

September 5, 2010

“IT’S A TRAP!”

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I preach verse-by-verse week after week, which means I always know what I’ll be preaching about in weeks to come; but sometimes coming up with a title is tricky. I spent a long time thinking of a sermon title this week, and when I finally hit on one I liked, I got distracted and forgot it. Later, I thought of a title that fits much better anyway: “It’s a Trap!” I couldn’t resist a title of that magnitude.¹

We’ve been looking at the tragedy that is unfolding in Lot’s life. Lot has put prosperity and material gain at the top of his priority list. The first half of Genesis 14 shows us how that drive landed him in an inextricable predicament, a “tar baby.” We also can see in this chapter that the man of faith, Abram, did not hesitate to put all he had at risk to rescue Lot. He was able to act in faith because he was prepared through worship *before* the crisis. Today, though, we will see the lure of prosperity placed before Abram. Will he succumb? Would we succumb to the very subtle trap if we were in his position?

Let’s read Genesis 14:16-17

And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.

And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king’s dale.

I want to skip the next few verses for a few minutes and come back to them later. For now, though, let’s continue with the interaction of Abram and the king of Sodom in verses 20-24:

And the king of Sodom said unto Abram, Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself.

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth,

That I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich:

Save only that which the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men which went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their portion.

There are two fashions of attack the enemy uses to destroy us. The first is open and obvious: a direct frontal assault. We find the devil characterized a lion, “seeking whom he may devour,” or as a dragon, powerful and enraged. This is the sort of attack that Satan brought against the early church in the form of intense persecution and martyrdom, with Christians being thrown to wild animals in the arenas or being burnt as torches for the emperor’s feasts.

¹ Cultural references to the statements of Admiral Ackbar in *Star Wars, Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. Copyright © 1983 Lucasfilm.

The second form of attack is one of subtlety, of cunningly devised traps placed in pleasant-seeming avenues. The Bible describes Satan as a serpent, or even as a very angel of light, using beauty and half truths to ensnare us and poison us. We see this also in the early church, even before the apostles had passed into eternity. The New Testament is rife with warnings about false teachers who would twist the gospel's message.

What we find is that if one sort of attack fails, Satan will then use the other. He tempted our Lord in the wilderness as subtle serpent, and failing that, he brought the forces of this world against Jesus and had Him betrayed, falsely accused, and murdered. In church history, Satan attacked as a lion first by bringing intense persecution against the church, which lasted until AD 330. The greatest and most intense persecution of the church under imperial Rome occurred under an emperor named Diocletian, who was determined to destroy Christianity and all evidence that it had ever existed. Yet the very next emperor, Constantine, made Christianity legal and then co-opted it into his government. Constantine lured Christian leaders into this arrangement by giving them special treatment; yet he himself took the mastery of the church's affairs as shown by his pre-eminence at the Council of Nicea. That is really when the church began to marry the world, resulting in the church's expanding political role and ambitions for the next millennium. We call that period the Dark Ages. When Satan could not *destroy* the church, he *subverted* it.

After we have had some great victory over the ravaging lion, we will often be tempted by the subtle serpent. Oh, how sweetly he appeals to us! Oh, how he makes it so easy to believe the good that will come of our decision, if only we will follow his wisdom! On the other hand, if he comes to us first with a soft tongue and a clever snare, and we reject it, we will next face the wrath and fury of a lion. Negative peer pressure is a powerful example of this: if a young person gives into the temptation to do something he knows is wrong, then he thinks he'll "fit in" with the other kids; and if he refuses, then he'll be punished by an outpouring of ridicule. Unfortunately, this double assault is often very effective; but both are based in lies. A young person who stands for what is right will keep his integrity and even win the respect of those who mock him (although they may not admit it at the time); he will often find that he is not as alone as he thought he'd be.

