:19–20)

It is important to recognize the connection between this blessing and the immediately preceding statement: “He was priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18). As John Calvin explains, “For men mutually bless each other; that is, they wish well to each other. But here the priest of God is described, who, according to the right of his office, sanctifies one inferior and subject to himself.”¹⁵ Indeed, this is a crucial point for the author of Hebrews: “It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Heb. 7:7). By receiving this priestly blessing from Melchizedek, Abram acknowledges his inferiority to Melchizedek.

Here again, our question surrounding the source of Melchizedek’s authority arises. If God himself has chosen to bless Abram (Gen. 12:2), what legitimacy does Melchizedek have to do so? In part, we may see Melchizedek’s blessing as the “first fulfillment” of God’s promise.¹⁶ That is, Melchizedek blesses Abram because he recognizes the blessing that God has *already* given to Abram. Still, this does not go far enough. In what capacity does Melchizedek offer a *priestly* blessing to Abram *as Abram’s superior*? What office, status, and role does Melchizedek have to do for Abram what God has done *directly* for Abram thus far?

The Blessing of Melchizedek

Next, let us press into the actual blessing that Melchizedek offers. To start, Melchizedek blesses Abram “by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:19). This opening part of the blessing is significant for two reasons. First, in whatever sense Melchizedek exceeds Abram in greatness, Melchizedek does not intend to *rival* Abram. Melchizedek offers his blessing “to confirm and ratify the grace of the Divine vocation to holy Abram; for he points out the honor with which God had peculiarly dignified him by separating him from all others, and adopting him as his own son.”¹⁷ Second, in the larger context of trying to determine where we should seek blessings and enrichment, Melchizedek points out that it is *God* who possesses heaven and earth. What foolishness it is to seek blessings from the world when God *owns* heaven and earth?

Next, Melchizedek blesses “God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” (Gen. 14:20). He recognizes that Abram’s success does not come from Abram’s military skill, but as an expression of God’s choice to bless Abram out of all the families of the earth. God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, uses his vast wealth and power to *fill Abram’s hands*. These blessings include military victory and enrichment as well. Although Abram lives by faith, he has not come away from this event empty-handed. God has delivered his enemies into his hands, and Melchizedek has even filled Abram’s hands with gifts of bread and wine on his return journey. Abram is thoroughly blessed!

In these blessings, notice also that Melchizedek’s blessings speaks for God. That is, Melchizedek speaks as a prophet. This becomes clearer in the connection between the word “delivered” (*miggēn*; Gen. 14:20) and the word for “shield” (*mālgēn*) that God himself speaks only a few verses later in Genesis 15:1.¹⁸ By his priestly blessing, Melchizedek neither seeks to displace Abram in God’s redemptive plan, nor does he seek to lead Abram away from God. The truth is exactly the opposite. Here, Melchizedek mediates between God and Abram, speaking God’s word to the one with whom God speaks directly elsewhere. Melchizedek is not only a king and a priest, but a prophet as well.

Emptying his Full Hands

In response, Abram *empties his full hands* by giving Melchizedek a tenth “of everything” (Gen. 14:20). Technically, the text does not specify that Abram gives the tithe to Melchizedek, rather than the other way around. Literally, the text says, “And he gave to him a tenth of everything.” In context, however, this point is clear. Gordon Wenham writes, “Tithes were given to both sanctuaries and kings. Melchizedek qualifies on both counts. Here, however, it is probably in virtue of his priesthood that Abram gives him a tithe. For as Abram has received a priestly blessing from Melchizedek, it is fitting that he should respond in the customary fashion.”¹⁹ This is a two-way interaction. Melchizedek initiates by his gift of food and wine and his blessing. In response, Abram gives him a tithe of everything—that is, of all the spoils that Abram recovered in defeating the Mesopotamian kings.²⁰ Of course, Abram is not paying money to a man; he is offering a gift to the prophet, priest, and king whom *God* sent to meet him on his return from battle. This tithe is a gift to God.

