

18. The Great Possessor (2007)

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[0 : 00] We'll return, if you would, to Genesis chapter 14, a chapter all about great possessions, but also, more importantly, about the great possessor.

We've been for a few weeks now walking with Abraham and Lot in chapters that we've seen are all about the beginning of the Christian faith, not the Jewish faith, but of course the Christian faith. That's what the New Testament tells us plainly, at any rate. Paul says in Galatians that the same gospel that we believe was preached in advance to Abraham, and that we who are Christ are indeed Abraham's true offspring, heirs according to the same promise.

And we've seen also, haven't we, in Hebrews 11 that it's just as plain that Abraham's faith was firmly focused not just on the earthly land of Palestine. Not at all.

Quite the opposite. It tells us that he just camped there, as in a foreign land, and he was looking for something far, far more, a permanent city, a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

[1 : 11] He was looking for a true homeland, a better country, a heavenly country, says Hebrews 11. In other words, unlike many believers down the centuries, and alas, many believers, I guess, today, Abraham was a man who really grasped the implications of the gospel of God, so that it dominated his thinking, so that it possessed him and his heart.

And that meant that the desires of Abraham's heart shaped the key decisions that he made in every crucial area of his life. And that, in turn, of course, forged his destiny in the hands of God.

And so, a couple of weeks ago, just before Easter, in chapter 13, we saw the fruit of that in the story of his division from Lot. Do you remember when they were forced to separate because of the need for pasture for their animals?

Because Abraham, you remember, decided generously. He gave Lot the first choice, and therefore he committed himself and his material future into God's hands.

God would take care of his earthly needs, knowing, as he did, that he had to take care of what was far more important, making sure that he was putting God's promise and God's purpose for his future right at the heart of his life.

[2 : 28] And that's what happened. And as a result of that, you remember, God blessed him even further. He gave him confirmations of the promise that he'd given to him about his offspring, and also about the inheritance in the land that God had given to him.

But, of course, on the other hand, Lot behaved rather differently. Remember, the Bible tells us very clearly Lot was also a righteous man by God's grace and mercy. And yet, we saw he didn't seem to be a man who allowed the promise of God really to shape his whole life.

The desires and the appetites of this world held their sway with Lot. The natural things. Well, those were the things that shaped his decisions. The best career path.

The best business prospects. The most advantageous place for him to live with his family. The best schools. All of those sorts of things. All perfectly normal things. Natural things. Innocent things.

Probably things by which most of us make most of our decisions most of the time. Lot saw the visible. And he saw the world as we know it.

[3 : 39] And he sought to do what everybody wants to do. Make the best of it. And it's very hard to fault Lot for that, isn't it? And yet, when we read the text of Genesis 13, we can see, can't we, that Moses won't let us miss the warning bells that he's ringing so loudly for us.

Lot seems blissfully unaware of it, but Moses points out to us as he goes towards Sodom, the men of that place were very wicked, great sinners in the eyes of the Lord. There's that other ominous verse in brackets that said, that was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

Warning bells ringing very loudly. And today in this chapter 14, we're going to see a little bit more about what tends to follow on from those kind of decisive choices that we make in life.

And if you look at chapter 14, you'll see, as we read it, it's a very dramatic chapter, isn't it? It's all about battles. Battles between those who want to be possessors of the great things of the earth. But we'll see, in reality, it reveals far more important things about what men's hearts are possessed by.

[4 : 48] And we'll discover that real security, real liberty, in fact, real power in this world comes not from great possessions that this world offers. Not even from the great victories that we might win in this world, but rather from what the great possessor of this world offers to the person who will humble himself and offer everything in worship to this God alone.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, once said this, The secret of a man's power lies in the measure of his surrender. And that's a secret that's made plain by God to us in this chapter today, in this story of great possessions and the great possessor.

So let's look at that, and it falls neatly into three scenes, and we'll take them in turn. First of all, we have a disastrous right in verses 1 to 12, then a daring rescue, verses 13 to 16, and then a decisive refusal, verse 17 to the end.