Do you know what propaganda is? We hear the word quite often; we generally associate it with something our political opponents use to influence their own faction, even if it happens to be true. We just conveniently dismiss their arguments as "propaganda." That is not what propaganda is, though. Propaganda tells us that there is a great and noble cause—and *that we can personally profit from it*. True propaganda appeals to us personally but rationalizes our greed as support of something good. Satan is a master of propaganda.

How does this tie in with Abram today? I think you'll see that Abram is faced by a very subtle trap in this passage, and he avoids the trap. He has fought against four kings who had just looted many cities and captured many people, including Abram's nephew Lot. Abram and his confederates were completely victorious, and in the act of freeing Lot, he freed many other people and reclaimed all of the stolen goods.

Word of the victory spread quickly. As Abram traveled homeward, he was met by a blue-ribbon commission from Sodom, led by the king himself. The meeting occurred in a little valley outside of the city of Salem, which would later be called "Jerusalem." This is the very valley our Lord crossed on His way to pray on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal.

It is here in this valley that Abram was offered a reward. The king says, “It’s okay for you to keep all the loot; just let me have my people back.” This sounds promising, does it not? What would you have said or done? I mean, surely Abram deserved the spoils of his efforts! It was customary, long-standing tradition: “to the victor go the spoils.” Besides, we wouldn’t want to offend someone by refusing his generosity, now would we? Why not accept what is freely offered? And think of how much good we could do for worthy causes! We could help the church; we could give aid to the poor—*propaganda!*

Pastor Ray Stedman sums up the danger beautifully:

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.²

There are no shortcuts to prosperity. You won’t have to search hard for bankrupt lottery winners, but that is not the point. The point is that Abram could have taken this wealth for his own, but he realized the true danger. He saw what we might have easily missed: a gift of this sort makes obligations of its own.

The apostle Paul reminds us of this subtle danger in I Cor. 6:12: “*All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power [enslaved!] of any.*” Oh, that we could learn this lesson! Even when something is lawful, it may enslave us. Is it wrong to watch TV? Well, there are some things for sure that we shouldn’t watch; but I mean, just in general. No, I don’t believe it’s wrong to watch suitable programming on TV; but should we order our lives around it? Should we indulge in it when we ought to be doing other things? Of course not. We could say the same about practically anything, really. Let’s not be enslaved by our hobbies, our careers, our entertainments, our love interests, our business partners, or anything else.

Abram determined not to take anything for himself of the spoils of war. Obviously some of the food was eaten on the march back, and that cannot be turned over to the king of Sodom. Notice also that Abram places no burden on his confederates to make the decision that he makes. His decision as a person of faith is to return his share of the spoils to the king of Sodom; but he lets the other leaders who went with him decide what to do with their portions. We are not told what their decisions are because they are not central to the story. We are simply told that Abram left it up to them. Folks, that’s maturity! So often we want to judge and criticize and force people to live according to our own standards. No, no, no! We set the example, but we are to let God do His own work in others’ lives!

What was the secret? How did Abram avoid the trap? The key is in the verses we passed over before, which Bible scholars often describe as one of the most fascinating and intriguing bits of Scripture. Let’s read Genesis 14:18-20:

2 Ray Stedman, “The Peril of Victory,” 1968. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/the-peril-of-victory>.

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.

Abram was met by not one king, but two! And they couldn't possibly be more different. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, appears as if from thin air and then vanishes again; yet he is clearly an important figure to Abram, and his importance resonates down through the ages, reaching even to us. How is this possible?

As we read this account, we notice several startling facts. First, let's discern the meanings of the names used here. The name *Melchizedek* means "King of Righteousness," and he is the king of *Salem*, which means "peace." The king of righteousness is the king of peace! Notice also that this king also acts as a priest of the Most High God. This title is actually quite rare in Scripture, but it is used four times here. You've heard the Hebrew form, no doubt: *El Elyon*.

