

A Very Strange Person

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[0:00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 6th of August 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Very Strange Person. It is from Genesis chapter 14 verses 1 to 24.

And you'll find it helpful to have open the Bible reading from Genesis 14 on page 9 in the Pew Bibles.

Near the beginning, page 9. And from last week and for the next few weeks we're looking at these chapters in Genesis.

Hansi Cronje, you probably know, was the captain of the South African cricket team. Until early this year. He's a Christian. He's no longer the captain because he confessed to and is guilty of match fixing and receiving money for bribes and so on.

[1:07] It was claimed that one reason why a man like Hansi Cronje, who is a Christian, could fall into such a sin is because the gospel preached by the denomination to which he belongs in South Africa preached a doctrine whereby God's blessing was tied up with material prosperity.

That's not the only church in the world that has done that or does that. But what happens when that is the case is that you become confused about what is God's blessing and how that relates to personal wealth and prosperity and material goods.

So the desire to seek God's blessing in the end becomes a desire to seek material benefit. And that gives way to a desire to just accumulate wealth.

And what often, or sometimes at least happens then, is that morality becomes compromised in the search for wealth. So that in a sense the accumulation of wealth and prosperity justifies the means by which you seek that goal.

Now if that is the case for Hansi Cronje, he's not the first to succumb to such a perverted form of the Christian gospel. Indeed, even in the Bible, often the blessing of God to his people is expressed in terms of wealth and prosperity.

[2:44] So there are promises made to the Israelites, for example, in the early parts of the Bible that say that if you are obedient to the laws that you've been given, then you'll be safe in your land, you'll have rain in its season, you'll have crops, you'll have children, and so on and so forth.

That's the dilemma that Abram faces in Genesis 14 at the end in the climax to the chapter. The dilemma between personal prosperity and blessing from God and how the two are related.

I should also say that this is probably the most unusual chapter in the book of Genesis. It is full of odd names of kings, and I didn't have the heart to inflict them on Nancy, so we only heard verse 17 onwards read.

But not only are the names odd, but there's a most unusual person who appears at the end of the chapter. The context is conflict in the Middle East, something that is not new in our day.

And the other aspect of the context is that tax evasion was happening. Again, something not new in our day. Indeed, it could even be that this is the stuff of the original Gulf War in 2000 BC.

[4 : 07] We're told that there were four kings in verse 1. They're the big four, the big league, the big coalition. King Amraphel of Shinar, which is Babylon, Mesopotamia, or modern-day Iraq.

King Ariok of Elessar, which is probably in northern Iraq. King Keroleoma of Elam, which is the area of Iran and maybe Kuwait. And King Tidal of Goyim, which would be eastern Turkey.

So it's the Mesopotamian coalition, the big four, the world powers of 2000 BC. And their opponents are listed in verse 2.

Five kings this time, but they are the kings of small city-states around the Dead Sea, between the current lands of Israel and Jordan.

They are probably quite insignificant in world terms. There is King Berah of Sodom, King Bersha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admar, King Shemabah of Zeboim, and the king of Bila, that is a place called Zoar.

[5 : 22] All of them around the Dead Sea, all of them small city-states that have come together in an alliance at this point to fight against the big four. Now why is that happening?

What's been going on that's led to these affairs? Well the background to this battle that's about to happen is told to us from verse 3 onwards. They gather to battle at the Dead Sea in the valley of Sidin.

And the reason is that for 12 years they had served Keroleoma, one of the first kings of the big four. But in the 13th year they rebelled.

Now presumably what has happened is that 12 years ago these five states were defeated by Keroleoma and the others of the big coalition from Babylon and Iran in modern terms.

And for 12 years they'd served him, that is they'd paid tribute or taxes to the big four as vassal states of that Mesopotamian empire.

[6 : 24] But now in the 13th year they withhold their tax. They rebel against these big four. They keep back their GST, their Gomorrah and Sodom tax or tribute.

Now that's the normal stuff of international and national affairs. There's nothing unusual in this of course. So the next year the big four set out to quell this little rebellion in the outskirts of their far-flung empire.

