

Foundations: Prophet, Priest, and King
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Mark 10:43-45; Hebrews 5:1-10; Genesis 14

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 14. May God add His richest blessings to the reading of His perfect, sacred, and holy Word. “At this time Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Kedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim went to war against Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these latter kings joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (the Salt Sea). For twelve years they had been subject to Kedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. In the fourteenth year, Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him went out and defeated the Rephaites in Ashteroth Karnaim, the Zuzites in Ham, the Emites in Shaveh Kiriathaim and the Horites in the hill country of Seir, as far as El Paran near the desert. Then they turned back and went to En Mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and they conquered the whole territory of the Amalekites, as well as the Amorites who were living in Hazazon Tamar. Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) marched out and drew up their battle lines in the Valley of Siddim against Kedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar-- four kings against five. Now the Valley of Siddim was full of tar pits, and when the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some of the men fell into them and the rest fled to the hills. The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. They also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom. One who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew. Now Abram was living near the great trees of Mamre the Amorite, a brother of Eshcol and Aner, all of whom were allied with Abram. When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people. After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself." But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me – to Aner, Eshcol and Mamre. Let them have their share.””

The Bill of Rights is far more well-known today than the United States Constitution which it amends. Most of us know at least some of those rights – the right to free speech, to bear arms, to practice your religion, to assemble, to a speedy trial. The Constitution itself establishes Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency. All vital and important to our country. But if you get bored reading about the foundation of our country’s governmental system, you’ll never get to the things that the government promises you as a civilian.

That’s also true of some Bible passages too. Like in today’s passage, it’s easy to get lost in a bunch of names that trip us up, that are hard for us to pronounce, from places we don’t know. It’s easy to say, “OK, I’ve read that, I’ve done my spiritual duty, let’s move on to something I can understand.” And admittedly, this passage can be a little daunting. But in the middle of it, in the story of Lot’s rescue and the appearance of a strange priest who comes out of nowhere, we have a historical event of great importance that will, thousands of years later, help to explain who Jesus is and what roles He plays in our salvation.

You might remember from last week that Lot and Abram parted company because their entourages had become too big to live together. Abram, trusting God, gave Lot the choice of anywhere he wanted to live, and Lot chose the beautiful and well-watered land near Sodom – despite knowing of the grave wickedness of Sodom’s people. Meanwhile, Abram travels the other direction, once again worshiping God and hearing again the promise that he and his descendants, who would be numbered greater than the dust particles you can’t even count, would inherit the land of Canaan.

This week, we switch gears, and our focus turns to a war among city-states. It seems like a lot of names and places, but the situation is pretty simple. For over a decade, Kedorlaomer and a coalition with three other kings had held sway in the region. Finally, there was a rebellion when five of the kings under Kedorlaomer’s thumb allied with each other against his rule. Eventually, Kedorlaomer takes his coalition to beat down all the opposition in the land, and it gets messy, with armies battling it out, and because of the tar pits in the valley where they’re fighting, there are fewer places to retreat. Kedorlaomer’s coalition wins, and when they do, they raid the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, taking with them food, goods, whatever they can lay their hands on, including people destined for slavery – and Lot was one of them.

There’s something extremely important to pay attention to here – since our passage last week, Lot has gone from living near Sodom with all his herdsman and people in his household to living in Sodom proper. He was drawn to the great grasslands and beauty, but now he’s living in this city that with its sister city Gomorrah was known for its immorality that went beyond the pale. What is he doing there? We don’t have a good explanation – all we know is that Lot, who let his eyes deceive him into thinking he was moving into paradise, has now followed that deception right into the heart of wickedness. He and his family are now residents of a place that makes Las Vegas and Amsterdam look tame.

We’re going to skip a bit to the end of the story. Abram, hearing of Lot’s plight, gallops to the rescue with a contingent of his own men, and he winds up routing Kedorlaomer. We might think that the coalition had spread themselves too thin; they weren’t counting on another force from the west attacking. But the reality is, God had Abram’s back through all of this.

