

return of the people who made up his part of the plunder (one fifth). However, before Abram allowed the king of Sodom anything, he gave one tenth of everything to Melchizedek, and then split everything else between himself and the three brothers who had gone with him. By my calculation, that makes the total plunder left for Abram to control as less than one quarter of the original. Abram then returned to the king of Sodom his total portion of what was left, which was less than a twentieth of the total, when what he came for was something closer to a fifth! Abram was not being mean with the king of Sodom, he was being generous on his own part, but shrewd; and he also made it clear that riches and wealth were a matter for God.

Application

Over the years which followed this incident, Sodom soon became a city that was out of control and cursed with wickedness. This caused God to destroy it (Gen 18:22 – 19:28). In fulfilment of his blessing on Abram, those who would not bless Abram received a curse (12:3) which was swiftly fulfilled. The blessing through Melchizedek, however, continued for many generations. When David took Jerusalem and became King (2 Sam 5), he became a 'priest / king' after Melchizedek, but of a new order, charged with a covenant relationship with God whereby blessing would come to all humanity (see 2 Samuel 7). This is why Psalm 110 refers to the king of Jerusalem as a 'priest according to the order of Melchizedek' (v4). In the course of time, when there was no king left in Jerusalem, this promise of God became wrapped up with the many different features of the Jewish people's 'Messianic hope' of a Saviour in the line of David. It is no wonder therefore, that when the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote about the priestly work of Jesus, he saw it as a fulfilment of both Psalm 110 and also Genesis ch. 14; 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.' (Hebrews 5:8-10, see elsewhere in Hebrews). Melchizedek's blessings pointed to Jesus.

There are a whole range of issues which could be explored further in this passage, from the connection of the sacrifice of Christ with the bread and the wine, to the significance of tithing and the worship of God. Even the mystery of the many different names of God used by scripture is raised in this passage. All of this, however, came from the faithfulness and success of one man who had learned the hard way to be obedient to God; Abraham.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How is it that God can work through someone outside his chosen people, yet do so in a way which is consistent with His revelation; such as Melchizedek?
2. If you had been the king of Sodom, what would your reaction be to the events in this passage?
3. What more do we learn about Abram from this passage of scripture?

Discipleship

There is something important in this scripture about the power and importance of 'blessing'. We talk of 'blessing each other with the Grace' during a service of worship, or receiving a 'blessing' from a minister, priest or church elder, but true blessing is not a formal act. It arises from the circumstances of life, as in this passage, and indicates the truth of our inner attitudes towards others. There was blessing between Melchizedek and Abram, but not between Abram and the king of Sodom because of the presence of evil. True blessing is a precious thing to both give and receive, in church or outside of it.

Final Prayer

Father of all, You have given each of us a heart to love, yet we have too often covered our hearts with hardness and defensiveness. We ask You to remove these artificial barriers, and enable us both to truly love others with all our heart; and also be strong to withstand troubles and distress not in our own strength, but in God's strength alone; in whom we find salvation. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN

Prayer

Open our hearts Lord God, to the people we meet and with whom we work. Give us graciousness in our speech, love in our hearts, generosity in our praise, compassion in our attitudes and honesty in our dealings with all who we meet. In this Gospel way, may we make a difference to our world. Thank You Lord God. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the Elderly in the Church

Pray for those who are elderly and yet still continue to give a wonderful testimony to the faithfulness of God, despite any problems they face with aging. Pray for a good understanding within the church as a whole of the contribution such people can make, and the encouragement they can give if they can be enabled to share their experience and testimony.

Meditation

Where do you find peace?

In a quiet moment sitting down with something to read?
Wandering about in a garden, with its sights and smells?
Thinking to yourself whilst alone for a few moments?
Walking briskly through the hills on a weekend break?
Putting your head back for an afternoon snooze?
Talking to the one you love on a lazy Saturday morning?
Doing what you know you can do well, and enjoying it?
Where do you find peace?

Find the greater peace which passes understanding
When you know that the Lord has blessed you,
In more ways than you can think or number:
For Jesus is your Lord and Saviour,
And for that, you praise His Name.