They set off. Keroleoma of Elam, that's Iran, and the kings who were with him. We're told in verse 5 they came and on the way they subdued various places.

They subdued the Rephaim in Ashtaroth Kanaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh Kiriathayim, and the Horats in the hill country of Seir as far as El Paran on the edge of the wilderness.

All places we know well of course, don't we? They've travelled, if you can imagine, I'll try and do this so that you look at it the right way. They've come from Mesopotamia, Iraq, Iran.

[7 : 31] They've come over the Fertile Crescent and they've come down through Syria into what is modern day Jordan, the high country of Jordan. And they've come right down to where the Red Sea, a little arm of the Red Sea comes up to the Gulf of Aqaba and hits a modern town called Aqaba.

That's the journey they've travelled and they've defeated all those people on the way down to there. And then we're told in the next verse 7 that they turned back, that is to head north, but they've now gone northwest in effect into the north part of the Sinai Desert, into the Negev Desert.

And there we're told in verse 7 they came to Emishpat, that is Kadesh, and subdued all the country of the Amalekites and also the Amorites who lived in Hazazon Tamar. So they've done a big sweep, wait a minute, big sweep down and then they've, I'm trying to do this your way around and it's a bit complicated, and then they've turned up and now they're turning in on themselves.

So it's as though they've circled the area that they're about to come to at the Dead Sea. That's what we've been told in verses 5, 6, and 7. Then in verse 8, the king of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admar, Zeboim, and Bela, the five little kings of the little city-states, they come out at the Dead Sea to do battle with the big four who are then listed again in verse 9.

And at the end of verse 9 we're told four kings against five just in case we can't count. But that's the standard thing in an ancient Near Eastern military document. You list the kings four and the kings against and at the end you say so many kings against so many kings.

[9 : 00] In this case it's five against four, but it's the big four, the old equivalent of the G8 or G7 summits so to speak against these five little city-states.

But the reason for telling us the journey that the big four have taken and the victories that they've won is to remind us that this is a formidable opponent. This is not a sort of equally balanced possible sort of battle.

This is the world power who've defeated this nation and that nation and that nation and that nation. In other places in the Old Testament we're told that those nations they've defeated are full of giants. They're quite formidable in their own right as well.

And now they're coming to these five rather insignificant city-states at the Dead Sea and they do battle. We're not told the details of the battle, but we are told in verse 10 that the valley of Sedim was full of bitumen pits.

Still today the Dead Sea is an area where bitumen comes up to the surface of the land and is actually, I don't know that you farm it, but you do whatever you do to bitumen to use it. And we're told that as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, presumably they were defeated and it seems to be quite a severe rout, they flee so quickly that some fell into these bitumen pits and the rest fled to the hill country.

[10 : 18] They've lost. Pretty quickly is the implication of that. And so the enemy, the big four, took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions and went their way.

In a sense, none of that's important. That's the stuff of day-to-day international affairs in the ancient and the modern world. Happens all the time. One nation against another in alliance with another, defeating another, taking off their booty.

And really, if that was it, that wouldn't be in the Old Testament because it happens so often. It's actually inconsequential to the story of God's people. Except for the fact that when they take off the goods from Sodom, Abram's nephew Lot is one of those who is taken.

So at the end of that paragraph, they also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who lived in Sodom and his goods and departed. That's why we've been told about these battles to this point.

Because Abram's nephew Lot is one of those taken off. Now Lot is no hero. He's Abram's nephew. But he's a greedy man. In chapter 13, which we haven't looked at from last week, we did chapter 12.

[11 : 32] In chapter 13, he and Abram have got quite a lot of sheep and cattle and a retinue of servants and so on. And so they decide to go their separate ways and Abram says to him, which way do you want to go?

And Lot looks around and he sees the valley around the Dead Sea and towards Jordan and so on as being a bit like the Garden of the Lord, lush and fertile. He thinks that's the best land.

So he says, I'll go there, thank you. He's being greedy in claiming the best for himself. And we're told in chapter 13 that he goes and lives near, quite near in fact, in the vicinity of Sodom.

