

“NOT BY MIGHT”

This passage presents Abram as a brave and mighty warrior, gathering a band of men around him and setting out to rescue his captured nephew Lot. But this is much more than a story of military heroism. The account of the battle of the Valley of Siddim needs to be understood within the context of what God was doing at this point in the historical unfolding of his plan of redemption. In the preceding chapter, we saw Abram exercising his God-given faith, trusting the Lord to give him the land of Canaan. And juxtaposed to this, we saw Lot choosing to leave Canaan for greener-looking pastures near Sodom. As we see in the chapter we just read, that choice quickly proved ill for Lot. But Abram’s faith was affirmed, as the Lord instructed him to symbolically claim the land of Canaan by walking through its length and breadth. And now, in this chapter, when that land comes under attack, we see Abram acting as its lord and protector, rescuing those who were taken by the invading army. Humanly speaking, Abram is the hero in this passage. But even though he wins the victory, he makes sure that all the credit goes to God.

The conflict described here is a typical example of an international skirmish in the ancient world. One group of powerful city-states would form a coalition in order to subdue and subjugate others as their vassals. That is basically what is taking place in this passage. I realize that the amount of names and places mentioned here can make it a little difficult to follow the action, so I want to take a moment to summarize the military action that takes place. First, Chedorlaomer and three other kings from the land of Mesopotamia band together and bring the lands to the east of the Dead Sea under their

control. Then, after twelve years of subjugation, five of the Canaanite kings decide to revolt against their Mesopotamian overlords. But the rebellion is soon put down, as invading forces from Mesopotamia cut down along the eastern side of the Jordan river and rout the kings in a battle in the Valley of Siddim, near the southern shore of the Dead Sea. The Mesopotamians then plunder the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and begin their journey home, traveling up through Canaan on the western side of the Jordan, right past the place where Abram is now living. Upon learning that his nephew Lot is among those who have been taken captive by the invading army, Abram marshals a military force of his own and sets out in pursuit of the Mesopotamians. Once he catches up with them, he leads a nighttime assault, defeats the invaders, pushes them entirely out of Canaan, and then returns with all of the people and possessions that had been taken as plunder, including his nephew Lot.

That is a summary of the military action that takes place in the story. But none of that is what is really important in this passage. The important thing is how Abram responded to the two kings who came out to meet him after he returned from the field of victory. These two kings could not be more different from one another. The first was the king of the wicked city of Sodom. Though Abram had just saved his neck, he expressed no gratitude towards him. Instead, he had the audacity to make a demand of Abram, telling him to hand over the people he had rescued. And while it is true that he offered Abram the plunder, we get the sense that it was only offered grudgingly. In fact, his words indicate that he was trying to put Abram in his debt.

The other king who came out to meet Abram was Melchizedek, who greeted him with a royal banquet of bread and wine. And even more importantly, Melchizedek attributed Abram's victory to the Lord, saying "Blessed be Abram by God Most High...and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." Melchizedek is one of the most mysterious figures in the entire Bible. Everything that we know about him as a historical figure comes from what is said about him in this chapter. And, as you can see, it tells us very little. We know nothing about his lineage, his birth, or his death. We know nothing about his life aside from this one event. All we know is that he was both the king of Salem, an abbreviation for Jerusalem, and a priest of God Most High. The fact that Abram pays him a tithe of the plunder and then refers to the LORD by the title "God Most High" tells us that Melchizedek was a worshipper of the one true God. This is a point that is very mysterious to us, because ever since Genesis 12 God's dealings with mankind have focused on Abram. The line of promise runs through him. So where did Melchizedek come from? How did he come to know the one true God? We do not really know. All we can say is that, in the words of one theologian, Melchizedek stands as "a representative of the earlier, pre-Abrahamic knowledge of God." [Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 217] He seems to be one of the last remnants of true religion descended from Noah. The mysteriousness that surround Melchizedek caused David to see him as a figure that foreshadowed an even greater priest-king, one who would come and sit on his throne in Jerusalem. And the author of the letter to the Hebrews shows us that that priest-king is Jesus Christ. Jesus is a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Even

though Jesus was a descendent of Abraham, the figure of Melchizedek helps us to see that Christ's priestly ministry owed nothing to Abraham or to any other man. Christ alone is the Savior of his people.

Abram's response to the offer of the king of Sodom gives us some insight into what he did before he embarked on his pursuit of the invaders who had carried his nephew away. He told the king of Sodom that he made a vow to the Lord not to take any of the plunder from this battle. He prayed to the Lord for victory, but as he did so, he promised not to use military means to enrich himself or to secure the blessing that God had promised him. By refusing the offer of the king of Sodom, Abram was remembering the vow he had made to the Lord.

