

Dear Friends of Jesus,

Years after winning gold, American sprinter Marion Jones admitted to taking steroids prior to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Summer Games. Jones stunned the athletic world by winning gold medals in the 100 metres, 200 metres and 1,600-metre relay and bronze in the long jump and 400-metre relay. But after 7 years of living with a guilty conscience she admitted to family and friends that she took a drug nicknamed "the clear" for two years, beginning in 1999. Jones stated: "I want to apologize for all of this. I am sorry for disappointing you all in so many ways."

There's something in all of us that likes to be at the top, to be popular, to be the best at what we do. Young people feel the pressure at school, whether to be the best at their sport, or to have the highest grade on a test, or to get the lead role in a play. You might like to be friends with the popular crowd. You might want to have the best business in town, the biggest bank account or the nicest clothes. You might want to have the best kids or even the best marriage that everyone else envies. We all have something that—if we're honest with ourselves—we strive to be number one in, something that will give us a good name among people.

There's nothing wrong with doing your best. Doing your best is a good thing. But sometimes even striving for good things can create opportunities to sell out your convictions, to compromise your faith. Marion Jones was a great athlete without the steroids. But to get just a little more of an edge over her competitors, either she or her coaches sold her body to the illegal steroid dealers.

In Genesis 14, Abram sets out to do good too. He's going to rescue his nephew Lot and his family who have been taken captive by four powerful kings. But as a result of the rescue, Abram faces a choice to gain some standing among his pagan neighbours—a good reputation and friendship—or to keep his friendship, his covenant with the LORD first and foremost. And, so, for the Lord to be his God. Abram is faced with the choice of being content with the blessings of a relationship with God or giving in to the temptation to make a name for himself among his pagan neighbours and receive the blessings of friendship with them. Would he trade in his relationship with God for friendship with some pagan kings and their people?

How do we deal with similar temptations in our lives? Can we be content with God or do we strive for friendship with the world?

The Background to Temptation

Let's try to consider our own hearts as we look at Abram. We begin by examining the background to the temptation Abram faced to compromise his faith. In the first 16 verses of Genesis 14 this becomes very clear. Chapter 13 ends with a report that Abram settled near Mamre. You see it on the map near that brown square to the left of the Dead Sea. All around him, though, there was unrest. While Abram was settling into the

land, foreign armies were invading it. Kedorlaomer the king of Elam had already gained control over 5 cities and their kings. You can see on the map the possible location of those places referred to in the white information bubble by the Dead Sea. These were the cities and kings at the lower Dead Sea. In the context of the five, “king” means something rather different from what it means in connection with the four big guys. The four are serious, big power players from the east who come in periodically and conquer cities so that they can gain revenue from them. So the five kings are just the rulers of obscure little towns. And Kedorlaomer—one of the big guys—had been their master for 12 years.

Then we read at the end of v.4,

Gen 14:4b ...but in the thirteenth year they rebelled.

The 5 smaller kingdoms around the Dead Sea rebelled most likely by refusing to pay their taxes to Kedorlaomer. They wanted their freedom. They also knew, however, that he wouldn't take that without a fight. So, knowing they were small, they thought it best to fight against the armies of Kedorlaomer and his allies in a familiar place. They had time to plan this as it seems from our reading that Kedorlaomer and his allies didn't come until the 14th year. From vv.5-7 we learn that these 4 big kings went out to expand their territory by capturing the 6 areas mentioned in those verses. And then they also came after the 5 rebel kingdoms who rebelled in the 13th year. In any event, the small-town kings did not wait for Kedorlaomer's army to come to them. They went out to the tar pit in the Siddim Valley (which you see on the map by the red line jutting down from the Dead Sea.) This way these 5 kings planned a battle where they would have, what we might call, "the home court advantage," since they hoped the foreigners wouldn't know the terrain. The tar pits were what we call bitumen, kind of thick and sticky. The kings wanted to trap and frustrate their enemies in that place. But their plan failed. The 4 larger kings easily overpowered the 5 smaller ones. And to top it off, they plundered the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (and probably the other ones too), taking pretty well everything that wasn't tied down. And they also took Lot and all his people and possessions.

The news that Lot had been captured sent Abram after these 4 armies. Abram takes on the character of the Lord who goes out to rescue his wayward children. Abram rushes after his lost nephew and breaks him loose from the bondage of these worldly powers. The odds of Abram winning against these armies must have been small. According to v.14, Abram gathers just 318 trained soldiers and goes against these four powerful kings—four kings who had not lost a battle yet. But Abram goes against all odds to save Lot. And, again, we see how God blesses His servant Abram for Abram wins the battle. While very little is said about it, clearly the victory belongs to the Lord. Abram with a small army defeats 4 strong kings and their previously successful armies. This is just nothing but God's grace and provision for Abram. It makes no human sense. But, as Abram's descendants would have to learn many years later, no enemy is too much when God is on your side! That's a good reminder for us too.

Abram returns from the battle, having recovered Lot and all his possessions as well as all the plunder from the war. The kings of Canaan are pleased with Abram. He has earned their respect and his right to dwell among them. Abram has delivered Lot, AND he has also freed the captives and regained the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Temptation to Compromise

That's the background to the temptation. This victory involved a great temptation for Abram, a temptation to compromise.