Bible Study - Genesis 14:17-24

¹⁷ After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and his allies, the king of Sodom went out to meet Abram in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).
¹⁸ King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. ¹⁹ He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; ²⁰ and blessed is God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one tenth of everything.

²¹ The king of Sodom then said to Abram, 'Give me the people, but keep the goods for yourself.' ²² But Abram replied to the king of Sodom, 'I have sworn to the LORD, God Most High, the one who owns heaven and earth, ²³ that I would not take even a thread or a sandal-thong or anything of yours, so that you would have reason to say, "I made Abram rich." ²⁴ I will accept nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share due to the men who went with me; Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them have their share.'

Review

In the first half of Genesis 14, Abram heard that his nephew Lot had been taken captive by an army of eastern kings who were marauding through Transjordan. Local city states including Sodom, where Lot lived, refused to pay the extortion demanded by the eastern kings and now paid the price through defeat in battle (14:10-12). Because of his standing and wealth, Abram

was able to muster an armed force together with three local brothers (14:13), and successfully went to the rescue of Lot after a brief but skilful military operation (14:15).

Whilst the story says much about Abram's place in the wider stage of the world affairs of his day, the full consequences of what had happened only became clear as he returned home. Two kings came to greet the returning 'hero' and the train of people and goods he brought with him; the king of Sodom, and Melchizedek, the king of 'Salem', (generally considered to be Jerusalem – see Bible study). The treatment he received from these two kings was radically different.

Melchizedek laid on a royal banquet of 'bread and wine' for Abram and blessed both him and 'God Most High', and Abram gratefully accepted this greeting and responded by giving king Melchizedek one tenth of the plunder from his victory over the eastern kings. The king of Sodom, however, had turned out only to get back what he wanted from Abram. He demanded the return of the servants and slaves he used to maintain his power within Sodom, and said so as soon as he had a chance to speak to Abram (v21). Abram responded to this curt demand in two ways. He told the king of Sodom that he had no intention of making any personal gain at his expense (v23) and said that he would give him back not just the people he had demanded but everything that belonged to Sodom. Abram was in control of the situation however, and made one proviso; the three brothers who had gone with him should firstly receive their share (v24).

There is much to discover within this story. Not least the significance of the 'priest / king' of Salem who worshipped the same God as Abram, and the importance of the bread and the wine he brought. All this became important to later kings of Jerusalem of the dynasty of David, and eventually became enmeshed in the Messianic hope of the Old Testament, as Psalm 110 testifies 'you are a priest for ever ... according to the order of Melchizedek', a passage taken up by early Christians which helped them to understand Jesus' great High Priestly role in the winning of their salvation. The original story itself, however, shows exactly how God's original blessing on Abram worked. God had said 'I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse whoever curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (12:3) Melchizedek blessed Abram, and was honoured and blessed as a consequence by becoming a role model of priesthood which pointed to Christ. Sodom, however, took from Abram what he could; and his cold response left him with no blessing; very soon, Sodom would be destroyed by God because of its wickedness. Those who blessed Abram were themselves blessed, and those who cursed him were cursed!

Going Deeper

This event is much debated within Scripture and within the church, so it is worth getting to know exactly what happened. We will look firstly at the name used for 'God' in this text, before spending time to look at other details of the story of the priest Melchizedek.

God is revealed through a new name!

The blessing of Abraham by Melchizedek is quite an extraordinary turn of events, with considerable importance for the future of the Israelite people and the Christian Church. Those who originally wrote down this story for us were aware of its importance, even though they did so before the time of Christ. The first important thing to notice is that the name 'God' is used for the first time in this last part of Genesis 14. Up to this point in the Bible, two names of God had been used; 'elohim', a general name for 'God' as used in Genesis 1, and 'JHWH' the holy name of God which is normally translated as 'LORD' with small capitals to indicate reverence. The absence of any reference to God in the first part of the story gives a sense of anticipation for what will come later, and when God is finally named by Melchizedek (v18), he does not use either of the two previous names, but a different one, 'El Elyon' which translates as 'God Most High'. In English we have a tendency to focus just on the word 'God' and therefore not spot the clear and important differences that take place between these names.