Abram’s tithe stands in contrast with the king of Sodom. The king of Sodom directly pursues worldly enrichment throughout his life. He oppresses, breaks covenants, and goes to war in order to preserve and protect his worldly wealth. Abram could have perhaps taken the same approach. After

all, God promised to bless *him*, so why shouldn't Abram stiff Melchizedek from the blessing that Abram earned? Why not keep all the spoils for himself? After all, Melchizedek did not go out to war with him! Abram recognizes that God alone is the one who fills his hands. He does not need to clench his hands around what he has, afraid of losing it. Rather, when God sends along a king-priest to bless him, Abram can freely tithe what he has to Melchizedek in the knowledge that God can give him far more super-abundantly than even what he is giving away here. If Abram does not believe that God is fundamentally good toward him, this move is foolish; however, if God *is* good, then nothing could be wiser. On paper, the kind of Sodom should be rich and Abram poor; however, Abram's full hands stand in stark contrast with the king of Sodom's empty hands.

Abram's Tithe

To come back to our earlier question about why Abram acknowledges the superiority of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews makes a significant point about Abram's tithe:

[4] See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! [5] And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. [6] But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. [7] It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. [8] In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. [9] One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, [10] for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him. (Heb. 7:4–10)

Melchizedek demonstrates his superiority both by blessing Abram (Heb. 7:7). As Abram responds by giving Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils, he confirms that Melchizedek is indeed his superior (Heb. 7:4). Notice, though, that the author does not do this so much to talk about the superiority of Melchizedek over *Abram* as much as over *Levi*, the great-grandson of Abram. Because Levi is “in the loins” of Abram, Levi *too* acknowledges the superiority of Melchizedek.

Now, the author of Hebrews is not attacking the importance of the Levitical priesthood. Instead, he is pointing out that the Scriptures have *always* acknowledged a greater priesthood than that of Levi, all the way back as far as Genesis 14. Even the great Abram himself needs this priest! As Iain Duguid writes, “Abram recognized that greatness in God's kingdom is not simply a matter of doing mighty deeds for God and rescuing the undeserving. It also involves coming to God through the priest that God has established.”²¹ This subordination of the priesthood of Levi to the priesthood of Melchizedek just hangs out there in Scripture for thousands of years, waiting for some kind of resolution.²² Why would God undercut Abram's glory by introducing a king-priest who appears from nowhere, and disappears as quickly as he arrived? David's prophecy in Psalm 110:4 helps by acknowledging that God has sworn that *another* priest after the order of Melchizedek will come. Even before God establishes a covenant with Abram (cf. Gen. 15), God demonstrates that his promises to bless the world through Abram will require something *outside* of Abram to enhance the capabilities and claims of Abram's offspring. Abram's offspring on their own, according to the stipulations of the law, will not be able to bless the world. The fullness of that promise will not come

to fruition until God sends his own Son, to whom he has sworn an unbreakable oath for making him a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Oath-Swearing Hands (Gen. 14:21–24)

By this point, we have nearly forgotten the silent king of Sodom who arrived in Genesis 14:17. Only after he witnesses this glorious interaction between Melchizedek and Abram does Bera speak: “And the king of Sodom said to Abram, ‘Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself’” (Gen. 14:21). The king of Salem *gave* to Abram food, wine, and blessings. In contrast, the king of Sodom now seeks to *take* from Abram. Where the king of Salem spoke blessings and gave gifts to Abram, the king of Sodom issues demands to take things from Abram.²³ The king of Sodom not only comes to this meeting with empty hands, but with *grasping hands*.

Still, the request of the king of Sodom is alluring and captivating. Essentially, he is asking Abram to play by the rules of the world, according to the standards of the world, in exchange for the riches of the world. The king of Sodom is not asking Abram to reject God altogether, but simply to buy into the larger lie that Abram must fend for himself. This is the same basic opening move that the serpent made in the garden. Rather than asking Abram directly to disobey God, the king of Sodom simply wants Abram to shift his trust back to what he holds in his hands, rather than to live expectantly for what God will deliver into his hands. Abram’s tithe of the spoil to Melchizedek was a response of faith, according to the values of God’s invisible kingdom, but now the king of Sodom implicitly seeks to draw Abram back into the values of the visible kingdoms of this world.²⁴ Remember, the battles between the four Mesopotamian kingdoms and the five Transjordanian kingdoms arose out of *greed*. Chedorlaomer went to war fourteen earlier, and, after his victory, subjected the Transjordanians to an annual tribute tax; however, when the Transjordanians grew tired of paying the tax, they rebelled (Gen. 14:4). The kingdoms of the world engage in battle as consumers, either entering into alliances or making war according to how much benefit they can accrue for themselves.