And we're told that Sodom was a very wicked city. So here is greedy Lot taking the best land for himself but at the same time going willingly to live in the environs of a notoriously wicked city, Sodom.

The implication, I think, is that somehow he's almost morally compromised in this. We're now told in verse 12 of chapter 14 that we've just read that he now lives in Sodom.

[12:39] So he's been sort of snapped up or sucked in to live in the town of Sodom itself. He does not deserve to be rescued.

He is not a hero. He is not a goody. He is associated at seems with the sins of wicked Sodom. He does not deserve to be rescued.

Abram could sit back and say, well, that's his problem. He shouldn't have mixed with the people of Sodom. But Abram sets off in pursuit of him.

He gets told in verse 13 that Lot has been taken. At this point, Abram's living near Hebron, which is in the south part of the promised land, about an hour's journey south of Jerusalem, or maybe a bit more than that.

He's been told by one who's escaped the battle that Lot's been taken. So when Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, we're told in verse 14, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them.

[13:46] And he went in pursuit. Nothing significant in the number 318. People try and find all sorts of incredible significances in that. I presume it's just how many men he had. That's why we're told.

But by any reckoning, Abram's pursuit for the sake of his nephew is a foolhardy exercise. Because he's pursuing the world power, who've just defeated this nation and that nation and that nation and that nation and all these nations round about climaxing in the defeat of the five nations of the Dead Sea, including Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abram is risking his life for an undeserving nephew. A stupid thing to do, really. But it's what he does. He doesn't stay in the safety of his own home, though he's, I think, legitimately able to do that and say, well, it's Lot's fault.

But he goes off. Now, I hesitate at one level to jump to a parallel. But that's exactly what God does for us. We do not deserve God rescuing us.

God could easily have stayed up in the security and safety of his heaven and said, it's their fault for getting mixed up in the sins of the world. But he doesn't.

[14:57] He risks his son's life on the cross to rescue us, though we do not deserve it. Now, I'm not sure at this point exactly that Abram's being painted in figures like God, but nonetheless, it's the way God acts to save undeserving sinners.

And he does so at the cost of his own son's life. God's help is to the helpless and undeserving, and that's you and me. But I think we can also take a lesson from God's activity, if not Abram's as well.

Very often, I think, we restrict our care and help to those whom we think are the deserving, poor, or needy. We're quick, perhaps, to condemn the dull bludgers, or the people who sponge off welfare.

But God's activity doesn't have such limits. His son died for all sinners, all the undeserving. And maybe that challenges the way we treat those who are in need.

Well, surprisingly, Abram succeeds in this task. It's the last thing we'd expect. Abram with his 318 men toppling the great big four coalition of Babylon and Mesopotamia.

[16:19] But he does. He pursues them as far as the very north point of the promised land to a place called Dan. That's at least what it was later called. We're told at the end of verse 14. About a hundred kilometer journey from where he was.

And there with a combination of both strategy and surprise, that is, he divides his army to surround them and he uses nighttime when it's dark, he wins a victory. The details of the strategy and surprise we're not told.

It doesn't matter. The result is what matters and Abram succeeds and beyond his victory he pursues them even further beyond Damascus, well out of reach of the promised land, well on the way back to Mesopotamia where they belong.

And in the process of course we're told that he brought back all the goods and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods and the women and the people.

His mission is accomplished. All the booty from the defeated king of Sodom and Gomorrah and so on has been reclaimed including Lot and Abram brings it all back. Well if his victory is surprising, which it is, the finale to this chapter is even more so.

[17:28] Two kings come out to meet Abram in his journey back home with Lot and the other things that he's reclaimed. They come out to him it seems quite close to Jerusalem.

We're told at the end of verse 17 that it is the king's valley and that is probably referring to the joining of two valleys just south of Jerusalem, a couple of miles south, not very far.

But the two kings who come out to meet him are very different characters and the way they're described here and the things that are said are portraying the two kings in contrasting light.

The king of Sodom and the king of Salem. Now Salem it seems is another name for Jerusalem. Jerusalem literally means the city of Salem or the city of peace that is.

And the king's name is Melchizedek, a name that means my king is righteous. So he's a king that his name and place bring together righteousness and peace.

