

“A Priestly Order”

Genesis 14:8-24

January 17, 2010

Read Genesis 14:8-24.

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

This is an odd little passage, isn't it? For those of you who have been along for the ride during the Pastor Study regarding Hebrews, you have some idea of just how odd a little passage it is. It is one of those head scratching stories; as in, “How did this make the cut for what is included in the Bible? The short answer is: God's plan for redemption is a mystery revealed through the generations – including Abram's generation. The significance of this seemingly random and uneventful encounter would not be revealed or realized until thousands of years later.

The Story

After Abram was thrown out of Egypt (for telling Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister and not his wife), he returned to the Negeb. He and his nephew Lot had grown wealthy. Their employees were clashing over the best grazing lands. Abram realized that they needed to split up to avoid having strife between their two clans. Lot chose the plain of the Jordan, which included Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram went to Canaan.

At the beginning of Chapter 14, Lot was taken captive. The land in which he chose to settle had been governed by kings (whose names none of us can pronounce). We read 'kings' and think royalty in England; however, these were more akin to mayors than rulers of vast nations. Those kings had served a more powerful king (Chedorlaomer – and here, think a governor of a state) for a dozen years, but rebelled in the thirteenth. Chedorlaomer came in and subdued the rebellion. Overwhelmed them, would be a more accurate description. The armies of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with several others, were routed. As was typical of the era, the losers' people and goods (including Abram's nephew, Lot) were carted off into captivity. One guy escaped. He found Abram and told him what happened to Lot.

Let me stop here to re-set the scene because the Abram we find in Chapter 14 is not the same man we saw in Chapter 12. Specifically, the author of Genesis was showing us a different Abram than the cowardly Abram who used his wife as a shield to protect himself. Here, the new and improved Abram – the Abram who had returned to God and the promised land, and the Abram with whom the LORD had renewed the promises – responded very differently. Abram gathered his 318 trained men and went out to rescue his nephew. Make no mistake: in human terms, he was way undermanned. However, with God, Abram had confidence that his numbers would be sufficient. He found the camp of the powerful king. Abram's team defeated them soundly. Abram gathered up everyone and everything that had been taken and started back home.

And this is where I want to spend the bulk of our time today. The battle is interesting insofar as it was God who provided the victory. But on the way home, in the “Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley), Abram was met by two kings: the King of Sodom and Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is introduced as a King, King of Salem, which is generally understood to mean that he was king of the land that later became fully known as Jerusalem. The name “Melchizedek” means King of Righteousness or Righteousness is my king. His kingdom is Shalom, or peace. The Word Biblical Commentary had the best summary of what happened at this meeting of kings:

The attitudes of the two kings stand in marked contrast. Melchizedek, for whom Abram has done little, greets him warmly, laying on a banquet for him. He further blesses Abram in the name of the most high God. Here, the promise of the blessing upon Abram and those who bless him (Genesis 12:1-3) starts to be fulfilled. By implication Melchizedek, who blesses Abram, is himself blessed. Indeed, Abram shows his benevolence towards Melchizedek by giving him a tenth of what he recovered. Contrast that with the king of Sodom who, by his cool, if not surly, reception of Abram, shows that he disdains Abram, an attitude that is unjustified, considering Abram’s rescue of the people of Sodom, and, in light of 12:3, a response that will evoke the divine curse. Yet despite Sodom’s coolness, Abram treats him generously, returning to him all the people *and* the goods that the other kings had carried off.

Sodom’s fate is hinted here. Not only is the city sacked by human hands, which suggests divine displeasure, but its king’s brusque treatment of Abram, his deliverer, suggest antipathy to one who evidently enjoys divine blessing and support. Even without the explicit warning “he who disdains you I shall curse,” the narrative suggests that it is dangerous to despise those through whom God works.¹

So, what do we do with this? It is a strange little incident among a series of strange incidents – what does this have to do with us?

There are a number of ways to go with this – not the least of which is a stewardship sermon noting how Abram gave a tithe of what he had gained as a thanks offering to the Lord. His offering was made for God’s blessing, recognizing God had delivered the enemies into his hand, and giving testimony that God indeed is the God Most High. If that was the direction I was taking, I might make the specific application that our giving is like Abram’s giving in that it demonstrates our heart – thankfulness for God’s blessing, deliverance from sin, and a testimony that God indeed is the God Most High. I might ask you to consider: if you look at your finances, what is the testimony of your giving of time, talent, and treasures? Who is the god you serve?

But that’s not the direction we are going.

Instead this morning, I would like us to focus our attention on what God reveals in Melchizedek. We know very little about the person, Melchizedek. Genesis 14 tells us that he was a king. He also was a priest. The rest is a left a mystery.

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 1, Genesis 1-15, p. 321.

These three verses (Genesis 14:18-20) are his only personal appearance in Scripture. We struggle with mysteries because we want to control them. However, mysteries, particularly those of God, remain outside of our command, no matter what we do to solve them.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior, was a doctor. As such he was very interested in the use of ether. In order to know how his patients felt under its influence, he once had a dose administered to himself.

As he was going under, in a dreamy state, a profound thought came to him. He believed that he had suddenly grasped the key to all the mysteries of the universe. When he regained consciousness, however, he was unable to remember what the insight was.

Because of the great importance this thought would be to mankind, Holmes arranged to have himself given ether again. This time he had a stenographer present to take down the great thought. The ether was administered, and sure enough, just before passing out the insight reappeared. He mumbled the words, the stenographer took them down, and he went to sleep confident in the knowledge that he had succeeded.