The Riches of Yahweh’s Kingdom

Abram, however, acted as God’s custodian. In both the alliances he forged and the battles he fought, he had no intention of seeking person gain.²⁵ Furthermore, while there would be nothing wrong with growing in wealth after his labor, he recognizes that the exchange the king of Sodom is offering to him changes the dynamics. No longer would the glory go to Yahweh, God Most High, for the victory; instead, the king of Sodom would steal the glory as the one whose possessions enriched Abram. Therefore, Abram categorically rejects what the king of Sodom offers him with an *oath-swearing hand*:

[22] But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, [23] that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’” (Gen. 14:22–23)

Lifting a hand is a common gesture for swearing an oath (Deut. 32:40; Dan. 12:7; Rev. 10:5–6). By swearing this oath, Abram testifies that he went out to battle to rescue Lot, and not as a mercenary.

Nevertheless, “unless Abram had resolutely refused the spoils of war, the rumor would immediately have spread, that, under the pretense of rescuing his nephew, he had been intent upon grasping the prey.”²⁶ Abram justified taking unlawful spoils when Pharaoh took Sarai into his house, but not this time.²⁷ As we follow in Abram’s footsteps of faith, we should observe that Abram rejects unlawful riches in the strongest way possible. He is clear, direct, and forceful that he wants nothing to do with the enticements of the world.

Notice here that Abram speaks of the same God that Melchizedek blessed: “God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:19–20, 22); however, Abram goes a step further by *naming* this God. When our English Bibles print the word “LORD” in capital letters, they are telling us that this word is not a general word for “Lord” (*adonai*), but the personal name of God: *Yahweh*. Yahweh is God Most High, the God whom Melchizedek serves as king, priest, and prophet. Furthermore, it is on Yahweh whom Abram is depending for his enrichment. To take for himself what the king of Sodom offers him would be to walk by sight, when Yahweh has asked Abram to walk by faith.

This passage contains massive practical implications for us. Allen Ross writes this poignant question: “God does want to bless his people today as he did back then, not just with heaven but with good gifts as well. How, then, may believers discern when a blessing is from God and when it is not?”²⁸ To answer this question, we might begin by observing that the world so commonly invites us to cut corners, or to take for ourselves what we have neither need nor rightfully possess. As in this case with the offer of the king of Sodom to Abram, we are often tempted to take things that are not necessarily wrong in themselves. The difference, then, comes only in *how* we take them, or to what *degree*, or for what *purpose*. To the extent that we find ourselves pursuing the riches and blessings of the world *apart* from God, we may identify that taking those things would be an act of faithlessness. That is, if someone *other* than God will get the glory in a business deal, a relationship, or an achievement, then we are living like consumers, and not as God’s custodians. We must ask ourselves, “Does this option lead my hands to grasp for something on my own, or to wait for God to fill my hands?”

Blessings for the World

Still, this does not mean that Abram must restore everything to Sodom. He recognizes that Sodom has no real claim in this matter, since everything rightfully belongs to him.²⁹ By keeping the spoils, he would not be doing anything unlawful in itself. The only problem arises in that he would be allowing someone other than Yahweh to enrich him. So, instead of restoring all the spoil to Sodom, Abram takes this opportunity to bless those who have gone out to war with him: “I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share” (Gen. 14:24). While we knew that Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre are allies of Abram (Gen. 14:13), we do not learn until this point that they have accompanied Abram on the journey with Abram’s 318 trained men (Gen. 14:14).³⁰ Yahweh said earlier that he will bless all those who bless Abram (Gen. 12:3), and this is one of the first clear examples of Abram’s blessing overflowing to those who align themselves with God’s chosen servant.³¹

Intriguingly, the principles Abram uses throughout this entire passage carefully follow the principles for warfare outlined in Deuteronomy 20:1–15.³² Abram did not fear to go out to a battle against an army larger than his (Deut. 20:1). Before battle, Moses explains that the priest should speak to the people to remind them that “the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you

against your enemies, to give you the victory” (Deut. 20:4), which is essentially what Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, tells Abram after the battle (Gen. 14:20). Even the word for the “dedicated” men of Abram’s house (Gen. 14:14) is the noun form of the verb for “dedicating” a house in Deuteronomy 20:5, and both words show up only in those two places in the Pentateuch. Also, this passage declares that, in battles fought against peoples who live far from the Promised Land (Deut. 20:15), the soldiers have a right to enjoy the spoils of war (Deut. 20:14). So, while Abram declines keeping the spoils for himself, he insists that his young men will keep everything they “eat” (Gen. 14:24; Deut. 20:14).³³ Although Abram did not have a written law to obey, we can see by comparing Abram’s actions to the written law that Abram fully obeyed Yahweh at every point of this expedition. He is God’s custodian, not the world’s consumer. He does not grasp with his hands, but he waits for God to fill his hands.

