

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 12, The Covenant Ceremony and Sign, Part 1

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Session 12 concerns the covenant ceremony and the covenant sign made with Abraham. You recall from last time that we were speaking of Abraham's journeys, and there was the occasion in chapter 14 to describe the war that took place between two groups of kings, the eastern set of kings and then the confederacy of the western kings, including the king of Sodom. The eastern group of kings defeated the western and took their possessions, including people, as their reward and marched north.

Abraham learned that Lot had been taken and his family, and so Abraham gathered his armies together and raced after to rescue Lot and his family, which he successfully did. Upon his return, he was met by two kings, and this is sometimes called the story of two kings. The first king to address him was the king of Salem, probably Jerusalem.

His name is Melchizedek, and I want to address Melchizedek and what occurred when he came out from the city to meet with Abraham. The writer to the Hebrews spends time on the figure of Melchizedek, showing the analogy between him and the Lord Jesus Christ. The second king is the king of Sodom, and the contrast between these two kings could not be any more stark.

In the case of the king of Sodom, he negotiated a return of a portion of his possessions, and then Abraham may keep some for himself. But Abraham says he will not take any of it, lest the king of Sodom boasts that he has made Abraham rich when Abraham wants to give all of his wealth and his security to the Lord God, as God has promised in the covenant that he has made with Abraham. Now, when it comes to Melchizedek, the writer to the Hebrews will interpret the figure of Melchizedek, but in doing so, he'll use a means which is not commonplace for us but very acceptable and understandable in the first century.

What the writer to the Hebrews will do is he will draw a type-antitype, in other words, an analogy where Melchizedek is a type, we could say foreshadowing, and then the corresponding antitype, the corresponding type would be Jesus Christ and acknowledge what they have in common. It doesn't have to be an analogy at every point, but just those that are selected by the writer who chooses to interpret Melchizedek and how he can be a prefiguring of Jesus Christ. So the point in the context of the writer to the Hebrews is that Jesus Christ is in a priestly order, in other words, an order of priestly lineage that differs from the priests of Israel as it is found in the Old Testament.

That is with the tribe of Levi, and in particular, the family of Aaron, who is a high priest in the genealogy that follows him. What he wants to demonstrate is that when it comes to Aaron, the high priest, he has restrictions. By that I mean limitations.

For example, it was necessary for him to offer up sacrifice repeatedly every morning, every evening. And then the annual Day of Atonement, that is discussed in Leviticus chapter 16, had to be repeated every year because the sacrifice offered by this priesthood was not altogether satisfactory. It provided a temporary resolution to the sin of the people, but a final complete resolution to the sin of the people was accomplished by Jesus Christ.

His priesthood is forever, and it is not limited by death, as was the case of Aaron and all those who followed him. So, this is what is in mind when it comes to the writer of the Hebrews as he speaks to Christians who may be tempted because of oppression to revert back to the Jewish tradition as opposed to moving forward, having received Christ, and following Christ. So, let's look then at Hebrews chapter 7, verses 1 through 4, and if you have Genesis open to chapter 14, verses 18 to 20, we can see the analogy that is drawn out by the writer to the Hebrews.

This mysterious figure Melchizedek, verse 1 reads, this Melchizedek was king of Salem, and as I said earlier, probably Jerusalem, and priest of God Most High, El Elyon. And that's the God of Melchizedek and Abraham in chapter 14 verse 18. Now in verse 22, we are told that the God Most High is Yahweh.

God Most High is an expression that would have been commonplace for someone like Melchizedek, using the language of a generic expression for God, God Most High. But when he says in chapter 14, creator of heaven and earth, that makes it quite clear that he is not a worshipper of many gods. He's not polytheistic.

But it may well be that Abraham will help him come to understand a clear understanding of who God is by connecting El Elyon with Yahweh in verse 22. Now, having said that, go back to Hebrews chapter 7. This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. So, he is both king and priest.

This would not be the case with Aaron, the high priest, in the tribe of Levi because the tribe of the royal figures, David, King David, would be the tribe of Judah. So, the priest could not be qualified to be king, and the king was not qualified to be a high priest in the order of Aaron. But Melchizedek, who is a Canaanite king, both office roles found in one person, Melchizedek.

This would not have been unusual in the ancient world of Canaan and nearby neighbors that the king also functioned as a priest offering sacrifices to the king's gods. But Jesus Christ, see this is the argument of the writer to the Hebrews, is contending that what we have in Jesus is both priest and also king. King by virtue of

his descent from King David, and then priest because he's in the priestly order of Melchizedek.