Does Melchizedek worship a different God from Abraham? Certainly, archaeological investigations have found that there was a belief in a 'High God' amongst the various different gods believed in by different nations of ancient times, and some believe that Melchizedek worshipped this 'High God' in his city state of 'Salem'. There is nothing definitive about this, however, and all we have to go on is the text before us, in which Abram, both by his deeds in

accepting Melchizedek's blessing, and his words in verse 22, clearly regarded 'El Elyon' as being the same God as 'JHWH', the personal God in whom he believed. Abram, in his reply to the king of Sodom, talked of both 'JHWH' and 'El Elyon' in the same breath, describing this God as 'the one who owns heaven and earth'. Abram was content to accept that the name 'El Elyon' referred to the same Creator God through whom he had been blessed. In speaking to the king of Sodom in this way, he inferred to the discourteous petty monarch that all things belonged to God, and that the 'possession' of other people he sought was at least contrary to the natural laws of the God who made the world (v22).

If Abram was able to offer this opinion to the king of Sodom, then this says two things. Firstly that Abram saw his wealth (including people) as given to him by God and for which he had a duty of care; and secondly, he was not going to quibble about 'names' of God providing both he and Melchizedek were talking about the one true God who made the world and everything in it. The fact that 'El Elyon' is now regarded even in Christian tradition as one of the important names of God used in the Bible is testimony to Abram's enduring faith, rooted in the revelations of these scriptures.

Melchizedek, the bread and wine, and tithing.

There has been much debate about the location of the meeting between Abram, Melchizedek and the king of Sodom, but it does appear that 'the valley of Shaveh' was indeed the name of a valley only two miles south of Jerusalem. Abram was returning from battle and heading further south towards his home settlement of Hebron, and a passage past Jerusalem was not unreasonable. As the victor, Abram had full rights to the spoils of the battle, but the grudging king of Sodom had made his way up to the hill country of Jerusalem from the plains around the Dead Sea in order to get back as much as he could.

Melchizedek, however, brought 'bread and wine'. In the Christian tradition we are so used to the term 'bread and wine' as referring to the last supper of our Lord that it is difficult to read these words in the Old Testament and not make immediate connections with the priestly sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross! Before we become carried away with this interpretation (which is quite reasonable given the theme of 'Hebrews'), it is wise to look at what the offering of Melchizedek actually was. 'Bread and water' was a phrase which meant 'ordinary food', however, 'bread and wine' meant 'a celebratory, royal meal' (see 1 Sam 16:20); so Melchizedek was coming out from Jerusalem to meet Abram and his troops with a celebratory feast in recognition of Abram's authority because of what he had done! Abram was grateful for the effort on his behalf and gave an offering in return (v20).

The giving of one tenth of his spoils of war to Melchizedek was Abram's practical way of accepting this priest / king's blessing and returning a portion of what he had to Melchizedek as if it were a gift to God Himself. That is what is meant by the ancient practice of tithing; it was a way of honouring God through giving to those who were His priests. This is the first time that tithing is mentioned in the Bible in any form, and one of the few in which the figure of one tenth is given. It is fascinating to see where these new elements of the worship of God appear within scripture and within Genesis in particular. Up to now, the worship of God has been reported as being the building of altars (Noah, 8:20, Abram, 12:7,8), but now we have added celebratory meals and tithing (which you could also call 'sacrificial giving').

All this happened in the context of the 'blessing' offered to Abram by Melchizedek. The function of a priest was to be the means of God's blessing of His people, as Melchizedek was here, for Abram. It did not matter that he was not one of the 'chosen people', or a family member of Abram. God demonstrated throughout scripture that he was willing to use people outside of the mainstream of His chosen people, for example Abimelech (Gen 21:22), Rahab (Joshua 2:11), Ruth (Ruth 1:16) and many more.

The spoils of war

If the blessings of God were so generously shared between Melchizedek and Abram, then the spoils won back by the efforts of the king of Sodom were minimal. A simple rough calculation will indicate that of the original plunder taken by the eastern kings, one fifth would have come from Sodom (there were five states plundered). What the king of Sodom was seeking was a