The Conqueror Who Gives Gifts

As New Testament Christians, we are still engaged in battle, even if the battle lines have changed. No longer are we struggling over a parcel of land, for our battle is against the spiritual powers who oppose Christ and his kingdom (Eph. 6:12). Furthermore, we fight not as those who must win the battle, but we fight as those who follow our Lord who has *already* won the battle. Making these observations, Allen Ross writes this:

According to Ephesians, Christ is the military conqueror who “ascends on high leading captive a host of captives”—the victory is his. The conqueror then distributes gifts to people, just as kings would distribute the spoils of war among their loyal subjects (as Abram did with those who went with him). In Ephesians, since Christ’s victory was spiritual (he conquered sin, death, and the grave), his gifts were spiritual gifts for the spiritual service of his subjects. With these spiritual gifts, and armed with spiritual weapons and armor, Christians continue the fight against the forces of evil, spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the world, championing truth, righteousness, and justice.³⁴

The question, then, is this: what *gains* in your life come not by faith, but as a mercenary? Where are you grasping after from the kingdoms of this world for your own enrichment, rather than waiting to receive by faith all that God has promised to deliver into your hands by the mediation of by God’s King-Priest, Jesus Christ? Let us live our lives in the expectant hope of receiving the glorious spoils of the war that Christ, our Savior, has won, while rejecting anything that this world might use to lead us astray from Christ and the abundance of his kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. In theory, which person should be richer: the greedy king of Sodom or self-sacrificial Abram? Why is that not the case here? Why does the king of Sodom end up empty-handed? Do greedy, grasping people today still end up empty handed, even if only in the next life? Why, then, do we find ourselves so tempted to grasp after worldly wealth?
2. Why do you think that God forbade his kings from being priests? Read through Psalm 110 and

Hebrews 7. What do we learn about Melchizedek? What do we learn about his kingship? What do we learn about his priesthood? From these principles, what do we learn about Christ? Why do you think God draws this story out across so many centuries?

3. What does Abram’s faith in this story teach us about waiting for God to fill our hands, rather than grasping for good gifts on our own? Why is it so hard to trust God for his good gifts? How does the knowledge that God is the “Possessor of heaven and earth” help us to trust him? How can we preach to ourselves God’s goodness when Satan tempts us to doubt?

4. Why does Abram go so far as to swear an oath to reject unlawful enrichment by the king of Sodom? Why do we need strong boundaries to keep us from being drawn away in temptation? What kind of strong boundaries have you established against your temptations? Are there other boundaries that could help keep you pure and unstained by the world?

Notes

1. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 315.
2. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 315.
3. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 409–10.
4. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 316.
5. Robert H. O’Connell, “מֶלְכִּי־צֶדֶק,” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem VanGemeren, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 789–92.
6. Calvin, *Genesis*, 390. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xx.i.html>>
7. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 316.
8. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 322.
9. Kidner, *Genesis*, 132.
10. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 300.
11. D. A. Carson, “Getting Excited About Melchizedek,” April 14, 2011. <<http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/getting-excited-about-melchizedek>>. Accessed February 27, 2018. I would strongly recommend this resource as an outstanding overview of how to understand Melchizedek in the overarching story of the Bible.
12. Calvin, *Genesis*, 389. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xx.i.html>>
13. Carson, “Getting Excited About Melchizedek.”
14. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 410.
15. Calvin, *Genesis*, 391. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xx.i.html>>
16. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 317.
17. Calvin, *Genesis*, 391–92. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xx.i.html>>
18. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 412.
19. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 317–18.
20. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 317–18.
21. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, 51.
22. Carson, “Getting Excited About Melchizedek.”
23. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 318.
24. Kidner, *Genesis*, 131–32.

25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 413.
26. Calvin, *Genesis*, 394–95. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xx.i.html>>
27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 413.
28. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 301.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 318.
30. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 318.
31. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 293.
32. The points in this paragraph come entirely from Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 148.
33. The ESV has “enjoy,” and (as Sailhamer notes) the NIV has “use,” but the literal word in Deuteronomy 20:14 is “eat,” which is the same word used in Genesis 14:24.
34. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 296–97.