We find in Jesus Christ a sufficiency that cannot be found in King David alone or Aaron as a high priest alone. Continuing in chapter 7, verse 1, he, that is, Melchizedek, met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him. And Abraham gave him a tenth of everything.

So, there was an act then of approval and the response of Abraham is mutual acceptance of the identity of Melchizedek as a fellow worshiper of the Lord God. Now the writer of the Hebrews is going to seize an opportunity to describe the character of Melchizedek. First, the name Melchizedek means king of righteousness.

If you look at the word Melchizedek, the last of that name, Zedek, is the word in Hebrew for righteousness. King would be Melek, and the I Melchi, the I is just simply a connection. Or it could be read as my king of righteousness.

King of righteousness then describes Melchizedek as both king, but a king who practices godly upright behavior. Then also king of Salem. Salem is close to the Hebrew word for peace, and you may know it, shalom.

So, he seizes this as an opportunity to describe Melchizedek as a king of righteousness, as a king of peace, solely on the basis of his name. And so you can see he is describing Jesus in that order, who was altogether righteous and also offering peace through the kingdom of God. Then verse three, without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

The point here, as I described earlier, is that Melchizedek is suddenly appearing in this narrative without any genealogy before or any successors after him. It's as though he doesn't have parents or progeny. Now, I don't think the point is that he must be a divine.

Now, he is, however, an example of how the Son of God, that is Jesus, has no beginning and also has no ending. And so, his priesthood, like the sudden appearance of Melchizedek in the narrative, has no beginning and has no ending, and hence an eternal priesthood. This is where sometimes an analogy is not to be taken as exhaustive, but selective on the part of the interpreter.

So, he says in verse three, reading with the New International Version, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. So, the writer makes it clear that he's drawing an analogy and that the analogy is dependent upon the experience of Melchizedek and what we can learn about Melchizedek. The reason I make this point

is that some believe, many believe, and have historically believed that Melchizedek is a manifestation of Jesus Christ before his incarnation found in the Gospels.

We do know that there is reason to believe from other passages in the Old Testament, where this is the case, that we have a pre-incarnate manifestation appearance of Jesus Christ. So, whether this is the case that Melchizedek is,, in fact,, a pre-incarnate manifestation, or whether he is a human, altogether a human being, who nonetheless models in these specific ways characteristics of Jesus Christ, one way or the other, the point is made. Verse four, just think how great he was.

Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder. Now the point here that the writer of the Hebrews is making is in the minds of the readers, Jewish readers, there was no one greater than Abraham. Abraham was the father of the Hebrew people.

Abraham was the father of the covenant commitment that God had made to all of Israel. Yet Abraham himself acknowledged the superiority of Melchizedek and honored Melchizedek by an act of presenting a tenth part of the plunder. So that is how Melchizedek is a very important figure when it comes to interpreting who Jesus Christ is, what his priesthood is like, his sufficiency as a mediator between God the Father and man, and how by his sacrifice, not only is he priest, but also he is a sacrifice because he gave of himself fully and wholly in the body to God as a sacrifice.

So his sacrifice is altogether sufficient as the Son of God, and completely human, enabling him to take the place of humanity, resurrected from the dead, offering a new life for all those who will accept him as Savior, the promised deliverer long, long ago, in Genesis 3 verse 15, and the deliverer found in Noah, and then again, Abraham himself, who would be the means whereby the deliverer would come, and we are clear regarding this when it comes to the New Testament. So I might mention in that vein, Galatians 3 verse 8, Scripture foresaw that God would justify, declare having right relationship, that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, that is the Gentiles in accepting and receiving Jesus Christ as Savior, that expression of entrusting themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, they are declared right, and this is very striking, Scripture foresaw and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham, all nations will be blessed through you, and that is a reminder of chapter 12 verse 3, that this is the plan long, long ago with Abraham, through whom God would bring blessing upon all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, and this is why Paul in Galatians 3 verse 8, can announce the gospel in advance, in microcosm, then the gospel is embedded in the Abraham covenant, all nations will be blessed through you Abraham, and in particular, it is Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ, who provides this good news, this announcement, and offer the salvation, he proclaims it, and he offers it for all those who will enter into the kingdom of God by faith. And then one more New Testament passage, Hebrews 11 verse 8 through verse 10, by faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though

he did not know where he was going, by faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country, he lived in tents as did his successors Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise, for Abraham was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, so we see the contrast, when he was in the land, as Genesis describes, he lived in tents, but he longed for a day when there would be a city with foundations, unshakable foundations, a permanent inheritance, and he knew that this has only come about by God.