First of all, then, look at verses 1 to 12, a disastrous right. These speak of Lot and his apparent protectors who thought that they had so much, but it shows them being dispossessed by the ruthless and unpredictable forces of this world.

Surely that's what this story of the four kings against five is all about. That's quite a neat little summary, isn't it, in verse 9. Four kings against five. It shows us about the frailty and the insecurity of the people and the powers of this world.

[6 : 27] And the sheer folly, therefore, of those people, including believers, who stake their prosperity and their protection and their security in these powers of this world.

It's quite complicated to read, isn't it? But basically it is a story of four kings against five. The four kings come from the east, from Mesopotamia. Shinar, you remember, in verse 1 there is really Babylonia.

And they've got a chief king, King Cheddar Leamer, the big cheddar, the big cheese, you might call him. Anyway, they were dominant, these kings, and they were in control of the whole area.

And they were collecting tribute from all the rest of these lands, including these five kings of the cities down at the bottom of the Salt Sea. And it tells us for 12 years they'd been behaving, they'd been paying their tribute.

By the end of 12 years they'd had enough, they declared UDI, and they said, we're not going to have it anymore, we're going to revolt. And of course you can't do that. Swift reprisals are going to come.

[7 : 27] So, the four overlord kings get their armies together, and they go down there to teach them a lesson. And if you look at verses 5 to 7, you'll see that they take their time, they make their point, don't they?

Wandering down through the Jordan Valley, destroying as they go six complete nations, six people groups there, the Rephaim and all that. Very mighty nations.

You read on in the Bible, you'll find the Rephaim were a giant-like people, very fearsome. The Amalekites were no mean force. You'll see that too if you read on into the Book of Numbers. But down they go and they make mincemeat of these six nations as they sweep down the east of the Jordan Valley through present-day Syria and Jordan. And then they turn north up around the western shore of the Dead Sea and into the Valley of Sidim.

And the five kings, who were so bold in their insurrection, are completely pulverized. It's a disastrous right. Well, that's the history.

[8 : 31] And that is the real world, isn't it? There's nothing strange, nothing foreign there. It's the world as we know it. It's power politics, the use of force, all for gain and for possessions in this world. Interestingly, most scholars seem to think that large tracts of this chapter are actually lifted directly out of ancient historical accounts.

They've got a ring of ancient authenticity about them. And that's what kings did in those days. They wrote down their exploits and about their victories. And it rather does look as if verses 1 to 11 are all about the annals of King Chedorlamour and all the rest of it.

We can't be sure, but certainly it is the real world. And we recognize it, don't we? Oppression and occupied territories in revolt and then brutal put-downs by their overlords.

I mean, just think of Tibet today and what's going on there. It's been in our news this very week, hasn't it? People revolting and the Chinese coming in and squashing it. And it happens all over the world.

It's happened all through history. It's the politics, isn't it, of global power play, dominance. Now then the issue was the control of the trade routes between the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia and the rich lands and the seaports of Upper Egypt.

[9 : 45] And the trade route passed right through what we know as Palestine or the land of Israel. And if you control that area, you control all the tax, all the tariffs, everything in and out.

It was big, big business. And that's, of course, just the way it's always been through history, isn't it? Wars have been fought time and again over control of trade routes, sea passages, canals.

Remember sewers? Nowadays, of course, it's always about trade wars and its import and export tariffs, isn't it, from the European Union or from NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Association.

That's a big issue today in the American elections, isn't it? It's all about attracting wealth creators to your country. That's what the whole business of tax breaks for the non-domiciles is all about, bringing the wealth creators into our country.

It's all about gas pipelines and things like that, isn't it? That's how Russia is flexing its muscles today against Western Europe. It's all about oil supplies. Well, that's what all the politics of the Middle East is all about, isn't it?

[10 : 47] Wars are still being fought for exactly these things. This is the real world. But very little has changed, actually, in 4,000 years. And so history records it for us.

