

Sermon on Gen. 14-15; Abraham and Melchizedek
Sept. 12, 2010

The tower of Babel account in Genesis 11 tells us about the wickedness and idolatry that humanity carried out when it was united in language. God confused that one language into a variety of tongues so people would spread out across the world, as He desired them to. But He also did this to prevent them from conspiring together to aggravate the evil they had already committed. In the subsequent verses we find another of many Biblical genealogies, and when we read it closely we find that people did finally go forth and multiply. Some of the names in that genealogy are important to Jewish history, but among them one stands out.

While Abraham is often referred to in the Scriptures as a great man of faith, he is also important because God's relationship with him marks a turning point in history. Through Abraham, the Lord starts to regard humanity in a different manner. Back with Noah, God had made a covenant with all creation, and all people without distinction. With Abraham, God reveals that He will begin to have a unique bond with a "chosen people." The Bible does not tell us why God chose Abraham in particular, but the mission God gives him sounds much like the one God gave to Noah. In Genesis 12, God tells the man then called Abram to get up and go, to leave everything that was dear to him. He was to undertake a difficult journey with an unclear destination, but a clear purpose. Through obedience, God promises to make Abram into a great nation, so that all people on earth will be blessed through him.

So like Noah, Abram simply obeys his Lord. Chapters 12 and 13 tell us about his nomadic journeys throughout Palestine, then down into Egypt and back. Chapter 14 tells us that Abram went into battle against four kings with just 318 men, and then rescued innocents who had been taken hostage in battle. With this he also captured all of the plunder the kings had plundered. This is where today's passage picks up.

Gen. 14:17 – 15:6: After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by

God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself." But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me — to Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them have their share."

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. *This is the Word of the Lord.*

In future weeks, we will be spending more time considering the importance of Abraham, not only in the Genesis record but in the broader scope of Biblical history and theology. For today, I'd like to focus on one of the most mysterious characters in the Bible, Melchizedek. This enigmatic figure is mentioned only here and in the Book of Hebrews. But he is extremely valuable as a precursor or a type of the Messiah, as the Hebrews passage we heard earlier touches on. By looking closely at Melchizedek, we will be blessed to see an amazing and beautiful portrait of Jesus Christ.

Let's start with the basics. According to verse 18, Melchizedek is a priest of God who is also the king of Salem. In other words, he is the king of what we now call Jerusalem. But the word "Salem" is actually the Hebrew word "shalom," meaning

“peace.” Melchizedek is by title the king of peace. But his name is also significant. “Melchizedek” means “King of righteousness.”

So in verse 18, this previously unmentioned priest, and king of peace and righteousness, meets Abraham to congratulate him after his tremendous victory in battle. But notice that the focus of the passage is not on the battle, or how great a military leader Abraham is, or even how great a man Abraham is. The focus of the passage, and even Abraham’s focus in the passage, is Melchizedek. This king of peace and righteousness, who was a priest of God most High, brings a special meal to Abraham. What’s in that meal? Bread and wine. (Sound familiar?)

Now in this time in history, it was common for a king to throw a royal banquet for a victorious conqueror. But it was exceedingly generous for Melchizedek to have wine with the meal, and not just water. The king of peace and righteousness comes to God’s servant Abraham to bless him for his faith and obedience – just as God had promised. Back in chapter 12, God told Abraham that He would bless him, and make his name great, and help him to be a blessing to others. This royal banquet with bread and wine offered by Melchizedek marks the start of God’s promises to Abraham being fulfilled. To cap it all off, Melchizedek offers a prayer and blessing: "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand."

Now up to this point, it’s an interesting story for us to think about who Melchizedek may have been, and see how richly he blessed Abraham upon his courageous victory. But the end of verse 20 throws us a curveball. It says, very matter-of-factly, “Then Abram gave him (Melchizedek) a tenth of everything.” Why would Abram do that?