So, as the writer to the Hebrews states in chapter 11, the hall of fame of faith, we might say, the legacy of all of these great heroes of faith, they never entered into the permanent possession of the inheritance, it was yet awaiting them, and we too will join all those of faith to receive the spiritual inheritance that God has given us, for the fathers of the faith and also all of us who have followed in their footsteps. So now we are in a position to turn our attention to the heart of the Abraham story in chapters 15, 16, and 17. When it comes to chapter 15, we will have the ratification of the covenant that was announced in chapter 12 by virtue of a ceremony, and then in chapter 17, we will find that there is a sign of the covenant, and that is a circumcision.

Sandwiched between is chapter 16. Here, we have the introduction of a potential rival, Ishmael, who was born to Abraham, and Sarah's handmaiden, an Egyptian woman whose name is Hagar. So, it is very intentional on the part of the arrangement of 15, 16, and 17 to have also in chapter 16 occasions where God assures Abraham that he will yet have a son who will be the beloved son receiving the promise of the inheritance through whom will come the blessing for all nations.

Now, let's turn our attention to the covenant's ceremony in chapter 15, and here you will see an important aspect of the structure. Chapter 15, verse 1 reads, after this the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision, and a vision with a vision of the Lord, but also the Lord speaks and explains, helping Abraham understand the significance of what is about to take place when it comes to the covenant ceremony. So, verses 1 through 6 would be the first section.

Paralleling this would be verses 7 through the end of the chapter, verse 21. Verses 1 through 5 focus on descendants, so the promise of progeny. Verse 6 is a hinge verse.

It requires a good deal of explanation because we find it quoted in the New Testament and used by the New Testament interpreters as an expression of Abraham's faith in the gospel. Verses 7 through 21 concerns the land promise, so we have two of the three promises. The third is implied and that is blessing.

So, we have the promise of becoming a great nation, the promise of progeny, and we have the promise of possession of land, that is Canaan, and then understood the

third promise is underway, up and running. So now let's look then at the proposal by Abraham. You remember now this is right after the episode of the two kings, and Abraham has refused the riches that he could have taken for himself, but put God first in his reputation.

So now God wants to assure him that his decision was a good one and that he, that is the Lord, could be trusted. So, he says, Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield.

See, the shield is a defensive weapon. I am your protection, your very great reward. Notice it says very great reward.

Whereas the king of Sodom offered Abraham a compromised reward, when it comes to the Lord, he will properly reward him. And what this has in mind for Abraham of the first order is, well, where is the offspring? Because of that tension, Abraham and Sarah face major hurdles. There is a very important wordplay that we want to look at between chapter 15, verse 1, where it says, I am your shield because the word shield is a wordplay on a word that occurred in chapter 14.

And if you look at it in verse 20, it's in the context of Melchizedek's blessing. Verse 20 reads, Melchizedek is speaking, and blessed be God most high, who delivered, you can underline that word, delivered your enemies into your hand. And that's what's in view here: God has delivered the enemies of Abraham.

This has to do with those who took his nephew Lot and the hostilities of not only the confederation of the Eastern kings but also all those living as Abraham is a neighbor to these kings, especially named here the king of Sodom. But the point is that God has delivered and as a consequence, God can be seen as a shield. It goes on to read in verse 2, a proposal made by Abraham, O sovereign Lord, and this is the language El Shaddai, El Shaddai, O sovereign Lord, the sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eleazar of Damascus? And Abram said, you have given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir.

Now, this is a proposal made by Abraham that was perfectly acceptable in his day. We know this from a newsy site in Mesopotamia, and the people group there was the people group known as the Hurrians, and the Hurrians did have this practice, and probably elsewhere in the ancient Near East. We know that we can surmise that adoption of a servant in the household could be a substitute for a childless couple, and that's what he has in mind.

Now, notice that Eleazar is from Damascus. He is not a Hebrew but a Gentile. So that is the proposal by Abram, who will be his heir.

Now, when we see the response of the Lord, this man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. So, he's saying and narrowing the identity of the successor to Abraham. He has got to come from your own body.

There's no possibility of an adoption, but don't be troubled. As I promised in the past, I promise again that so great in number will be your descendants, and they will be as numerous as the stars. Earlier in chapter 13, you remember, he promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust.

Now, we come to a very important verse in Genesis, and for that matter, the whole of the Bible. Because the narrator interprets what's taking place and describes this in verse 6, Abraham believed the Lord. Now, when it says this, Abraham believed the Lord; he's talking about what the Lord had promised.