Second, let's discern the meanings of his interactions with Abram. Notice that Melchizedek blesses Abram, and Abram receives the blessing. That clearly shows that both Melchizedek and Abram understood who had the higher spiritual office. In fact, Melchizedek is the only man whom Abram recognized as a spiritual superior.³ Abram not only accepted a blessing from him, but gave him a tenth of all he owned—a tithe. This is the first mention of tithing in Scripture. The practice of acknowledging that the first 10% belongs to God was established before Moses and the Law, and therefore we can see that it would not be made obsolete like the temple sacrifices under the New Covenant. The tithe belongs to God. We are free to give above that as a means of showing special affection for God, for His people, for benevolence, for the ministry, or for whatever other reason might be on our hearts to give; but the first 10% is God's. Abram's tithe showed that he recognized the spiritual office of Melchizedek.

Let's especially notice the two things that Melchizedek brought to share with Abram, though. Did you notice this? What did he bring? Bread and wine. My friends, when do we share the bread and the wine? For the Hebrews, the bread and the wine took on special significance in the Passover; but Jesus showed us the meaning behind the Passover, and gave us the ordinance that we call The Lord's Supper. The bread and the wine represent fellowship; and in communion, they remind us of what our Lord Jesus suffered for us.

Now that is all this passage tells us about Melchizedek. In a book full of family histories, genealogies, we have no family records or even tribal affiliation for this man. The next time we hear of him is in Psalm 110, when David calls the Messiah a "priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." David understood that the Levitical priesthood would come to an end someday; but Melchizedek came first and blessed Abram—and in blessing Abram, indirectly blessed his descendants, including Levi. Levitical priesthood had a beginning and an ending, but the priestly order of Melchizedek has neither beginning nor ending. We see Melchizedek again in the book of Hebrews, where the writer mentions the fact that we have no records of this man: "without father, without mother, without descent, having

3 John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 54.

neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually” (Hebrews 7:3).

For this reason, some Bible scholars consider this to be an appearance of Jesus Christ to Abram; but the word *like* in that verse in Hebrews tells me that this man is meant to be a *symbol* of Christ. Among the Jews, tradition holds that this was Seth, who, if there are no gaps in the genealogy, would have actually outlived Abram. The truth is that while both of these claims have their strong points, we simply are not given enough information to settle the question—and that is the intention. If God wanted us to know for sure that this was Seth or Jesus, He could certainly have made it plain and settled the question. All I can do is take this passage at face value. To me it seems there was a Gentile king who retained the knowledge of the true God. He was the actual king of a real, physical city, which leads me to believe this was an actual human being who is *symbolic* of Christ, the true King of Righteousness and Peace, with whom we fellowship in the elements of communion, who blesses us, and to whom we offer our tithe. The truth about God was not confined to Abram, but was still held in other places as well.

Now we can see how Abram was able to avoid the trap: he had help from a higher power. He had fellowship with God’s priest. He had his spiritual connection fully in tune with God. *He was close to the Good Shepherd.*

I want to show you one more thing about this passage as we wrap up this sermon. Have you heard of palindromes? Palindromes are words or even sentences that are mirrored so that if you read them backwards they say the same thing. An easy example would be the words *mom*, *dad* and *Bob*. They are the same forward and backwards. Longer examples would be “So many dynamos!” and “Rats live on no evil star.” Well, when you do this sort of thing with concepts, we call that a chiasm. This passage is a classic example of a chiasm. One commentary notes it this way:

The arrangement of Abram’s confrontation is chaistic: (a) **the king of Sodom** met Abram (Gen. 14:17), (b) the king of Salem met Abram (v. 18), (b’) the king of Salem blessed Abram (vv. 19-20), (a’) **the king of Sodom** offered Abram a deal (v. 21). The fact that the offer from the king of Sodom came after Melchizedek’s blessing helped Abram keep things in perspective.⁴

The Lord calls Himself the Good Shepherd. Whether the danger to the sheep is from a lion or a serpent, which sheep are the safest? The ones who are closest to the Shepherd! My friends, let us, like Abram, stay close to the Shepherd.

4 Ibid., 54.