Instead of accepting the enticing offer made by the king of Sodom, Abram sided with Melchizedek in giving all the credit for this victory to God. Abram understood that the promises God had given him were not something that he should seek to obtain by worldly means. And he might very well have been tempted to do so. He could have used his victory over the four invading kings to become a major player in the politics of Canaan. He could have negotiated an alliance with the king of Sodom. He could have made demands of him. But he refused to do so. Abram may have led the army that routed the kings from the east, but he clearly believed that the Lord was the ultimate deliverer. He understood that the blessings that God had promised were going to be given to him by grace alone, not by his own power or cunning. God had told him, "*I will make of you a great nation...I will bless you and make your name great...To your offspring I will give*

this land...*I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth.*” Notice the subject in each of these sentences. God repeatedly says, “*I will do it.*” This is what theologians refer to as divine monergism. God is the one who accomplishes his saving purposes in the lives of his people. God is the one who is building his kingdom. This is a lesson that we must never forget. Listen to how it is articulated by theologian Michael Horton in his recent book, *Christless Christianity*:

“The church is not the gospel...We do not redeem; we were redeemed...The kingdom of God is something we are *receiving*, not something we are *building* (Heb. 12:28). The Lord of the church did not say, ‘Build my church’; he said that on the ‘rock’ of the confession that Jesus is the Christ, ‘I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it’ (Mt. 16:18).

In his Great Commission, the risen Christ did not say, ‘I’m leaving now, but you will take my place and extend my redeeming work by following my example.’ Rather, he said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Mt. 28:18-20). The indicative comes first and gives rise to the imperative - and even then, God always concludes with another indicative! The gospel goes behind us, before us, and ahead of us.” [230, 233]

This is the foundation upon which biblical religion has always rested. Yet the church throughout the ages has faced the constant temptation to forget it, to forget that what is promised in the gospel is given by grace alone. How easily we fall into the trap of thinking that we will never be able to reach our goals, either as individuals or as a church, without in some way allying ourselves with the world and its ideals. It is a temptation to which the church has yielded time and time again throughout the course of its history. And whenever that happens, it always proves fatal to the church's distinct identity. The Bible teaches us that if we belong to Christ, we are not of this world. Any alliance that we might make with the world in order to further the cause of the gospel, any embracing of the world's ideas about how to find peace and happiness, all such things are actually betrayals of the gospel, betrayals of our Lord.

Let me illustrate this by telling you the story of Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury in 16th century England. Cranmer was instrumental, along with other several other bishops of his day, in advancing the cause of the Protestant Reformation in England. But when Mary Tudor, who would later be nicknamed "Bloody Mary", came to the throne, the teachings of the Reformation were condemned, and many of those who were friendly to the Reformation, including Cranmer, were thrown into the Tower of London to await trial. Cranmer's fellow bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burned at the stake for their support of the Reformation, and Cranmer endured three years of harsh treatment while imprisoned. Eventually, though, the authorities decided to

change their tactics with Cranmer. They brought him out of prison and put him in a nice house. They treated him kindly. Then they promised him that the queen would quickly restore him to his high position in the church, if only he would renounce the Reformation and affirm the elements of Roman Catholicism that were opposed by the Reformers, including the supreme authority of the pope over the church. Sadly, Cranmer gave in. He signed his name to a paper that recanted his views, a paper that was published throughout England in hopes of discouraging support for the Protestant cause. But afterward, despite what had been promised to him, Queen Mary still insisted upon Cranmer's execution. In addition, it was determined that he should speak publicly against the Reformation on the day when he would be burned at the stake. Cranmer agreed to this. But when he rose up to speak to the people who were gathered to hear him, he said: "I desire to speak a few words before I die by which God might be glorified and you might be instructed in the faith." And after a few brief comments about Christian love, he continued by saying,

"And now, I come to the great thing which troubles my conscience more than anything I ever did in my whole life. I now renounce the things written with my hand against the truth in my heart. I feared death. I wrote to save my life. And because my hand has offended, writing against my heart, therefore my hand shall be punished first, for when I come to the fire it shall be burned first. And as for

the pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy with all his false doctrines." [Hannula, *Trial and Triumph*, 144-5]

Later that day, when he was executed, Cranmer was true to his word. When the flames rose up around him, he plunged his hand into the fire and held it there, condemning it as unworthy for signing the recantation. When Cranmer first signed that document, he thought that it was in his best interest to do so. Perhaps he even thought it would be in the church's best interest as well. But in the end the Spirit of God opened his eyes and enabled him to repent of what he had done. By God's grace, he remembered that friendship with the world is enmity towards God. In the end he saw that by signing that letter he had compromised with a worldly church; he saw that he had betrayed his Lord.

C.S. Lewis once said, "Jesus Christ did not say, 'Go into all the world and tell the world that it is quite right.' The Gospel is something completely different. In fact, it is directly opposed to the world." [cited in Horton, 217] Abram understood this. That is why he refused the offer made by the king of Sodom. He believed that his blessing must come from the hand of God alone. God did not need Abram's cooperation to fulfill what he had promised him. He did not need the contributions of the king of Sodom. And he does not need our contributions either. If you belong to Jesus Christ, God has promised to bless you in ways that exceed anything you could ever ask or imagine. But those blessings can only come from his own hand. The world cannot produce them for you, even though it would like you to think that it can. God is the one who is building his

kingdom. The only role given to us is to receive it. And the only way to receive it is the way Abraham received it: not by works; not by might; not by craftiness; but by faith alone.