[18:32] And he comes out we're told in verse 18 bringing bread and wine. It's nothing to do with communion services of bread and wine.

Really he's bringing out staple food. The word bread actually is a word for food so it could actually mean bread along with other sorts of food as well. We ought not to think something special particularly about wine.

I mean he could have brought water that would be the basic but if it's not water it's going to be wine. They didn't have coke and fanta and tea and coffee and so on in those days. You drink either wine or water. But it's an act of generosity.

He's not being stingy. He of course had gained nothing from Abram's victory. He just comes from nowhere and he disappears to nowhere in a couple of verses time. But he's offering something generous and festive to sustain Abram and his warriors and to celebrate their victory.

And he didn't need to do it. In contrast the king of Sodom's first words to Abram are give me the persons. In verse 21.

[19:38] You see the contrast. King of Salem who stood to gain nothing from Abram's victory comes out giving Abram bread and wine to celebrate. It's an act of generosity.

But the king of Sodom in whose debt who is in Abram's debt because it's his booty that Abram's reclaimed. The very first words we're told that he said give me the persons.

It's quite abrupt. Not so much as a thank you to Abram. It's rather greedy and certainly grudging words to Abram. Now under the rules of ancient warfare even though Abram's booty from the battle comes from Sodom, by rights Abram could keep the people and the provisions and the goods and the property that he had won in the battle.

That is the victor of a battle had the spoils to himself to share as he wanted to or didn't want to. And even though they'd come from Sodom the victory had actually been won by Abram so in a sense they legitimately could belong to Abram and he could claim them.

Now I know that the king of Sodom goes on to say in verse 21 after give me the persons but take the goods for yourself. That's actually not a statement of generosity. He's actually wanting what is not in a sense his and allowing Abram to keep what is thoroughly by rights Abram's.

[21:08] There's no generosity in what the king of Sodom is saying to Abram. Instead of taking from Abram though the king of Salem who's full of generosity blesses Abram.

And so he says in verse 19 blessed be Abram by God most high maker of heaven and earth. Melchizedek we were just told was a priest.

We're told that at the end of verse 18 a priest of God most high. So this is a priestly blessing that Melchizedek is giving to Abram. We're not told how and why Melchizedek is a priest of God most high.

The God of the Bible. The God of Abram. The God whom we serve. We're not told where he comes from or how he came to know God or be his priest. And that doesn't matter.

His past is inconsequential to us. This enigmatic figure just appears to bless Abram and give him bread and wine. The king of Sodom doesn't even say thank you.

[22:16] Let alone give a blessing. The king of Salem moreover goes on to bless God in verse 20. And blessed be God most high who has delivered your enemies into your hand.

The king of Salem Melchizedek acknowledges that the real victory belongs not to Abram but indeed to God who has brought the victory. Now if we only knew of Melchizedek from these verses I doubt that any of us would remember his name in Bible trivia contests.

We'd be excused for never thinking twice about him. After all in a sense he'd be as important as king Keduleoma and Bersha and the other kings that have been mentioned in this chapter most of whose names we never remember do we?

But Melchizedek is not only known from this chapter. He doesn't appear anywhere else in Genesis. He doesn't actually appear in a sense anywhere else in the storyline of the Old Testament.

he arrives in Genesis 14 verse 18 and he's not mentioned again after verse 20 just three verses. But in Psalm 110 thousand years later he appears again in words that are in a sense words of encouragement to King David who is not only a king but also in a sense a priest.

[23:38] But then another thousand years later or a bit more and Melchizedek appears quite substantially in the letters to the Hebrews.

Unusually in a sense because he's such a minor character in the Old Testament. A bit player. Walks on stage quickly and walks off. And yet quite a deal is made of him by the writer to the letter to the Hebrews.

We just heard a few verses in the second reading today. But there the writer to the Hebrews makes a point about Melchizedek's priesthood. That his priesthood is in a sense greater than the priesthood of the Old Testament which was held by the tribe of Levi.

And the reason why Melchizedek's priesthood is regarded as superior is because Abram paid him a tithe. And you pay tithes to somebody who is superior. And the tribe of Levi who are the priests of the Old Testament they are descended from Abram.