In response to his victory the king of Sodom and the king of Salem come out to greet Abram. They meet him in the King's Valley which is just outside of Jerusalem. The first king to greet Abram is the king of Sodom. And here is where the temptation arises. The king of Sodom represents evil. Sodom and Gomorrah, as you know, were wicked cities. Lot became ensnared by the paganism of Sodom and that's why Abram had to rescue him.

Girls and boys, imagine that you and your friends are always being beat up by some bullies who punch you, push you in the dirt, and steal your favourite snack from your lunch at school. Then along comes a guy named Abram. He comes to your defense and manages to stop these bullies from picking on you. Now he is the hero on the playground at school. He is the guy that all the kids are looking up to. All of a sudden, everyone wants to be Abram's friend.

Well, in the story we are looking at, the king of Sodom now wants to be Abram's friend. He has his army and possessions back thanks to Abram. And he knows that as long as Abram is on his side, Kedorlaomer and his partners won't be coming to attack him again. In v.21, the king of Sodom comes to Abram with a proposal. What he says to Abram is something like this: "Why don't you give me back my people. And I'll let you keep all my possessions for yourself." He was trying to befriend Abram—to get Abram to be one of the partners in the alliance against Kedorlaomer. He wants Abram to join his group of 5 kings.

No doubt Abram must have been tempted by his new found, sudden fame. It must have been a real temptation for him to take all the glory for himself, to feel proud that he had defeated the 4 kings and their armies. What would you do if you were put in that position? One day Abram is basically a nobody in Canaan. And the next, everyone wants his autograph. Would Abram grow closer to the Canaanites now? Would he become friends with the wicked people of Sodom just like Lot had done? It would have been easy to do.

Everyone likes to be important in the world. But if Abram grabbed the attention and accepted the gifts of the pagans, he would have wound up thinking he was something in himself, instead of someone who was blessed by God. Abram, like us, had to remain in the world, but not be of it. We, who live after Christ, have that spelled out for us clearly by James who says in chapter 4:4

Jas 4:4 ...don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?

Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

So "Abram was not free to join in the life of the Canaanites. Those doors had to remain closed for him if he was to receive glory of another kind, a glory that would open other doors." (DeGraaf, 90).

That's the glory that came from the king of Salem. So thirdly, let's look at the king of Salem and unpack the blessings of resisting the temptation to compromise.

The Blessings of Resisting

Salem is a short and earlier form of Jerusalem which is just an addition of the first four letters, so you get Jeru-salem. Salem comes from the same Hebrew root word as Shalom or peace! So the king of Salem is the king of peace. The king of Salem is called Melchizedek which means "My king is righteous" or "king of righteousness." He is, then, both a king of peace and of righteousness.

His name is already a signal that he knows the God of Abram. It is rather remarkable and comforting to know that this king is a believer in God. He and Abram are spiritual brothers. In the providence of God, this mysterious man had come to know the Lord whether his ancestors had kept the faith from the time of Noah or Adam and Eve or God had revealed Himself to him in a special way as He did with Abram. We aren't told. But through Melchizedek, God is offering Abram glory of a different kind than that being offered by the king of Sodom.

Melchizedek was not only a Canaanite king; according to v.18 he was also priest of God Most High. The mystery behind this man is related to the mystery of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 6&7 go into great detail about this. Both are king and priest. Melchizedek pops up out of nowhere and thus no record of his family history is given. In that sense he models Christ who was without beginning or end. Both Christ and Melchizedek are priests. Priests mediate between God and mankind and bless God's people. As such, Melchizedek is appointed by God to bless Abram.

He blesses Abram in two ways. First, he gives him some bread and wine for physical refreshment after the battle which indicates that there was probably a feast that went along with it. It was physical nourishment by a spiritual friend. And, interestingly, Melchizedek's kind gesture to strengthen a battle-weary Abram consists of the same elements that our High Priest, the Lord Jesus gives us as spiritual nourishment in the Lord's Supper that we hope to celebrate again next Sunday. In that spiritual food, our Lord Jesus strengthens us for spiritual battle against the powers of darkness and the temptations in our own heart to seek our own greatness and glory, regardless of what God might say. He helps us to learn to give up our dreams and pursuits of personal glory and fame and to, instead, seek first the kingdom of God which lasts for eternity.

Secondly, Melchizedek blesses Abram with the blessing of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. This is the first time in the Bible that this name "*God Most High*" is used. And it basically comes across as a name that describes God as the greatest of all gods. As such, it is a name that is offensive to the Canaanites because it means that Yahweh is the only True God, more powerful than the gods of the Canaanites and supreme over them all. What Melchizedek does in giving Abram the blessing of "*God Most High*" is remind Abram that it was God who had given Abram the victory over the foreign kings. And it was therefore God alone who deserves the glory for Abram's victory over those 5 powerful kings. Melchizedek reminds Abram and us that God was going to give Abram the land in his time. Abram could have been tempted to think that he was strong and great and siding with the 5 kings would only make him stronger. There was a spiritual battle in Abram's heart just as there is every day in ours. We want to take credit for good things we do. We want to take the glory. Or we want to

align ourselves with people or powers that will help us climb the ladder of success our own way.