Stories of oppression and rebellion and then repression and revenge. And all these verses remind us, don't they, that the story of God's people and God's purpose is played out in the real world. We mustn't forget that. There's no escaping these realities. God's eternal purpose doesn't bypass the realities of the world that we live in, a world torn apart by sin and greed and all of these things. And we've got to be realistic about that as Christians, haven't we? We mustn't imagine that somehow we can be closeted off, we can be separatists, we can be unaffected by all of these things in the real world. We can't. And yet, as verse 12 reminds us, there's more to the events of the world than the secular historian will ever recognize and ever understand.

I guess it was verses 1 to 11 that filled the newspapers of the ancient world for some time. That's what all the people would be talking about, the five kings against four, the battles, the rout, and all of these things.

[12 : 00] But in fact, the real story, the thing that God is interested in, is in that little cameo there in verse 12. Do you see? They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.

See, all of this history here of the ancient world is important because it affects God's people. And God's story is involved in all of this. In fact, that's the most important thing of all.

And that's true, actually, of all world history, isn't it? In the end, it's only relevant at all insofar as it plays a role in the real history of this world, in the far more important eternal history, the story of God recreating his whole universe through the redemption that's in Christ Jesus.

We mustn't get confused. It's not that the story of the Christian faith and the Christian hope fits in somewhere into the bigger story of secular world history.

It's quite the reverse. And we need to remember that. We need to see that as Christians. The world will never see that, but we must see it. If you read the papers today, it's all full of the politics of the world, isn't it?

[13 : 13] It's all full of talk about China and India and their growth as world powers and as great economies. That's not the real story. The real story in China, the important story, the thing that matters, is the massive growth of the Christian church.

The fact that there are teeming numbers of people coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's true through so much of the developing world. Our newspapers are interested in the economies of the developing world, but God and the perspective of eternal history is interested in something quite different.

The growth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, the secular commentator, the secular historian, will only see the story of one superpower against another.

Five kings against four. But God wants us to focus on the deeper story. That's why verse 12 is there. And in fact, the only reason verses 1 to 11 are there is because of verse 12.

And you see, Lot, we are being shown, made his choice. And Lot sought for himself security and safety in the powers of this world.

[14:29] And what we are being shown here is just how quickly all of that was lost. In a moment, in a twinkling of an eye. Totally taken away by forces way beyond his own control.

If you look at verse 12 carefully, you'll see that it tells us he was now dwelling in Sodom. That is, he was settled and static. Verse 13, he was just heading in that direction. But he sought the natural security and the safety and the prosperity of going into the city, we might say.

And his choice of security, you see, became a thankless world. And that just turned around and dispossessed him. Totally without warning. Not just as the credit crunch is doing today to many who have sought their security in the city.

Isn't that right? I was just reading about that poor chief of Bear Stearns Bank who went to bed last Friday worth a billion dollars and woke up on Monday morning down to 20 million.

You've got to feel sorry for him, haven't you? 98% of his wealth wiped out. Pretty grim to be down to your last 20 million. But that's the security this world affords. It wasn't just him, of course, by the way.

[15:41] That's why your mortgage rate is going up too. That's why your savings are going down. But you see, if we put our faith for our security in the wizardry of the merchants and the bankers and the financial gurus of this world, we're putting it in a very frail place, aren't we?

And the message is very clear, you see, if you seek your security in the possessions, in the things of this world, you are doing something very foolish. You're putting yourself in the hands of very, very frail and powerless protectors.

The world will turn around and bring a disastrous rout to those who put their security there. And we see it all of the time in the proud and the successful ones of the world who are suddenly turned around and routed, find themselves in ignominy and defeat.

That's what verse 10 speaks of, isn't it? Sheer ignominy. These kings running for the hills, some of them jumping into the tar pits to escape. They must have been the laughing stock of their cities.

Have you ever tried to get tar off your skin? Can you imagine what these guys looked like for weeks? Covered in tar? The sheer disgrace of it, the humiliation.

[16:57] Once they were fettered by everybody, no doubt, but very quickly, I'm sure, were the butt of all the jokes. Well, that's just so, isn't it? Remember, not very long ago, we were reading in the papers how Northern Rock was a great beacon of modern British banking.

Well, now it's all called Northern Wreck, isn't it? Everybody's got egg on their face. The world, you see, is very unforgiving, isn't it? Very ruthless. But Lot chose that world for his security.