So once Lot and the other people are rescued and all the stolen goods recovered, the king of Sodom comes out to meet Abram. Remember, this is a king whose rebellion was put down; he has no army; he has no right to demand anything. He's like, "Let the people go back to the city, but keep the goods for yourself." Given the circumstances, it's a bold request.

But Abram says, "I'm not going to make it so you can say you made me rich. I give back everything – just give the men who went with me [his commanders] their share." Abram wants nothing to do with Sodom or its people or its king. He won't give any reason for the king of Sodom to hold anything over him or against him. He had every right to take the goods and the people; if he had been like many of the other kings, he could have taken the people he rescued as servants or slaves, "the spoils of war." But Abram grants them their freedom to go back to Sodom, without making any alliances or creating any bonds. Yet, sadly, Lot goes back.

Here's the first theme we have to examine in this passage: *give wickedness no quarter in your life, for it can easily overwhelm your life*. Lot went from living near the Sodomites to living with them and sharing in their disasters, which are only going to get worse from here. As we said last week, the apostle Peter calls Lot righteous; he is not an evil man, but he gets caught up in this wicked city and its wicked people. Where once he was a man of the land, now he's a city dweller in the midst of it all. So much has gone wrong since he decided to pitch his tent near the heart of this region's worst evildoers. And Abram will have nothing to do with Sodom, even though he had every right to claim their riches when he defeated Kedorlaomer's army.

This theme continues throughout Scripture, throughout Jesus' teachings and the era of the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns how lust is spiritually equivalent to adultery and rage morally equivalent to murder. Jesus showed that purity is not just about avoiding the most heinous sins but also rebuking our sinful attitudes that lead up to them. In Ephesians 4, Paul tells us to take off the old self filled with its lusts and deceits and to put on the new self given to us by Christ. In Ephesians 4:26-27, Paul says, "In your anger, do not sin – do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil a foothold." That's ultimately what we're talking about here – give no footholds.

I have a good friend who spent time in prison for embezzlement. He didn't intend to do it. He thought he could pay it back. But he admitted that it didn't start with an expectation that he was going to steal money. It started with a habit he picked up of habitually lying. He lied about little things. He found he was good at it. So he lied about other stuff. I remember once he told me about a Star Wars video game he'd played that just didn't exist at the time. He became so experienced at lying that he lied to himself; that's where the real problem started. Thankfully, he's been on a better track for many years, but it started with giving one foothold away.

James 1:14 says, "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." I cannot tell you your desire, but we all have them. So many things seem nice and comfortable and alluring. The little ways we indulge them may not seem like much. But James continues in verse 15, "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Eventually, giving way to small, insignificant temptations leads to full-on sin, which then if left undealt with leads to spiritual death. Have nothing to do with sin, just as Abram had nothing to do even with the goods of Sodom taken in battle.

Now let's move on to the fascinating part that comes out of nowhere – the sudden appearance of the king of Salem called Melchizedek. We've never heard of him; he's not been mentioned before. And more strangely, he never pops up again. He disappears from the narrative entirely. He's literally not mentioned again until David's era a thousand years later in one of the psalms. But what we do know is intriguing.

First, we have good reason to believe that Salem is the initial or shortened name for Jerusalem. Thus, we have our first introduction to the city that will be the home of God's temple and God's people, and will someday be renewed in the new heaven and new earth. Second, Melchizedek is her king. Which means that, based on the Hebrew spelling of the name Salem, Melchizedek is literally the king of peace – at least the city called Peace. Third, he is a monotheist. In a world where hundreds of gods are worshiped and every tribe has its pantheon, Melchizedek without any contact with Abram that we know of worships God Most High, creator of heaven and earth.

Forth, he brings out bread and wine to welcome Abram and refresh him and his men. Where else do we hear of bread and wine in the blessings to God's people? Fifth, Melchizedek is not just a king but a priest. This was an unusual arrangement, for someone to be both. In later Israel, under God's command, the line of priests would come only from the Levites. Israel's kings were to come from the line of David – so no one could fulfill both roles. But here, Melchizedek does so. He blessed Abram, and he wisely states that it is God who has given the victory to Abram, not any plan or strength on the part of Abram and his men. In this way, he also acts as prophet. Finally, Abram gives him a tenth of everything. Though the tithe the Israelites were to give to God and to the priests wouldn't come until centuries later, Abram gives the ten percent to honor God and the man who brings blessings from God. The king of Salem stands at complete odds with the king of Sodom; night and day difference.