There are a couple of things to consider as we answer that question. First, notice in verse 19 that God Most High is called the “creator of heaven and earth.” A better translation of that is that God is the possessor of heaven and earth. Then, when Melchizedek in verse 20 praises God for delivering Abraham’s enemies into his hand, we understand more clearly that it is God’s sovereignty, His ownership of heaven and earth, that has brought Abraham to this place. Both Abraham and Melchizedek recognize that everything, and everyone, ultimately belong to God. So the first piece of our puzzle is that Abraham knew the plunder he gained in battle ultimately belonged to God.

The second fact to consider is that even though Abraham had achieved the victory, and could rightfully claim all that came with it, he still gave a tenth of it to Melchizedek. This “tenth” is the same word that is used later for a “tithe.” At this time it was customary for a military victor to pay homage to the regional king. So Abraham knows that even though he won the battle, King Melchizedek deserves honor and subservience. In fact, if Abraham had not given Melchizedek anything, or had given less than 10 percent, he would have been insulting the king. Abraham not only honors the king of peace and righteousness by giving the full 10 percent tithe, he sets the prime example for tithing that is picked up later on in the Scriptures.

Up to this point, I’m sure you’ve picked up on the facets of this passage that point us to Jesus, but I want to be sure to comment on them because they are so powerful. Instead of Melchizedek, Jesus is our king of peace and righteousness, as well as our great high priest. Jesus comes to us to bless us, and pray for us. He meets us wherever we are by offering fellowship with us, especially through a generous, royal meal of bread and wine. And during this meal, even though God has blessed us and given us victory over our enemies of sin and death, the focus is not on us. Our priest and king gets all the honor and glory, and deserves more honor and glory than we can give him.

Abraham also teaches us what our proper response to Jesus as priest and king should be. We bring ten percent of what God has blessed us with, to honor our Lord. We have earned the plunder, but everything ultimately belongs to God.

We also have much to learn from Abraham when we turn to Genesis 15. The Lord has just given Abraham a tremendous military victory, a wonderful blessing and prayer from the priestly king, and a luxurious banquet. The Lord clearly had begun to fulfill His promise to bless Abraham, and use him to bless others. But Abraham doubts. Like him, we can be deeply aware of God’s loving mercy one moment, and the next forget His faithfulness to us. We can even be on a spiritual high, but then trip and stumble spiritually when we allow doubt to seep in.

In Genesis 15, even though Abraham has proven himself on the battlefield, God needs to assure him not to be afraid by saying, “I am your shield. I am your very great reward.” Perhaps Abraham feared having to go into battle again, or that the 4 kings would return to carry out vengeance. Perhaps he realized how weak he was apart from the

Lord's help. Perhaps he had second thoughts about giving all of the plunder away. When you and I have fears rise up within us, the Lord says the same thing to us. He is our protector and provides for us. If we have Him, we can be confident that we have all we need. Listen to that again. If we have the Lord, we can be sure that we have all we need.

Like Abraham, we can also ask God honest questions. There are plenty of times when God's promises seem to be far from realistic. His promises are especially precious for the times when life just doesn't make sense, when we don't know how we'll make it through the day, when we're holding on by a thread. Abraham complains that God has promised him a son, but the promise seems downright impossible. How can I be the father of many nations when my wife and I cannot have children? God takes him outside and shows him the stars. "Abraham, if you ever need to be assured of my faithfulness, just look at the stars." And the Hebrew in verse 6 says that Abraham trusted God, and saw truth in His words. You and I sometimes need to look to the stars. God's promises are always certain, and His Word is always true. And many times, our deepest joy comes in seeing His hand accomplish what seems to be impossible. ///

One of the reasons that you and I can have this bold confidence in God's promises is touched upon by the passage in Hebrews, and I encourage you to reread this later today. The key phrase in those chapters states that Christ is a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. I'd like to spend the rest of our time exploring what that means, not just in an intellectual and theological sense, but especially in practical terms.