So in a sense when Abram pays a tithe the tribe of Levi who are descended from Abram are paying a tithe to Melchizedek through Abram. So the point the writer to the Hebrews is making is that the Old Testament priesthood is not the best priesthood anyway.

[24:51] If it's not the best priesthood anyway then we ought to be able to see that Jesus' priesthood is even greater still. In the same way that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of the Levites in the Old Testament, Jesus' priesthood is even greater.

Now some similarities are drawn between Melchizedek and Jesus. There is righteousness and peace and there is no beginning, no genealogy for Melchizedek. And in the same way Jesus is also eternal.

It's not saying that Melchizedek is a form of Jesus. Jesus is greater even than him. But the point is that this enigmatic character here is taken up and used to extol the greatness of Jesus in the New Testament.

But here in Genesis 14 not so much is made of him. He's a contrast to the king of Sodom. Two kings, two responses to Abram. One blesses Abram.

One shows him disdain perhaps. But last week we saw that God promised Abram amongst several things that those who bless you I will bless.

[26:03] And those who curse you I will curse. And here is a glimpse of that promise being fulfilled. For the one who blesses Abram, Melchizedek, is in turn blessed by God.

Signified by Abram offering him a tithe, a tenth of the booty that was his from the victorious victory in battle. This is a proper GST 10%.

It is generous sacrificial tithe. Abram could legitimately have kept it all because he was the victor. But he willingly tithes as an expression of his faith in God who has brought the victory.

And he gives it to that God's representative here, the priest king Melchizedek. In contrast, the king of Sodom offers Abram no blessing.

He doesn't quite curse Abram, but he certainly shows him some disdain. And in just a few chapters, he will be destroyed for his wickedness.

[27:07] To him, Abram could easily have kept the goods and the people from the battle. Under the rules of ancient warfare, as I've said, they belong to him.

But he doesn't. He doesn't keep a thing. He gives it all back to this greedy king. He says to him in verse 22, 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, so that you might not say, I have made Abram rich.

I'll take nothing but what the young men have eaten and the share of the men who went with me, let them take their share. That is, Abram is saying, I will only take what we've eaten as our rations to keep us alive, but I will take nothing else.

For I'll not be placed in a compromised position whereby you might say that the king of Sodom has made Abram rich. Even though legitimately Abram could have said, God has given me the victory, the spoils of the battle belong to me, it is a sign of God's blessing, this prosperity that has come to me because of the battle that I've won.

But he renounces it all and forsakes it, gives it back to the king of Sodom. So there is no possibility of any ambiguity about who has made Abram rich.

[28:35] And God commands his attitude. Oh, not here in chapter 14, but the very next words, an unfortunate chapter break in a sense.

Because after these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield. Related word to the word that was used in verse 20.

Delivered you from your enemies. And I am your very great reward. Or in our translation, your reward shall be very great.

Abram has forsaken the reward that was in a sense his, giving it back to the king of Sodom. Because he trusts in God's blessing and doesn't seek prosperity for himself.

And God commands him and says that he, God, is Abram's very great reward. God, who is himself a giver, blesses those who give.

[29 : 42] God, who is himself generous, blesses those who are generous with what they have. God, who supplies our daily needs, blesses those who trust him for their daily needs and don't rely upon their own ingenuity and resources to provide for themselves and be wealthy.

God, who is the source of all prosperity and wealth, blesses those who bless him for their wealth, rather than those who just desire to accumulate more and more.

I think Abram's response here is a challenge to us in our affluent society. To be generous givers. To acknowledge and bless God for providing our daily needs.

It ought to challenge us about our views of wealth and accumulation of wealth and prosperity. We ought more not only to rely on God, but to see in God himself our very great reward and shield.

All that we need. Let's pray. God, God most high, the creator of heaven and earth.

[31 : 05] All good things come from you. Forgive us those times when we think that we have achieved great wealth and prosperity through our own strength.

help us to renounce the pursuit of wealth for the pursuit of you and to find in you our very great reward.

Amen.