So Abram has two options before him. He may accept the partnership with the king of Sodom and his allies or accept the blessing of God Most High through Melchizedek, the King of Salem. And that's the same choice we face all the time as well—God or the world. It is one or the other. We already heard James' reminder, "*Friendship with the world is hatred toward God.*" And Jesus told us, "*You cannot serve two masters.*"

Now Abram must decide how to respond. He must decide who he wants to live in harmony with more. Was an alliance with pagans more important than his dependence on God? No. So Abram humbles himself before Melchizedek and accepts the blessing of God Most High. He forfeits the glory of this world from the king of Sodom in order to accept the blessing of God Most High. Abram knew all the wealth and prestige in this world, in the words of Romans 8, "*...is not worth comparing to the glory*" that awaits those who trust in God (Romans 8:18).

Abram believed in the coming Mediator who would stand between God and man. He awaited God's promised Messiah, the true Priest of God Most High, the true King of peace and the true King of righteousness. Jesus Christ.

Dear friends, remember, there is no friend more faithful, loving, or powerful than Jesus. It surely is a better thing to be His friend rather than His enemy. Therefore we ought to choose Jesus Christ and His way for living rather than the world.

Ralph Bell was an associate evangelist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, a godly man who tells of learning to live God's way, the way of trusting Jesus, in a deeply personal way. Bell is a Canadian-born black man who lives and ministers in the United States. As a young man, he struggled with experiences of racial insults and discrimination. Being mistreated by fellow Christians, who were disobeying James' instructions about impartiality, was especially hurtful. Bell shared his struggles with his mother, who counseled him to keep his eyes on Jesus, because Jesus would never disappoint him. As he sought to apply that advice, he began to find the grace to see others' racism as their problem. He further sought grace from God to purify his own life of hatred toward those who mistreated him. After James talks about not living in step with the world, he calls us to submit ourselves to God. He says,

Jas 4:10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

After Ralph Bell humbled himself before the Lord, he found himself being lifted up by the grace of God and even able to love his enemies. That's what relying on the amazing grace of God can do in our lives!

Because Abram trusted the God who promised him the land of Canaan, he did not have to concern himself with trying to gain the land through friendship with pagan kings. Instead, he focused on giving glory to God. The first thing Abram does is give Melchizedek a tithe or ten percent of all the plunder he gained. Being blessed by God moved Abram to gratitude. In giving that 10% to Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, Abram was offering it to God. It was another way of saying, "God Most High, you are my provider. I want to live for you. I want to do what you want. I want to love others

as you want me to love them. I want to live by your commands and not by my selfish desires. Now I give you a gift of something that you have already given to me!

Giving our tithes to God is one of the least things we can do as well to show Him our gratitude for His faithfulness and grace to us. If we realize all the blessings that are ours in Jesus Christ, then we will give Him all we can. We will give Him our all—our hearts, our lives. In gratitude for our salvation we should offer to Jesus, our perfect High Priest and King, everything we have. (cf. Romans 12:2)

However, giving to God is only part of the way we show our gratitude. The other side of showing our sincerity is in what we do not do. Not only did Abram give a tithe to Melchizedek. The second thing he did was refuse to accept any gifts from the pagan Canaanite king of Sodom. Abram would not trust this self-serving man or compromise his faith by building a friendship with him that would lead him down the same road of sinfulness that trapped Lot and his family. Abram did not want to be obligated or tied to the world in this way. He wanted his only allegiance to be to God alone.

Accepting gifts from the pagan king of Sodom would signal that Abram was relying on that friendship instead of trusting God to supply all his needs. The blessing of Melchizedek was a reminder to Abram that God Most High was the only friend he needed. So he vowed not to take anything—not even so much as a thread of a sandal from the King of Sodom. Nothing. This was not an act of hatred toward the world. It was, instead, an act of confession. Abram's refusal of the gift pointed to his complete reliance on God.

That's a good pattern for us to follow as disciples of Jesus today. We ought to, like Abram, live in such a way that our neighbours see that our hope is not in what people can do for us. Making us secure, rich or popular. The blessing of the Lord to bring a Messiah through his line meant more to Abram than the blessings of his neighbours. In reality, though, in closing the door on the gifts of his neighbours he opened the door for himself to be a blessing to all the nations through the person of Jesus. In closing the door on his neighbours, they stood to gain access to eternal life through Jesus. This promised Messiah could offer much more to these neighbours than Abram could.

That must be our mind too as we live in this world. As Christians, we must fight the temptation to be popular in the eyes of the world and compromise our faith in Jesus. Instead, we ought to offer Christ our lives and deny ourselves those things that jeopardize our testimony before our neighbours and friends. When we live so much like the world that they cannot see the difference, then we fail to be a blessing to them. But if we live among them with the knowledge that life's true joys are found only in relation to Jesus Christ—and He is our first love—then our lives will be a confession of faith in God Most High, the God who blesses.