And therefore, he joined in their downfall. And it's a real warning, isn't it? The psalmist says, put not your trust in princes. And I'm sure that Moses, as he was writing this for his own people, about to go into the promised land of the land of Israel, I'm sure he wanted them to see that very, very clearly.

If you read ahead and read Deuteronomy chapters 11 and 12, for example, you'll find that it constantly is full of warnings not to be taken in by the ways of the people of the land, not to seek your security there.

You will not be like them, but walk with the Lord and he will be your protector, your guard, the one who blesses you. And of course, the New Testament is constantly giving us the same warning, isn't it?

[18:14] Do not lay up for yourselves, says Jesus, treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. We need to learn that, don't we?

Poor Lot, a man possessed by the treasures of the earth. He chose to invest himself and to ally himself with the world's culture, with the world's treasures, with the world's possessions.

But he was utterly dispossessed by the ruthless unpredictability of the world. What shall it gain and profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

Well, that was Lot. Or very nearly, that was Lot. Because that brings us to the second scene to verses 13 to 16, all about a daring rescue. They tell us, you see, these verses, that Abraham alone was able to really repossess Lot.

It takes an outsider who is not caught up in the folly of Sodom and the thinking of Sodom to do that, though. And these verses show us the power of a man who is fully in this world and engaged in this world but is decisively not of this world.

[19 : 31] It's interesting, isn't it, in verse 13 that he's called Abraham the Hebrew. Again, that might be evidence of this being part of an ancient secular text that Moses has brought into his account here.

And if so, it seems to look at the thing from the perspective of the people of Sodom. Abraham the Hebrew was the hero who brought back and rescued all their possessions. Well, that was God's promise, wasn't it, back in chapter 12?

Your name shall be great and you will be a blessing. Well, here he is, a great name and being a blessing. Just as God had promised to be with him and to protect him and be a presence with him. And he was, wasn't he? It's interesting, Abraham wasn't touched as everybody else was by these invading kings. They didn't come near him. They were rampaging all around the land, no doubt assuming that they were the masters of it and the owners of it.

But of course, God knew differently. He'd made Abraham the ruler of this land and so he was untouchable. And Abraham's motivation in this rescue wasn't just a social thing.

[20 : 36] It wasn't just that he was trying to do a good turn to Sodom. No, he was doing much more than that. It was a spiritual thing. He was acting in line with God's revelation. about the promise for his future.

He was to be a blessing to others. That was to begin with Lot, surely, his kinsman, his brother, as it says literally there in verse 14. Very striking, Abraham's attitude, isn't it?

Would you have felt like that about Lot? You'd have been very tempted to say, well, it jolly well serves him right. Let him stew in his own juice. I think that's probably what I would have felt. But Abraham was touched by grace, wasn't he?

He was touched his reaction to a brother who stumbled, a brother who was caught up in the consequences of his sin and his folly. Very gracious, wasn't it?

That's what Paul, of course, says our attitude should be in Galatians 6, verse 1. The mark, he says, of true spirituality, you who seek to restore someone gently. You do that, of course, because you know your own heart, don't you?

[21 : 40] Your own folly and your own foolishness. I'm sure Abraham hadn't forgotten how God had pulled him out of a scrape back in Egypt in the previous chapters. Abraham seemed to sense what Paul put into words later when he said, we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.

It seems to be what we're seeing here, isn't it? Abraham knows that he is his brother's keeper. He knows that he has a responsibility to him because of God's gospel promises to him.

And because of that, he's willing to risk everything, huge personal cost to go and save his brother, his kinsman. Would you do that? Worth thinking about, isn't it?

Because according to the Bible, that's kind of a pretty common family trait for the seed of Abraham. One will scarcely die for a righteous man, says Paul, but while we were sinners, Christ died for us. You see, that attitude can only really flourish in a man who is truly detached from this world's thinking, isn't it? A man who's able to bless the world because he is in it, but he is not of it, he is not possessed by it, and the same thinking.