First, in chapter 12, there is the announcement of the promises, and then here, there is the renewal, the response of God, speaking again of the assurance of the promises. All that Abraham had to do was believe what God said, the word of the Lord. And he, this is referring to the Lord, and notice Lord is in all caps, and these indicate that the Hebrew is the personal name of God, Yahweh.

And Yahweh credited it to Abraham, to him, as an act of righteousness. So he, by virtue of his faith in the word of the Lord, as it is presented to him by God himself, believed him in this vision. He entrusted himself and his future to God's hands.

And so, the Lord gave him the value and acknowledged the value of this confession of faith. And therefore, declared him having the right relationship with the Lord. Now, I don't think that this is the first time that Abraham believed the Lord.

He had responded in faith when he departed from Ur and Haran. And when he, having received the promises, it says in chapter 12, verse 4, that he responded immediately. And then from place to place in Canaan, he built altars and worshiped the Lord.

So, you can see then that he has faith already, but now it is clarified, specified by the commentator directly, the one who is the narrator. Now, the word credited is an interesting word for us because it is in the same; it's not of the same root, but the same semantic range of counting. And it's a counting credited in the sense that it was considered by God as valued and approved.

Counting the promises were true. The reason I mentioned that the word credited is in the same domain, the sphere of counting; although it's a different word, it has a similar meaning because of what we found earlier in the verse before it had to do with counting the stars. So, your offspring shall be.

So, there's a connection there between his faith, God's promise, and how Abraham in verse 6 is said to now be righteous in the eyes of God. This is not a righteousness produced on the part of Abraham but rather a righteousness that came by faith. Now, the writer that we want to turn to in the New Testament, who uses this to explain what faith is, is found in Romans 4. And let's look at two verses in Romans 4. What the apostle Paul wants to do in Romans 4 is explain to his readers, many of which were Jewish readers and then also Gentile readers in the church in Rome, that salvation comes by faith and not observance of the law presented by Moses.

In other words, the Jews of the apostle Paul's day didn't go far enough back to Israel's history that they focused on Moses and the Ten Commandments, the law that God revealed at Sinai. What they needed to do, as Paul explained, was to go further back to the father of the Hebrew people, the father of the Israelites, the father who received first the promises of God, and that would be Abraham. And so he quotes our Genesis chapter 15, 6, and it's found in Romans chapter 4, verse 3. What does Scripture say? And, of course, Scripture would indicate what had been received by the Jew and Gentile believers in Rome as authoritative.

Scripture was the voice of God to be received as speaking with the full authority of God's voice. So, what did Scripture say? Abraham believed God and was credited to him as righteousness. And now, listen to the commentary in verse 9. Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, that is only for the Jew who has undergone circumcision, as a sign of the Abraham covenant, or also from the uncircumcised? We have been saying that would be the Gentile, the nations; we have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.

Now the point of his argument, which we must heed, is that salvation did not come by the law. Abraham preceded the law. He did not have the Mosaic law to obey.

So, if Abraham is indeed recognized for his righteousness by God himself, it must be not by law, but by faith in the word spoken by God. And also notice that this came before circumcision. Circumcision will be described in Genesis chapter 17.

And there, both those who are in the household of Abraham, that is his offspring, those who are born to Abraham by offspring and family, and the only offspring he has at this point, chapter 16, Ishmael, and all those who are aliens, in other words, those who have become a part of his household, but not part of his initial family group, all of them undergo circumcision. So, what he is saying is that before circumcision was inaugurated, he is already declared to be righteous. On what basis? On the basis of a faith.

And God responded, rewarded him, declaring that he is righteous. He's not saying that Abraham is a perfectly righteous person, because after all, we can see not only before chapter 15, but also subsequently, that Abraham continued to sin against the

Lord and to stumble in his spiritual journey. But by virtue of his faith in God's word, the Lord declared him with right standing.

So, when we draw the analogy to that of a Christian believer, what we have then is the same means where we have faith involved. A Christian believer has faith, I like the word entrust or the word confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ and what Jesus Christ declared regarding himself, the kingdom of God, and the provision through Christ's sacrifice. But also, we want to notice there is the same object of Abraham's belief, his faith.

And just as our object is the same as that of Abraham, notice, it says, Abraham believed who? The Lord, the identity here of God, Yahweh. And so, we, too, know as Christians that when we entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ, we know that we are entrusting ourselves to the Lord God. For the scriptures tell us in the New Testament that Jesus Christ is fully God.

So, we have this sameness. Now, what are we to say regarding Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross? Well, the sacrifice on the cross, of course, occurred in time, but also in eternity. So that is the same basis for the declaration of Abraham as having right standing.

