

THE PERIL OF VICTORY

by Ray C. Stedman

Following Abram's great victory over the invading kings from the east, the 14th chapter of Genesis relates a curious incident with a strange and mysterious king named Melchizedek. The book of Hebrews makes so much of Abram's encounter with Melchizedek that our curiosity is awakened and we are stimulated to find out more about this man of mystery. We may be sure that the deliberate interjection of this account at this point in Abram's life is designed by the Spirit of God to unfold to us blessed and needful truths.

Abram is now on his way back to Sodom with all the goods of the city and much of the population, including Lot and his family. It is a time of victory for Abram, and therefore a time of peculiar peril. In our spiritual life, the enemy loves best to strike when we are relaxed and off guard after some spiritual victory or period of great usefulness. His approach then is never open or frontal, but subtle and insidious, taking full advantage of our relaxed defenses. We shall see, then, how Abram is suddenly confronted with a subtle temptation on his way back to Sodom, how, by a strange interlude, deliverance comes to him, and, finally, we shall observe the sensible attitude he displays concerning others who are involved in this incident.

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). (Gen.14:17 {RSV})

Our special attention is directed to the place where the king of Sodom met Abram on his way back from the battlefield. It was a valley right outside the little village of Salem. In later Israelite history, Salem became transformed into Jerusalem, the capital of all Israel. The valley outside the city, even then known as the "King's Valley," was none other than the Valley of the Kidron, the little brook that ran down along the eastern side of Jerusalem, separating the mount of Olives from the city. It was into this valley that our Lord went with his disciples on the night he was betrayed, crossing over to go up the slopes of the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane's Garden. In this strategic and historic spot, the king of Sodom met Abram.

Skipping down to Verses 21-23, we read:

And the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself." But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" {Gen 14:21-23 RSV}

Here is the subtle temptation which suddenly came upon Abram. He was met by the king of Sodom, who had somehow escaped capture and was in the city when news came of the triumphant return of Abram with the spoils of war.

On the surface, the king of Sodom's offer seems a perfectly justifiable reward. Abram had fought his great battle not, of course, on behalf of the King of Sodom, but for the sake of Lot and his family. Nevertheless, the effect of his victory was of great benefit to the whole of that wicked city. For this reason, the king was there to meet him. A special welcoming committee had been appointed, headed by the king himself, to confer upon Abram the usual reward for a conquering hero. The king simply asked for the return of the residents of the city; the goods and riches he gratefully offered to Abram. The wealth of Sodom was all to be Abram's!

Now notice the subtlety of this temptation. It appeared to be so right and proper! Abram could well have said, "This is certainly only what I deserve, and after all, it is the custom to do this. Everyone does it! There are no strings attached. I can take the wealth and go my way back to my tent and altar and never go near Sodom again." Who of us, standing in Abram's shoes, would not have thought like this?

But it was exactly in the apparent freedom of the gift that the peril lay. To a man of Abram's character, it is impossible to accept this kind of a gift without feeling an obligation to the giver. If he had been required to sign some kind of contract, he would have found it easy to say, "No," but to accept this gift without strings would be to make it exceedingly difficult to say, "No," to anything later on. From that day on the king of Sodom could say, "Abram is indebted to me. If I ever need any military help, I know where I can get it. My man is up there on the hillside." The gift was an insidious threat to the independence of the man who took orders from no one but God. If Abram yielded, he would never be wholly God's man again.

Note the timing of the temptation; it came when he might well be off guard, enjoying the popularity of the hour. He had earned a few moments of relaxation after the strain of battle, and at this quiet moment in his life the subtle offer came. Have you experienced something like this? I have seen young Christian college students who are surrounded throughout the school year by subtle and perilous dangers to their faith and fellowship with Jesus Christ, and who maintain proper safeguards, keeping alert, aware of the peril that confronts them. But when they come home on vacation, they let down their guard and there comes some sudden and appalling failure. Satan has chosen that moment to attack.