[22 : 59] And Abraham was that man. So off he goes against all odds with a tiny force, 318 men, we're told, there were some others with him from his three allies who went with him, Mamre and Eshkol and Aner, but still a tinier force to attack these marauding kings, these people who had destroyed five kings and six nations.

And we're told there that not only does he effect a daring rescue for Lot, but he defeats the four kings, he chases them right out of sight, way north of Damascus, and he comes back laden with all the possessions, all the booty of all the defeated peoples.

Now you can understand, can't you, why the annals of Sodom recorded that great feat and extolled the name of Abraham the Hebrew, our saviour. But why do you think Moses records it for us here, for his people?

Why do you think the Holy Spirit caused it to be kept for us, God's people today? Well, first of all, I think surely to remind us that despite the uncertainties and the unpredictabilities and the powers of this world and, no doubt, the miseries that the powers of this world so often cause, despite all of

these things, he wants us to see that God's plan and purpose cannot and will not ever be put astray or be threatened.

I think that was probably very important, don't you, for the Israelites on the brink of the land to understand, surely? It's quite interesting, actually, if you follow through the geography of the path that these invading kings took coming into the land of Israel.

[24 : 45] It's the exact reverse of the path that the Israelites took as they travelled from the Sinai into the land under Moses. In fact, if you read the early chapters of Deuteronomy, you'll find a lot of the names of these tribes coming up again.

And again, just there, we're told, Moses reminds his people how God had used one tribe against another, one king against another to destroy each other and open up the path and make it clear for God's people to enter his land.

The message is very clear, isn't it? God had promised to Abraham the land and God would give to Abraham the land. Nothing was going to stand in the way of that.

And God will use the ebb and the flow of world powers for his purposes. Abraham hardly ever had to fight. In fact, he never had to fight decisively for his own possession of the land.

But if a threat comes against him as God's person and against God's people, well, God is going to clear the way. And God will always ensure that when his people are first seeking his promise and his purpose, then he will be with them to protect them.

[25 : 56] Even against insuperable odds, great marauding kings and their armies. And Moses' people needed to hear that. They lived in a world of geopolitics and shifting sands of kings and rulers and emperors just as we do.

And we need it too, don't we? It's easy, I think, to be fearful as Christians. It's easy to be fearful when we see the powers of this world seeming to be so invincible and so often opposed to the kingdom of Christ.

We're seeing that all the time in our western nations now, aren't we? The anti-Christian secularization of our world. More and more things being pushed through parliament that seem to us to be so abhorrent to the truth of God, so against the way of God.

We see it, don't we, in so many parts of the world where the great fist of Islam seems to be advancing. Where Christian believers are being persecuted and squashed and driven out of their lands.

It's easy for us to feel that we're on the back foot and that God is failing and somehow there's no hope. But fear not, says Moses to his people, look what God's man does when God's promise is at stake.

[27 : 09] It's the same in the New Testament. Read 2 Peter chapter 2 when you go home. The Lord knows, says Peter, how to rescue the godly from their trials. The Lord knows how to deal with his enemies and bring them to judgment.

And actually, this passage does also remind us, doesn't it, that there may well be times when God's people do have to be willing to stand up and fight. I don't mean for us, physically. There are many times, too, when we're not to fight for personal gain or for possession.

But there are times when God's promise and his purpose, his gospel, is being threatened clearly, the word that he's given by his revelation and like the apostle Paul, we're to stand and we're to fight for that.

We're to fight for the truth of the gospel, for the integrity of that message, the kingdom of God. The apostle Paul was a great example, wasn't he? He always refused to fight for his own personal rights.

He always was willing to give those away. But if the gospel was at stake, the promise of God by his revelation, even at great personal cost, he would stand and defend that.

[28 : 21] But above all, surely, I think, in this passage, we got to see that Abraham's very ability to be such a blessing in the world, both to his brothers in the faith and also to his pagan neighbors, is that he was so wholly detached from the possessions and from the powers and from the priorities of this world.

If you look at verses 12 and 13, there's a very striking contrast there between what we're told about Abraham and Lot. Lot, says verse 12, was dwelling in Sodom. That word means he was settled, he was fixed, he was rooted there.

