

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 12, The Covenant Ceremony and Sign, Part 1 (Gen 15:1-17:27)

NotebookLM's 6-min. Video Overview

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Today, we're diving into a story that starts on an ancient battlefield. We're talking thousands of years ago, and it involves a victorious warrior, a mysterious king, and a promise so powerful it would literally shape the world we live in today. So let's set the scene.

You've got the patriarch Abraham, and he is fresh off this massive military victory. I mean, he just rescued his nephew, Lot, from a whole coalition of powerful kings. As he's coming back, two very different local rulers come out to meet him.

And the choice he makes right here between these two, well, it changes everything. In this moment, it really boils down to what you might call a tale of two kings. It presents Abraham with a choice between two totally different paths, two ways of looking at his victory, and really his entire future.

Okay, so on one side, you've got the king of Sodom. He offers a classic worldly deal. Hey, you keep all the goods, just give me my people back.

It's purely transactional, right? But Abraham refuses. He's determined that no one will ever be able to say, I made Abraham rich. He's trusting in a completely different source.

And that source is represented by the other king, the king of Salem, who doesn't offer a deal at all. He offers a divine blessing. And this brings us to this incredibly fascinating figure, the king of Salem.

His name is Melchizedek, and he just kind of appears out of nowhere in this story. But wow, his impact is absolutely immense. So who was this guy? Well, we know he's the king of Salem, which is very likely the ancient city of Jerusalem, but he's also called a priest of God Most High.

Now that's super interesting because the official priesthood of Israel won't even exist for centuries. And get this, his name, Melchizedek, literally means king of righteousness, and his city, Salem, gives us the word shalom or peace. But here's the most mysterious part.

He shows up with no family tree, no father, no mother, no recorded kids. He just is. And right here, we see just how high Melchizedek's status is.

Abraham, the hero of the whole story, the father of a nation, pays him a tithe, a tenth of all his spoils from the war. This one action makes it crystal clear. Abraham is acknowledging that Melchizedek represents a higher spiritual authority.

But the story doesn't stop there, not by a long shot. Centuries later, the writers of the New Testament look back at this one brief meeting, and they see something incredibly profound. They see the foundation for what they call an eternal priesthood.

Now, to really get what they're talking about, you need to understand this idea of a type and anti-type. Think of it like this. It's an interpretive lens where an early person or event, that's the type, is seen as a divinely planned sneak peek of a later, greater fulfillment, the anti-type.

So, the book of Hebrews presents Melchizedek as the perfect type of Christ by comparing his priesthood to the one in Israel. See, the regular Aaronic priesthood was limited by death and by your family tree; their sacrifices had to be made over and over and over. But Melchizedek's priesthood is presented as eternal, with no recorded beginning or end.

He brings together the roles of priest and king, which were always kept separate in Israel. He becomes the model for a totally different, higher order. Okay, so let's pivot from Melchizedek and go back to Abraham himself.

Because right after this whole encounter, we get one of the most important foundational statements in the entire Bible. And here it is. God promises Abraham that he'll have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

And the text just says that Abram believed God. That's it. And because of that belief, that simple trust, God credited it to him as righteousness.

Now, what that means is he was declared to be in a right standing with God, not because of something he did, but simply because of what he believed. But here's the kicker. The really crucial question is, when did this all happen? Because the timing of this declaration is the absolute key to unlocking a massive theological argument that's made centuries down the road.

Check out this timeline. Abraham is declared righteous in Genesis chapter 15. But the physical sign of that covenant, circumcision, that doesn't show up until two chapters later.

And the formal law of Moses wouldn't be given for hundreds of years. This exact sequence is what the apostle Paul latches onto in his letter to the Romans. His whole argument is that righteousness has always been based on faith, because Abraham himself was declared righteous long before any laws or rituals were ever put in place.

Okay, so if the promise is all based on faith, how is it sealed? How is it guaranteed? Well, this leads us to one of the absolute strangest and most powerful ceremonies in the entire ancient world. To prove to Abraham that this promise was completely unbreakable, God tells him to prepare for a special kind of covenant ceremony. But trust me, it is not like anything you'd imagine.

So first, Abraham takes several animals, cuts them in half, and arranges the pieces to create this bloody pathway. This was actually a known practice for the most serious ancient treaties. But then, things get really weird.

Abraham is put into a deep supernatural sleep. He becomes just a spectator. And then, a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch, which are symbols of God's holy presence, pass between the animal pieces, all by themselves.

You see, in a normal ancient treaty, both people making the deal would walk down that path together. It was basically a self-imposed curse. They were saying, if I break my end of this bargain, may I be cut in two just like these animals.

It was the ultimate guarantee. But in this ceremony, how many parties walked that path? Just one. And this is the mind-blowing part of the whole story.

Since only God passed between the pieces, God was taking the entire burden of the oath on himself. He was essentially saying, if this promise is ever broken, let the curse fall on me. This completely changes it from a two-sided contract into a one-sided unconditional promise.

Its fulfillment depended entirely on God's faithfulness, not on Abraham's ability to keep up his end of the deal. All Abraham had to do was believe it. So, this ancient story leaves us with a really deep question to chew on.

What is faith, really? Is it a human action? Something we have to work up and achieve? Or is it simply our response to a divine promise, one that has already been made, sealed, and guaranteed by God himself?