As you may know, when God gives the Law to Moses in the desert, a priesthood is established through Aaron, who was a descendent of Abraham through Levi. Aaron's family was given the perpetual charge of leading worship and maintaining the sacrifices that were regularly offered to the Lord. It's important to note that Jesus was not descended from Levi and Aaron, but from Judah, so Jesus would never have served as a priest. We're told that Melchizedek was a priest, yet he was not part of the line of Levi and Aaron. Melchizedek was also the king of Jerusalem, but was not related to any known Israelite family.

At first all of this may seem to be just trivia. But when King David wrote Psalm 110, he took this Genesis account of Melchizedek and tied him to a prophecy of the coming Messiah. In Psalm 110, David describes the victory that God the Father promises

to His priestly and kingly Son. It begins, "The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, you will receive the dew of your youth. The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

The portions of the Book of Hebrews that refer to Melchizedek explain for us what it means to have Christ as our eternal priest and king. The prime reason that Christ must be from the order of Melchizedek is that the priesthood through Aaron was tied to the Law of Moses. That Law had to come to an end. The Law of Moses was never sufficient to save us from our sins, but showed us our sinfulness and need for salvation. The priests of the Old Testament were people just like us, sinners who died. They offered sacrifices according to the Law of Moses, both for themselves and for the people. But they could not offer or achieve salvation themselves.

In contrast, the order of Melchizedek predated the Law of Moses and Aaron's priesthood. Melchizedek's authority as a priest and king was not based upon his bloodline, or anything else of earthly origin. His authority was given directly by God, and was founded upon peace and righteousness. This is why Jesus is our great high priest, in the order of Melchizedek. His authority comes from God alone, founded upon peace and righteousness, and as such can never be shaken or destroyed.

Remember, too, that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but fulfill it. His eternal status as priest and King surpasses the Law by ensuring forgiveness and salvation for those who believe in Him. The Gospel completes what the Law could not, by offering eternal hope. Jesus is the only priest qualified to offer Himself as the perfect atonement. And Jesus reigns as King of Jerusalem, no matter what government may currently sit there. His Kingdom is not of this world, but it is still very much among us, and within us. Christ's Kingdom is one of a spiritual peace and righteousness that the world cannot know, apart from saving faith in Him.

The fact that Jesus is our priestly king in the order of Melchizedek can still seem like a distant notion with little bearing upon us for daily life, but that's not so. Jesus' priesthood means that right now, and in every moment, He is interceding with God the

Father on our behalf. He is advocating for us, and praying for us. Because Jesus is our priest, the way to the Father is always open – we always have immediate access to the divine throneroom of the King of the universe. We have a hotline, so to speak, because in Christ you and I are always acceptable to God. But even more, the dynamic power of Christ’s life is what strengthens us. As our priest, Christ dispatches the Holy Spirit to encourage us, equip us, protect us, and sustain us. He is the only priest who is both fully divine and fully human, so He sympathizes with us in whatever we are facing, and rejoices when we rejoice.

The put it simply, our great priestly king is constantly serving us by showering us with grace, and mercy. If you feel like you’re forgotten, He is always thinking of you. If you think you’re alone, you’re not. If you feel no one understands what you’re going through, He does, and He loves you beyond your comprehension. If you wonder whether anyone prays for you, He is constantly praying for you. If you feel unloved, you’re wrong, because He is always loving you, deeply.

Our great high priestly king rules eternally, in the order of Melchizedek. What this ultimately means is that Jesus Christ Himself guarantees the salvation of each person who trusts in Him. He personally vouches for the new covenant that He established through shedding His own blood. He makes sure that His Kingdom is coming, and one day you and I will sit with Him at a royal banquet of bread and wine. Jesus personally guarantees what the Lord said to Abraham: we don’t need to fear, because He is our shield, and our very great reward. In Him, all of God’s promises are Yes, and amen.

I’ll close with part of Romans 8, which elaborates the meaning of Jesus’ eternal kingly priesthood on our behalf. “Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship, or persecution or famine, or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Let us pray.