But in verse 13, Abraham was living by the oak of Mamre. That word literally says he was tenting, he was camping there. And although Abraham was the true heir, the ruler of that promised land, actually, Hebrews 11 tells us this plainly, he lived there as a stranger in an exile.

He knew he was but camping on this earth. He lived in this world, but his eyes and his heart were on the world to come.

And that's why he could be a man so greatly and effectively used by God. That's why he could be a blessing not just to Lot, but to the world. Because he was not possessed by the world.

[29 : 43] It's not that Abraham was some kind of weird ascetic. Of course not. God had given him the land to enjoy and he did. He knew, just as Paul did, that everything that God created is good and is to be received with thanksgiving.

But he also knew that the greatest blessing of all about the land and the earth that God had given him was that it was the place where he could walk with God, where he could know God, where he could commune with God.

He could see through all that God has given him to the very heart of it, that what God had given him above everything was himself to be known and loved and rejoiced in. Listen to what Paul says about that to Timothy.

Let me just read to you a couple of verses. As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

[30 : 54] 1 Timothy 6, verse 17. And that was Abraham, you see, a man who had seen and understood and therefore taken hold on what was truly life. He didn't fall into the trap of idolatry, worshipping the land, worshipping the gifts that God had given him, worshipping the mere possessions.

No, he wanted the possessor, God himself. You see, a man like that is a man who is truly liberated to do good, as Paul says, to be rich in good works, to be generous, to be ready to share.

You might have heard somebody say something like this, oh, so and so, he's so heavenly minded, he's in the earthly use. That is absolutely false.

It is always the believer who is most wholly focused on the things that really do matter, on the better country to come, that is able to give most and do most in this world and for this world.

It's a huge mistake that some Christians make today when they say, oh, never mind about heaven, that's later on. Focus on the earth. Our task is all about peace and justice and so on.

[32 : 12] Friends, the reality is it has always been believers most focused on the eternal gospel of God, on the priorities of the kingdom of God.

It has always been those kind of Christians whose goodness has spilt over more than anything else in blessing to this world. That's the truth about the great social reformers, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, all of these.

They were gospel men first and foremost above everything. The very freedoms, the benefits that all of us in the western world take for granted, all of these things would have been impossible without the very Christian heritage that they were built upon which came from the gospel of God, which came through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus.

No, the great rescuer in this chapter of the pagan cities of the plain was Abraham the Hebrew. He was an outsider. He was a man who lived in their world but was not of their world.

He was not possessed by it. And that's why he was liberated to be a blessing and Lot was not. And that's still true.

[33 : 22] The very best way to be a blessing in this world, this world of folly and of wickedness is to see this world for what it is. Lost and wicked and very near destruction.

It's to sit light to this world. Not to dwell in it but to camp in it and to know and to know that it's not a permanent home. To know that we shouldn't ever set our hopes on its uncertainties but rather to take hold on that which is truly life, which is lasting.

And that alone is the way for us as Christian believers to be liberated, to be rescuers, to be rich in good works, to share blessing and to bring blessing to this world.

And that's the secret of Abraham, the great rescuer in this chapter. And that's what's reinforced in this last little section here, verses 17 to 24, where we see it's all about a great and decisive refusal. See, these verses show us, don't they, that Abraham was absolutely unpossessed by the prizes and the apparent rewards of this world because he has been instead decisively possessed by the great possessor, the God most high, the possessor, says verse 20, of heaven and earth.

[34 : 48] They show us that the secret of Abraham's power truly did lie in the measure of his surrender personally to the Lord of heaven and earth. See, in some ways what these verses show us is the greatest battle in the whole chapter.

Here's Abraham, you see, victorious. Coming back, God has blessed him, God has vindicated him in the eyes of the whole pagan world. The stock of Abraham, the Hebrew, had never been higher in that land.

And yet, you know, it's interesting that it's often at our very high points, isn't it? Our greatest successes, the greatest victories of our life of faith that we're most vulnerable.