There is no doubt that the pressure on Abram to accept this gift is very great. It was an expression of gratitude on the part of the king and I am sure that Abram felt the king would have been hurt if he rejected this sincere offer. I have found that many Christians, myself included, have been trapped by the fear of offending someone if we say, "No!" We are troubled about what they will think, and so often very little troubled about what God will think. We fail to realize if we cannot say "No" now, how can we ever say "No" after the offer has been accepted and we are indebted to some degree. The easiest time to say "No" is now!

This is what the Apostle Paul means when he says, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything," (1 Cor 6:12b {RSV}). That is, the only one I wish to serve is Christ. The only power to which I will yield my life is his. Anything else that threatens to control me or limit me I reject! It may be lawful, it may even be in good standing all around, but if it makes any demand upon me that is not his demand, I do not want it! This is what Abram is so beautifully demonstrating here.

He replies to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" Note the positiveness of that decision. He says, "I will take nothing; not a thread, not even a shoestring! I do not care that you offer me. I want nothing. No thing. Period. That settles it!" More positive language is simply not possible.

And note the solemnity of what he says. This is tremendously important to Abram. It is not some mere passing whim. He says, "I have sworn to the Lord my God." This touches the deepest thing in his life. He takes a solemn vow that he will not touch anything of Sodom's. And how perfectly frank he is: "lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" In other words, he is saying, "I want you to know why I have done this. I can serve only one king at a time, and I want you to understand that I am not concerned for my own enrichment, least of all through you. If God doesn't give me something, then I don't want it. If it doesn't come to me through my God, to whom I have committed my life and from whom I have determined to accept whatever he offers, then I don't want it."

It is a bold and positive declaration, is it not? What a clear-cut victory! The subtle trap of the enemy has been uncovered and the danger is safely past. The Lone Ranger escapes unscathed again! Ah, but why? This is what we are interested in. How is it Abram saw through this subtle thing so clearly, and so stoutly resisted the almost overpowering pressures to which he was exposed? Now let me put it to you bluntly: If you were in Abram's shoes that day, knowing your own heart, would you have offended the king by rejecting his grateful offer? I am sure my own devious heart would have viewed it as an added bonus from God, as a result of my great faithfulness to him in battle, and I would have accepted Sodom's gift. Well, Abram did not! Yet he was a man like me, of like passions and heart. How, then, could he pass this test so easily? The answer lies in this strange interlude with Melchizedek which we have passed over till now, Verses 18-20:

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said,

**"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"
And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. {Gen 14:18-20 RSV}**

Before the king of Sodom met Abram with his wily offer, Abram had already met with another king, the mysterious Melchizedek. He steps suddenly out of the shadows, ministers to Abram, and just as suddenly disappears from the pages of Scripture, and we never hear another word about him until we come to the 110th Psalm, where David declares that the Messiah to come is made a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Then another thousand years roll by, and in the book of Hebrews we have another extended reference to this strange individual.

Who was Melchizedek? The guesses range from Shem, the son of Noah, who, according to some chronologists, could have still been alive at this time, to an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ in human form.

All we are positively told of him is that he is the king of Salem (which afterwards became Jerusalem), and that he is the priest of the Most High God (Hebrew: *El Elyon*). His own name means "king of righteousness." He appears suddenly in the Scriptural record without any mention of his father or mother, no birth date, and no subsequent account of his death. These omissions from the record are seized upon by the writer of Hebrews to indicate that since we have no record of his genealogy, this man is a type of the eternal priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ who, in actuality, has no beginning nor ending of days, but who ever lives to make intercession for all those who come unto God by him. Thus, the Melchizedek priesthood is a ministry of help to those who face a time of trouble.

