

THE KING OF PEACE

by David H. Roper

Chapter 14 is one of the first places in the book of Genesis that touches a point of history. This passage is cast against great battles and empires of great names. The men whose names are mentioned in Chapter 14, Verse 1, are men who are well-known from the monuments of this period.

And yet, as you read this chapter, you get the impression that these are only the incidentals of the story. God's preoccupation is with Abram and Abram's walk with Him. God's real concern is for the heart of his man. Though Abram was a nobody, God called him out of very obscure origins to be somebody. He is, as Paul described himself, unknown -- and yet, he is well-known, because in God's eyes he is an important figure. He is a strategic figure who had a great impact upon his time and continues to this day to have that sort of an impact. Though from a secular standpoint there are some great names from this time, the greatest name of all is that of Abram, and the work that God was doing in his life.

In Genesis 14, Abram was returning from the slaughter of four kings from Mesopotamia. Their names are given to us in Verse 1: Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim. Their names don't mean much to us, but they were well-known at that time. These men had carried out a punitive raid on the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities to the south of the Dead Sea.

After years of paying tribute to these Mesopotamian kings, five kings who lived around the region of Sodom rebelled against these Mesopotamian kings. Chedorlaomer led his forces out, looted the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, burned them, and took captives back with him to Mesopotamia.

We are told in Verse 10:

Now the valley of Siddim was full of tar pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and they fell into them [they leaped into them to hide]. But those who survived fled to the hill country. {Gen 14:10 NASB}

These men wreaked total havoc in these towns, taking the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah and their sister cities captive. Lot, who was the nephew of Abram, was one of those taken captive -- and that brings Abram into the story, because he goes to rescue his nephew.

Throughout the rest of this account we are told how Abram chased these kings to Dan and engaged them in conflict there. Then he chased them north of Damascus, and finally he drove them out of the country, and was able to save Lot and his family and the other Sodomites and their goods and bring them back with him.

As you read this chapter, it is difficult to see the magnitude of this action. Abram had a very small force -- less than 400 men -- and he had taken on four of the greatest powers of that age.

It was somewhat like the recent Israeli strike in Uganda. In the aftermath of this strike, you wonder what this action ultimately will cost, and whether Uganda will retaliate.

Abram is making his way back to Hebron with the captives, traveling along one of the trade routes that run along the crest of the Judean highlands. As he is traveling, he encounters two men: this king Melchizedek, who is the king of Salem, and the king of Sodom. We read of the events that transpire because of their meeting.

If this is your first time to read Genesis 14, you must wonder who Melchizedek is, because he has no historical antecedence. We don't know where he comes from -- there is no genealogy given, he is not tied in with anyone we know about. He just appears, and he disappears. He is never heard of again in history. His name occurs twice more in the Scriptures, in Hebrews 7 and Psalm 110; but, historically, we know nothing about Melchizedek. Who is he? Where does he come from? What is the significance of this brief meeting with Abram?

We can pick up a number of facts about Melchizedek from this passage.

First, we learn that he is a king. Abram met this king in the King's Valley, the Kidron, just to the east of Jerusalem. In the book of Second Samuel this is identified as the King's Valley.

We also know that Melchizedek was the king of Jerusalem, because Salem was the ancient name of Jerusalem. Long before the Israelites captured it, Jerusalem was known as the city of peace -- Shalem, or Urusalim, as it was known in many of the inscriptions of this period. In this translation, Salem is merely the shortened form for the name of the city.

So Melchizedek was one of the Canaanite kings of the city of Jerusalem, and he met Abram as Abram was returning from this conflict. Melchizedek gave Abram bread and wine to fortify him. Abram had been involved in a very difficult battle, he had traveled long and hard, and his men were tired and hungry. Melchizedek met their need at a crucial time.

The account also tells us that Melchizedek was a king/priest, which was unusual. Any Jew reading this account at a later time in history would immediately fix his attention on the two offices that Melchizedek held, because nowhere in Israel do you have any example of these two offices being combined. Kings and priests were separate. These offices were divided because the kings might be tempted to use their spiritual or religious power to gain political power over the people. But here is a man who is both king and priest -- a man who represents God to the people and the people of God, and who also exercises political authority. So he is somewhat unique.