So often, it's exactly these things that bring in their wake real and critical times of testing in our lives. Haven't you found that to be so? Remember Jesus in Luke chapter 4.

Immediately after that great, glorious affirmation at his baptism, this is my beloved son. We read, immediately, he was driven out into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

[35 : 57] And that's just what we're seeing here in the story of these two kings coming to meet Abraham. Look at verses 17 and 18. Two kings come to meet him but they could hardly have been more different, hardly have offered him more opposing choices.

First is the king of Sodom. Verse 2 tells us his name was Bera. It means wickedness. And the other king is the king of Salem. Melchizedek.

His name means righteousness. So here's Abraham, the returning general, victorious, bearing booty, confronted in the valley of the kings by these two kings.

Which of these kings is he going to honour with all his exploits? The king of righteousness or the king of wickedness? The king of heaven or the king of hell, we might say?

The king of Sodom brings him a wonderful offer, doesn't he? Seems an excellent offer anyway, verse 21. Abraham, he says, you keep all the treasure. It's all yours. You deserve it.

[37 : 00] You're the hero. Claim you're right and you'll be the greatest in the land. You'll be the master of all you survey. This land that you've been promised, well, it's at your feet now. It's yours. Extraordinary tempting offer, isn't it?

And after all, it was God's promise, wasn't it? And God had given him the victory and it was his and surely this was God's way to exalt Abraham.

But what was the king of Sodom really saying? Well, the unspoken word was this, wasn't it? Take it from me and from my hand, Abraham. And see, look, this will tie us together, won't it?

In a powerful alliance forever. Abraham and Bera, boy, we'll be invincible. And of course, by and by, you'll remember that I'm the one who made you what you are. That I'm the kingmaker.

In other words, that I'm your real Lord. Very familiar, isn't it? One of Abraham's offspring heard very similar words, didn't he? All this I will give you if you will fall down and worship me.

[38 : 06] Remember? What about the king of Salem? What does he offer to Abraham? Well, precious little by comparison. A simple meal to provide for his needs and a public opportunity to humble himself and bow down and give all the credit and the glory for his exploits to God alone.

See verse 20? Blessed be God most high. He's the one who has delivered all your enemies into your hands. Valley of the Kings.

That's a very familiar piece of terrain, isn't it? For Christian believers.

Abraham walked it. Jesus walked it. And you and I walk that valley, don't we? We walk it every day. And we especially walk it in our successes and our victories.

In our own lives, in our life as a fellowship, as a church. Isn't that right? And every time we're faced with that same choice, the King of Hell says to us, take the glory now. You're entitled to it.

[39 : 14] Come on. Join in the world's recognition. Just think what God could do with all of that. And the King of Heaven says, well, remember your true Lord and your true promise.

Are you going to forget all about that now just because God's given you the victory? Are you going to forget who really deserves the glory? It's a mark of true faith, isn't it? According to Jesus in John 3, whoever is truly of the light comes into the light and clearly acknowledges that everything has been done.

It's been done by God, not by us. How did Abraham respond? Well, look at verse 22. I have lifted up my hand to the Lord, God most high, possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you shall say, I have made Abraham rich. I will take nothing. A decisive refusal to bow down to the ways of this world, to be beholden to the ways of this world, to the rewards of this world.

He'll not be budged from a vow that he says he's obviously taken before he went out on this exploit, asking no doubt that if God granted him success in this rescue, he would give all the glory to God.

[40 : 37] You've prayed that kind of prayer, haven't you? So have I. It's very easy to pray, isn't it? Lord, if only you'll do this, I'll give you all the glory. Hard to remember it, isn't it, after he's given you the victory.

Much harder to keep that vow when we're faced with a share of the glory, isn't that right? In one sense, there was nothing wrong with Abraham taking the booty. It was his by rights.

He was a victor. He gave his allies a rightful share. nothing wrong in one sense, but like the apostle Paul, even what was his right, he would refuse, lest it could ever be said that Abraham's God needed the help of the king of Sodom, or lest it could ever be said that Abraham's gospel was really all about getting gain in this world's terms.