Here, then, is a man who is evidently a Gentile king. The original knowledge of God as the maker and possessor of the heavens and the earth, passed along by Adam to his descendants, has evidently come down to Melchizedek unchanged. He is a worshipper of the true God, and a priest to that true God. In this sublime presentation of Scripture, the record shows him in such a way that he becomes a type of our Lord Jesus who is our heavenly Melchizedek, ready to minister to us in our need. His specific ministry is to reveal *El Elyon*, the Most High God, the One who owns everything in heaven and on earth. He is the one perfectly adequate to meet any human need. This is what Paul declares to the Philippians 4:19 {RSV}: "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Now we can see why God led Abram back to his home by way of the King's Valley. The king of Sodom is coming to meet him, but Abram knows nothing of his approach, nor of the subtle offer with which he plans to put Abram in his debt. Had he known of it, he would have seen nothing wrong with it, for Abram is not different from you and me. The peril is too subtle to detect; it looks too innocent and attractive. So God sent Melchizedek to meet him!

His first ministry to Abram was to remind him of the character of the God he served. Doubtless he warned Abram of the subtle trap awaiting him in the offer of Sodom's wealth, and then perhaps he said, "Abram, your God is the possessor of heaven and earth. He made it all. He owns it. He holds all its wealth in his hands. There is nothing that he cannot give you. This is the God to whom you belong."

And then we are told he served him bread and wine. We need no interpreter for this. These are the symbols of love. They speak eloquently of strength and joy flowing out from the passion of self-giving love. All this is recorded in the Old Testament, yet as we read it, we can see in this historical incident a beautiful picture of the need of our own lives. There is nothing that has such power to motivate the Christian heart as to partake, with the people of God, of these symbols of the suffering of our blessed Lord. He gave himself in the fullness of his life, poured out all that he was, and as we feast by the Spirit upon the symbols of his life, that life strengthens the inner man, lends sinew to the resolve of the soul, and makes us able to meet all that comes our way. This is the only power sufficient to make us reject the world's offer and maintain our independence as servants of Christ. The love of Christ constrains us!

In the intimacy of this fellowship, under the ministry of Melchizedek, Abram worships his God. The record says he gave him a tenth of everything, that is, he gave him tithes of all he had. The tithe is not a debt paid to God -- it is rather a symbolic representation that everything belongs to him. The antitype in the New Testament is not that we continue to give a tenth, as under the Law, nor, as in this case, in patriarchal days, but to recognize that all we are and have is to be given to God in worship. In Second Corinthians 8:5, Paul writes of the Macedonian Christians, "but first, they gave themselves to the Lord and to us," {2 Cor 8:5b RSV}. The whole of our life is to be focused on the one aim of serving God.

Here in this place, the King's Valley, where centuries later a greater Melchizedek would sweat in bloody agony in a Garden, Abram enjoyed by faith the high priestly ministry of Christ. His heart ravished with the love of Christ, and refreshed and strengthened in spirit, he saw that God alone could satisfy his heart. There was no other place where he could find the deep-seated heart satisfaction that makes the rivers of living water begin to flow. Here he swore to the Lord his God he would not touch a single thing that Sodom could offer him, and in the strength of this encounter, he rose up and went out to meet the fair and innocent-appearing trap. Now he was ready for it!

Have you ever found yourself trapped by some subtle appeal that looked innocent enough on the surface and seemed to be the popular thing to do? Too late, you realized its true nature, when the damage had already been done, and all you could say was, "I didn't realize...", "I never dreamed...", "I meant right...!"

You may remember an account of an unfortunate young man who perjured himself some years ago in connection with a TV quiz program. Everyone wondered at his apparently endless knowledge of difficult subjects. When he was finally exposed as having been given the right answers beforehand, he explained to the court that it had all looked so innocent to him. He justified his deceit to himself on the basis that he was advancing the cause of intellectualism and education. He felt that as people saw him give these almost impossible answers, they themselves would be stimulated to learn more. He knew some would regard it as cheating, but it was justifiable as advancing a good cause. Then, at last, there came a realization in his own heart of what he had done, and he confessed it. He said, I was deceived, deluded. I couldn't see the way it really looked until it was too late."