We are also told that Melchizedek worshipped God Most High. This was a term which the Canaanites used for the highest god. But in this case, we have a Canaanite who worships one God -- he is a monotheist. He worships the same God that Abram worships, the God who is the possessor of heaven and earth. It all belongs to him. He not only created it, but he also possesses it.

So Melchizedek appears as a priest/king from the city of Jerusalem, and he gives Abram and his retainers bread and wine. He blesses Abram and calls his attention to the fact that it was God Most High who delivered him. The one who is the possessor of heaven and earth is the one who has consistently met Abram's needs.

Who is this Melchizedek? His name describes him as the king of righteousness. His name is composed of two words, *malki* (king) and *sedeq* (righteousness). He is the king of righteousness. In Old Testament terms, the word "righteousness" means conformity to a standard, and the standard is Godlikeness. Men who were like God were righteous men.

Suppose that you purchased some property and were uncertain whether the man who sold you the property had measured it accurately. In fact, you suspected that he had used an 11-inch ruler. How would you check it out? You could use some of the 12-inch rulers that you knew about, but he might not be willing to take your word for it. So you could go back to Washington, D. C., to the Bureau of Weights and Measures, and you would find there a platinum bar marked out in inches and feet, and you could check his ruler against that 12-inch standard, and you could establish whether his was a righteous measure or not. That is what the term "righteous" means in the Old Testament sense. It is conformity to a standard, and the standard is the character of God. Everything must be measured in those terms.

Later, in Hebrews, Melchizedek is called the king of peace, the one who has authority to grant peace. Now *peace*, in Old Testament terms, means "wholeness, completeness."

In Deuteronomy 25, when Moses describes the need for just weights and measures, he says, "Whatever weight you have, be sure that it is righteous and peaceful." That is, be sure your weight is according to the standard, not lighter than the accepted standard. Merchants had an unscrupulous habit of filing the corners off their weights, and thus they would cheat the people by using these measurements. God says to make your weight whole and entire, and according to the standard. So the king of Salem was a man who was complete and had authority over wholeness, the authority to grant adequacy, and he was the king of righteousness, with authority over righteousness.

Let's try to imagine what Abram was thinking as he was returning from the slaughter of these kings. I am sure he was a little uneasy. He might have been somewhat exhilarated, as we are after some great victory.

If you have been watching the Olympics this past week, you have seen that look on the faces of young men and women who are Olympic champions. There is a tremendous sense of exhilaration that comes from having won.

But we know from the context that Abram was also feeling something else -- fear. In Chapter 15, Verse 1, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision at night, and said, "Stop fearing, Abram." That is the way that should be read, for that is the force of those words. Abram was afraid. He had enraged four of the mightiest men of his time, and he was afraid they would retaliate. He had ventured himself in a precipitous act of faith, and now he was second-guessing himself.

Have you ever done that? Have you thought that God had called you to do a certain thing, and so you did it, believing that God would undergird you. Then when you got out there you began to wonder, "What in the world am I doing? Did I really do that? Is God going to support me in this project?"

We have had in our home this past week a young couple who will be studying here next year. They are leaving very secure jobs and a home, and they have children who are in school. They gave all this up because they feel that God is calling them to study in the scribe program here next year.

Then they arrived here with no jobs -- and you know how expensive housing is. There are all sorts of superficial indications that they made the wrong decision. Although they have been strong in faith, there have been many temptations to second-guess, and to wonder if this is truly the direction the Lord wants them to go. Who of us can't identify with that? We have all been there. And that is what Abram felt.

This man Melchizedek comes at the time of Abram's greatest need, and he ministers grace to him. Melchizedek does two things: First, he gives Abram bread and wine -- he ministers to his physical need. I believe this initial action is symbolic for the second action that Melchizedek takes, which is to bless Abram. Now, the word "bless" means to bestow upon another all that that person needs for life. It is the bestowal of those things that make one adequate to live, those things that give us the capacity to cope. So Melchizedek blesses Abram -- he gives him the resources for facing the demands that he has to face. Essentially, in blessing Abram he reminds him that it is God Most High who is the possessor of heaven and earth.