He wouldn't have it. And so it cost him dearly, didn't it? He gave up everything he could have had by way of prosperity and glory. And he gave it up gladly.

And if you see the second half of verse 20, not only that, he gave Melchizedek a tenth part of all that he had. Gladly acknowledging that all that he had, all that he was, really did belong, not to him, but to the true king, the possessor of heaven and earth, the Lord Most High.

[41 : 58] I wonder what the king of Sodom thought of that, and all the captives and everybody else. I wonder what Lot thought of that. Alas, it seems that he was just as mystified as the pagans, doesn't it?

Because we're going to find out. He seemed to go straight back to Sodom to get into the same folly all over again. But Abraham stood fast. He decisively refused to be a man whose praise came from men.

And rather, he chose to lay up for himself treasures in heaven, where moth and rust don't destroy, and where thieves don't break in and steal, because he had laid hold of that which is truly life.

And this is life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you've sent. Friends, here's the thing.

You and I are going to face again and again, what Abraham faced that day. You and I are going to walk the valley of the kings tomorrow morning at work, and next week, and all through your life, and again and again and again, we're going to face the call of these two kings.

[43 : 13] The king of Salem is going to call us and say, give the glory to God most high, and show it by giving your best to him, and refusing the accolades and the treasures of this world.

But the king of Sodom is going to be right beside him, and he's going to be offering everything by way of a very prosperous partnership with him, guaranteed to beat the world, guaranteed to fill you with this world's praise.

And every day, and in every great victory, you're going to face those two things in a thousand ways, and you're going to face it right till the very end of your days, and so am I.

So here's the question for you and for me. Will we be able to keep the fire that we've made to the king of heaven? Seems impossible, doesn't it?

But listen, I've said to you again and again as we've looked at Abraham, the message of these chapters is not look at Abraham and emulate his faith. That's a counsel of despair. No, the message is this.

[44 : 20] Remember, that if you're in Christ, you're Abraham's seed, and you and I, we are heirs of the same promise of this same wonderful God. And ask yourself this, how did Abraham keep his vow?

How did he stand firm against the lure of the king of Sodom? Well, look again at verse 18. You see that right in between the appearance of the evil one and his tempting words, and Abraham's response, miraculously it seems, this extraordinary figure, Melchizedek, appears.

He's never seen before in the Bible, he's never seen again. But unmistakably, he is the priest sent from God Most High. He's a king, he's also a priest.

And like a caring shepherd, he ministers to God's child, Abraham. He feeds and refreshes him with bread and wine. He literally prepares a table for him in the presence of his enemies. And he walks the valley with him, doesn't he, to comfort him, to strengthen him. He blesses Abraham, blessed be Abraham. And he leads him gently into the presence of the only God Most High.

[45 : 33] And by the grace and the blessing given in the ministry of that great high priest of God, Abraham, the friend of God, is given the strength to stand tall and to face the king of hell and to win the victory and stand against him.

Friends, that's the good news, isn't it? We are heirs of Abraham, the man of faith, and we also have just such a high priest. It's what the book of Hebrews tells us in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has become the source of our eternal salvation to all who obey him. He has been designated a great high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. But he's greater by far even than that great one.

That's why we're told Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant, even than Abraham had. He's a priest forever, says Hebrews 7, and so he's able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.

It's a strange paradox, isn't it? That often it's not in our greatest failures that we so desperately need Jesus, our great high priest. In our great failures we're often so conscious of our need, aren't we?

[46 : 51] We run to him. But often it's in our successes, our victories, the triumphs that God gives us. It's then when we're not at all nearly so conscious of our need, it's then that we need him even more, don't we?

To remind us that the greatness of our power, the power to bless, the power to rescue, the power to deliver for the sake of the kingdom. The greatness of our power always lies in the measure of our surrender to the most high God, to the true king, the possessor of all things.

It's not we who possess it, it's he who's the possessor of heaven and earth. And if we're to have power, then he must possess us as he truly possessed Abraham.

So let's come to him and lift up our hand. To him alone and give him the glory and honor his name. Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.

Let us hold fast to our confession. Why? We have a great time.

[48 : 07] We have to love.