This happens to many of us, doesn't it? Life is full of subtleties like this -- little decisions, little problems, incidents that seem so innocent on the surface. We find it easy to rationalize and justify our choices. Why is it we fail? It is because we do not go to our Melchizedek! We give him no opportunity to minister to us and open our eyes. We do not come to the throne of grace, as we are bade, to find grace to help in time of need.

We are like poor, troubled Martha, stewing over her pots and pans in the kitchen until, out of patience, she comes storming into the parlor to blame the Lord Jesus for all her problems! Luke gives us the story in his gospel, Chapter 10:38-42: Martha meant to make the Lord welcome in her home, she intended to fix him a delicious meal, yet she ends up so frustrated and bewildered that she insults him and accuses him of causing the whole mess. In contrast, the Lord suggests to Martha that she needs what Mary had found. What was Mary doing? She was sitting at Jesus' feet, letting him open her eyes to truth as it really is. She was letting him possess her heart, and, as she did, she found life falling into place, the right things were being emphasized. She saw things in their proper perspective and focus.

Abram would never have passed by this subtle trap unscathed had Melchizedek not met him, and, in the intimacy of that fellowship, he saw what he would not otherwise have seen -- that the values on which the world sets great store are but baubles compared to the glory of fellowship with a Living God, Maker of heaven and earth. When the king of Sodom came, Abram could say, "Take your little toys and run back to Sodom, I want none of it. I want no man to say that he has made Abram rich. If anyone makes Abram rich, it will be God." What a victory!

One more incident is brought before us in this story. It is the very sensible attitude Abram displayed toward the others who were involved with him in this affair. He says to the king of Sodom,

"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 {RSV})

Abram, do you mean to say that it is right for these young men to have what is wrong for you to take? Is it possible to have a double standard of right -- one for you and one for them? What a lesson there is here for us!

These young men had not yet come to the stage of Christian living and maturity that Abram had achieved. There is no Melchizedek for them, or, if there was, they did not enter into the same depth of comprehension that Abram did. Abram is content to let God deal with them directly in these borderline areas. He is not going to force others to walk in the light of his conscience. Somehow, Abram has learned the truth of Romans 14, that we are not to judge our brother in these matters, Verse 5b {RSV}: "Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind."

I have had Christians tell me that God had spoken to their hearts and told them it was wrong for them to drink coffee, and they have tried to persuade me to stop, too. But I am still waiting for word from the Lord on this! I recall hearing of a dear old Nazarene evangelist called Uncle Bud Robinson. He spoke with a bit of a lisp and was well-known and well-loved by Christians throughout the West. Among certain groups these borderline issues are frequently raised, and whenever anyone would say to Uncle Bud, "How can a man drink coffee and be a Christian?" he would say, "Juth bring me a cup and I'll thow you."

It is a great lesson to learn that there are areas of our Christian life where we must walk alone before our God, and cannot force our views on others. So Abram says, in effect, "Let the young men have their share. It is not right for me to take anything, but they are not standing in my place. Let them have their share."

Now, life lies ahead of us with all its possibilities of peril and danger, both spiritual and physical. How we need to go on in the strength of the Lord our God, Maker of heaven and earth. Nothing that the world offers can fully meet our hearts' need. All that will really satisfy comes from him alone. We are in this world. We are expected to live in it. We are expected to use the world, but not to abuse it. We must not love it, nor demand anything from it.

Like Abram, we must lift up our hand and say, "I have sworn to the Lord my God, I will not touch anything that you have to offer."

Prayer

Our Father, how gracious you are to send us that blessed, heavenly Melchizedek to strengthen us in times of peril, and to enlighten our hearts. How clearly we see now the need for fellowship with Him. How dare we face the perplexities and complexities of this subtle world apart from daily fellowship in the King's Valley with Him. What easy prey we are to the snares of Satan without this. Deliver us daily, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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