Reading between the lines, I can see what was going on in Abram's mind as he made his way south by Jerusalem. He probably had his hand calculator out and was trying to determine how he was going to pay the bills for this operation. He had wasted a great deal of time on this expedition, and probably had lost some of his own goods. But he was thinking how he could retain some of the goods from Sodom for himself. All of this was going through his mind, and he was very uneasy about the provision for his own needs. Melchizedek meets him and reminds him of the source of his adequacy -- God Most High.

You see, the greatest attack Abram was going to face was not from the kings of Mesopotamia. They were no threat. They are never heard of again in the scriptural account. The greatest attack upon Abram came from the king of Sodom.

The king of Sodom suggested that Abram keep the goods for himself. "That's the way to provide for your needs. Keep the booty that the Mesopotamians took from us and give me the souls," he said. "Give me the people and you keep the goods."

Abram was sorely tempted to count on those material possessions. But Melchizedek tells Abram: "No, your confidence is in God Most High." So when the attack of the king of Sodom comes, Abram's response, in almost the same words as Melchizedek's, is this (Verse 22):

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth," {Gen 14:22 NASB}

It is *Yahweh*, it is the Lord, who is the Most High God, who owns it all. The king of Sodom may have a few possessions, but as we know from reading further in Genesis, all of those possessions were dedicated to destruction. It wasn't long before all of them were destroyed. The king of Sodom has only those possessions, but the God Most High owns it all. He is the possessor of the universe. Therefore, Abram says,

"... I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" {Gen 14:23 NASB}

"My confidence is in God Most High," says Abram. "I will count on him, rather than these human resources."

A thousand years later, David, who in one sense succeeded Melchizedek to the throne, pointed out that Melchizedek is like Messiah, in that he has been designated a king/priest forever by God. Now David knew that Melchizedek was not Messiah. He was not the angel of Jehovah. He was a historical figure; but he illustrates the kind of ministry that Messiah would have. He would meet our needs, whatever they were, in whatever situation we find ourselves. He would be a king/priest, with authority over our lives. He would mediate for us. He would stand on the Godward side of us, as Melchizedek did with Abram, and he would minister grace to us. He would supply right conduct, the power to be righteous, and he would supply peace -- the sense of inner adequacy. Thus our vision would be filled not with our own needs, and our own problems, and our own despair, but with the Lord Most High, who is the possessor of heaven and earth.

Hebrews 7 adds one further note, based on David's statement in Psalm 110:4 that Melchizedek would abide a priest forever. It appears that Melchizedek has no antecedents, there is no genealogy given for him. We don't know who his mother and father were, nor do we know who his descendants were. He just appears on the scene. Because this is so, it is as though he is eternal. He is like our high priest, Jesus, who is always available to us. He does not die; he is never inaccessible. He is always available.

Even Melchizedek is not a perfect example of a priest who is always available to us. Some years later. Abram made his way through that same valley on the way to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son. For all he knew, he was going to have to offer his son, and this son was his last hope for his seed. Moriah is just a hundred yards or so above the city of Salem, and that particular time Melchizedek did not appear. There was no one there. There was only Abram and the Lord. So Melchizedek himself is not a perfect illustration of the priest who is to come.

The king/priest who is to come, the Lord Jesus, is always available. He is always adequate. He is there to meet our needs, he is there to give help in times of pressure and distress. It may be a head-on attack -- the sort of thing that Abram experienced from the kings of the east -- or it may be like the more subtle attack that came from the king of Sodom -- the unexpected attack, the temptation to count on our own resources instead of laying hold of the resources of the possessor of heaven and earth. But whatever the attack is, Jesus is a high priest who is always available. He is always there.

From reading the Bible, I have come to the conclusion that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe that heaven helps those who help themselves, and there are those who believe that God helps those who believe in the seed of the woman -- Jesus. The bread and wine that Melchizedek gave Abram is an illustration of the resources that come from God, just as the elements of the bread and juice that we partake of in communion are symbolic of the resources that we have in Christ. They are merely symbols -- but wherever we are, we can eat and drink of Christ. He is the high priest who remains, who ministers bread and wine to us wherever we are.

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