This Melchizedek guy is mysterious and strange, and we could just hop over his story. But here's what I think we should see: *Throughout history, God is constantly giving us hints and clues that point to Jesus, our prophet, priest, and king.* Jesus did not pop into history out of nowhere. The Jewish people were waiting a long time for their Messiah. And here in Genesis 14, we get a quick glimpse of what the Messiah would look like, long before the Jewish people had any clue to be looking for him.

Some folks over the years have thought that Melchizedek *was* Jesus, come to visit Abram in what's called a Christophany. So many features of Melchizedek are similar, and our passage from Hebrews today compares the two. Yet Hebrews also says that Melchizedek is a *type* of Jesus, meaning that he intentionally points the way towards Jesus. His existence also explains how Jesus can be our prophet, priest, and king. Since Jesus is eternal, He comes before Melchizedek, and if Melchizedek could be a priest and king, so could Jesus, without having to come from the tribe of Levi. As our reading today says, Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Let's also understand that because Jesus is eternal, Melchizedek is a type of Jesus, not the other way. He points to Jesus forward because Jesus will come as a man to save us from our sins, but he points backwards to Jesus who existed before him.

In Melchizedek, God gives us hints about the future Messiah, and the roles that Jesus has as the Messiah mean everything to us. Here's why. He's our Prophet – He speaks words of truth over our lives. He speaks truth about our sin and that we are enslaved to it, but He also speaks the truth that He alone can set us free from sin. Instead of the condemnation we deserve, He speaks holy blessings over us, calling us part of the family now – that we who trust in Him exist as His brothers and sisters eternally. He calls us by name into His Kingdom. We hear His words of truth and, if we truly hear them, we are changed.

He is our great high priest. The priests in the line of Aaron from the tribe of Levi had to make sacrifices day after day, year after year, because their sacrifices could only cover up sin, not defeat it and remove it from the people. One generation of priests would die and another would take their place in a never-ending cycle. The greatest of earthly priests could only enter into the Most Holy Place once a year.

But Jesus is greater than them, and we surely need Him. Because Jesus is both our priest and our sacrifice. Because He is perfect – perfect God become perfect man – He can make a sacrifice that does not need to be repeated. And He Himself is the sacrifice. He gave Himself willingly for us, the priest who did not offer a goat or a lamb but offered Himself. And because He gave Himself, we have access to God the Father and entry into the Kingdom of God through faith and trust in Christ.

We have such a blessing in Christ as our great high priest because we never need another. Jesus eternally stands in the gap for us. His sacrifice for us never needs to be renewed or replaced. You can count on it forever. Despite your sins and failing, despite all our failures to follow and to obey well, you never need to worry that the blood of Jesus isn't enough. It always is. He lives eternally interceding for us. All who trust in Him will not face God's justice for our sins but receive His mercy forever.

And that all explains why Jesus is our King. He watches over us better than any earthly king or president or chancellor or prime minister ever could. He rules over us, but He does so with a gentle hand and a perfect character, looking after our needs and providing for us. We obey Him because we belong to Him – and because He is a king worth following. Many leaders make bold promises and use powerful words and charisma to get people to follow them. But no other king has laid down His life so that I might enjoy all the benefits of His Kingdom. And so we willingly lay down our old lives of rebellion and pride and sin to take up our new lives as Kingdom citizens under Jesus' rule and reign. Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils to honor God and God's blessing brought through this mysterious priest. We owe so much more to Christ, who saves us from eternal death, and yet what He wants is us, as faithful followers, spreading word of God's love.

Hidden in the details of today's passage are the hints of our Messiah. Let's not miss them. Instead, like Abram, let's throw off the sin that can so easily entangle us and give our honor, glory, praise, and worship to the God who gave us Melchizedek to point the way to our prophet, priest, and King Jesus, who God gave for us so that we could live under His gracious and merciful reign forevermore.