The passage that is clearest regarding the nature of the sacrifice of Jesus having been declared in eternity, is found in the book of Revelation, chapter 13, verse 8. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast that is an opponent of God and his believing family, all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Now, here is our relevant passage, the Lamb, which in context is clearly referring to Jesus Christ, a Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. So, we see that in the mind of God, in the eye of God, the basis for all salvation, whether an Old Testament figure or New Testament figure, is dependent upon, as the writer of Hebrews would say, the superiority, the satisfactory sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

So, what do we have in common between Abraham and Christian faith? Well, we have the same means, it's by faith. We have the same object, the Lord God, and we find that the same basis, the sacrifice of Jesus, whether old or new, is not time-bound and not place-bound. And so, the effect of the sacrifice of Jesus was forecast, foreseen, and effectuated in the life of Abraham and all those who would place their faith and trust in the promises of God.

So, we don't have two ways of salvation. Many times it is asked, how were the people in the Old Testament saved? They were saved in the same way. And so, it's not by keeping the law.

In fact, they couldn't keep the law. Repeatedly, they failed to keep the law. And it wasn't by circumcision, for faith came before circumcision.

This then leads us to the ritual that is described. This is a ceremony that has, we think, similarities to what is found in the ancient Near East, where there is a sacrifice that is involved. The nearest explanation of this is found in Jeremiah chapter 34, verse 18.

This runs through verse 20. The context here is that the prophet Jeremiah, in the 600s before Christ, is condemning the people of Judah for their failure to keep God's covenant commandments. So, listen in verse 18.

Those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walk between its pieces. Now, as we find in chapter 15 of Genesis, this is exactly what takes place, where God informs Abraham to take animals, cut them in half, and set them in the arrangement of opposites so that there is a lane, a pathway between the body parts of these animals. Jumping back to Jeremiah 34, verse 19, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests, and all the people of the land walk between the pieces of the calf.

Now, again, this has to do with the ceremony of the two parties in the covenant walking through the half pieces in that aisle or lane provided by having the animals. In doing so, they would cross walk in parallel. And so, they are ceremonially accepting the covenant stipulations that would have been named in a covenant between two parties.

So that's why in Jeremiah, it speaks of walking between the pieces of the calf. Now what is different about what occurs in chapter 15 is that there's only one party that walks between the pieces of the animals. As we pick it up in verse 12, we will find that as darkness begins to come upon the scene, Abraham falls into a sleep.

He is not walking between pieces. He's over here on the side with a deep sleep, the same kind of sleep as described by Adam when taken from his side by his wife, Eve, in chapter two of Genesis. So, in this deep sleep, he has a night vision.

And the Lord said to him, and then there is a description of what will become of Abraham's descendants, as they must go down into Egypt for four centuries before they will be delivered. And that is by Moses, then picking it up in verse 17. When the sun had set, and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch.

So, this is a receptacle. It has incense. It has been lit a fire.

And so, there's smoke emerging from this vessel, this pot with a blazing torch, it appeared and passed between the pieces. Now in the context, it makes it quite clear. This is the party, the Lord himself, he is the one verse 18 reads on that day, the Lord

made a covenant with Abraham and said, and then he lists the parties that are appearing in the land, these various people groups.

Now, returning to Jeremiah, verse 20. Here's what the Lord says: I will deliver into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them; their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals. This may be suggestive, only suggested, somewhat speculative.

That is what is in mind here in Jeremiah, by declaring that the enemies of these who have violated the covenant will be executed through warfare, and their dead bodies will become food. So might it mean that by the having of the animal parts, that this was a symbolic gesture that if you don't carry out your part of the covenant treaty relationship, then you're going to be brought to judgment and will suffer the same fate as the animals, namely, that you will die under the judgment of God. So this is the ritual.

This ritual may then be a self-imprecation. In other words, you curse yourself by signing on by taking up this covenant, which has implied the curses of death, should you violate them, as did the leadership of Judah during the time of Jeremiah. But since the Lord has passed through, represented by the fire pot, since he is the one that has gone through, the Lord is really obligating himself to fulfill his promises.

And so, in doing so, he is declaring that his own reputation is dependent upon carrying out truthfully the covenant promises. And again, as we heard in chapter 12, where the promises are spoken without any stipulations for Abraham, here it is again, Abraham is not a participant. He's not a participant in the ceremony.

And hence, he is the recipient of what God promises in the covenant. And so it's that one way. We can thank God for that in Abraham's life because Abraham did not always obey the Lord.

He will fail at times in his spiritual journey. When we have the next session, we will continue the story of covenant making in chapter 17 with circumcision. In order to prepare for that, we will begin anew next time with chapter 16, the story of Hagar and Ishmael.