Upon awakening, he turned eagerly to the stenographer and asked her to read what he had uttered. This is what she read: "The entire universe is permeated with a strong odor of turpentine."²

It's tough to argue with something so profound.

Years ago, I read an article by Richard Mouw, who was the president of Fuller Seminary when I was a student there.

...[T]heology is not so much a "problem solving" enterprise as it is "a mystery discerning enterprise." ... In a mystery story, many of the early happenings don't seem at the time to have much significance. But when the mystery is finally solved, one can look back and see that some seemingly insignificant happenings, things that did not seem important to the overall plot at the time have turned out to be major clues: the dog who did not bark, the butler's nervous tic, the nephew who claimed not to have watched TV that night.

Similarly, ... we can read passages in the Old Testament that do not seem at the time of our first reading to have any direct connection to what comes later. But when we look back at them after having read about the redemptive ministry of Jesus, they can suddenly have a new kind of "aha!" meaning for us.³

That is absolutely the case with Melchizedek. It is a prime example of strange words or seemingly unimportant events later having extraordinary significance.

² (<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/m/mystery.htm>)

³ Richard Mouw, *Presbyterian Outlook*, January 2010.

Generations after Genesis 14, Melchizedek appeared by name in a Psalm exalting the special role of David. I invite you to turn to Psalm 110. Psalm 110 has two prophetic words from the LORD: you will see them verse 1 and verse 4. The first invites the king to take his seat at God's right hand; that God is the true king and will be responsible for victory over enemies. (Note, this is consistent with the blessing Melchizedek uttered over Abram.) Then, the second word in verse 4, the Psalmist wrote, "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind. 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" The important thing here is that David was identified and recognized as the king and priest of Jerusalem – exactly the titles held by Melchizedek.

Many generations after David, when the people were taken into exile and the temple destroyed, Psalm 110 transitioned; it was understood to be a word of hope. The promise of David's line holding the throne eternally was one of the important expectations of the messiah. God would give the messiah victory over enemies, establish him as the king of peace (king of shalom) and he would pursue God's righteousness. How all this would happen was a mystery.

Yet many more generations later, the preacher of Hebrews picked up the Melchizedek theme and applied it to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The mystery revealed here was that the new covenant established by Jesus the Great High Priest, a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Consider how the writer of Hebrews described the Genesis 14 event:

"This "King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him"; and to him Abraham apportioned "one-tenth of everything." His name, in the first place, means "king of righteousness"; next he is also king of Salem, that is, "king of peace." Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

Let me break in here to explain what is meant here: Melchizedek was not introduced in Scripture with a family identification or genealogy – thus, no father or mother. He is not a priest by birth or pedigree. In Scripture, he is not described by age or birthplace and he does not appear again in person – thus, within the context of Scripture, he does not have a beginning of days nor end of life. Within Scripture, he remains a priest forever. The timelessness of his priesthood is important to the writer of Hebrews.

See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. ... It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal, in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Just as Abram gave tithes to Melchizedek and received from him a blessing, so Jesus was superior to the descendants of Abram. Then, look how the preacher in Hebrews opened the meaning of the mystery revealed:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according

to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of him, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.” (Hebrews 7:1-19 NRSV)

You may be thinking to yourself, “Wow, that’s pretty incredible, to see how God promised and then worked through the generations to reveal his messiah.” Or, you may be saying to yourself, “What does all this have to do with me?”

Two things:

First, God’s promises are true, even today. The promises made to Abram were fulfilled thousands of years after Abram’s generation had died. This passage is a reminder to remain faithful during generations – even generations filled with difficult times. On paper, we can understand that message. In the living, however, it is much tougher.

But look: Scripture says that Melchizedek was part of God’s priestly order. It does not say that in Genesis; there it only describes him as priest of God Most High. That he was part of a priestly *order* only was revealed more than a thousand years later, in Psalm 110. Even there, the existence of that order was only hinted; it was not fully revealed. Further revelation takes a thousand years later – after Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – when the preacher of Hebrews explained how Jesus was the one foreshadowed by Melchizedek’s priestly order. Is that the final revelation? How many other things in Scripture do we have yet to see fully manifest?

This is where faith comes into play. Are you willing to trust God’s faithfulness even if it means you will not see those promises fulfilled in your lifetime? Must God fulfill the promises of Scripture in such a way that you can see, feel, touch, reproduce in order for you to believe – or – are you willing to place your hope in one who remains a mystery?

If you believe the here and now is it, if you believe that God is good only when pleasing things happen to you, if you believe that worldly success is the measure of God’s blessing, then things like the pandemic and social unrest are going to shake the foundation of your faith. If, on the other hand, you understand that here and now is *not* it, that we do not see everything clearly, that God’s redemptive history is a mystery, that it has been going on for many generations, and that there are things you will not understand; you can put your hope in one whose will has proven to be trustworthy.

Put your hope in the one who is faithful. Put your hope in the one who is true. Put your hope in the one who is Lord over all the generations and who loves you so much that he gave his only begotten Son to be a high priest in the order of Melchizedek and offered himself once for all as atonement for sin.

Second, Jesus Christ *is* the great high priest in the order of Melchizedek, whose sacrifice, once for all, deals with your sins. That is what brings us to this table each month: we celebrate the goodness of God in providing for us, reclaiming us, redeeming us, and restoring us to fellowship with him through the sacrifice made by our great high priest, Jesus. If you have received Jesus as Lord and Savior, if you have repented from your sins and desire to be his disciple, you can have confidence that Jesus' blood given for you has washed you clean and made you righteous in God's judgment.

The meal provided to Abram by Melchizedek – bread and wine – may or may not have been a foreshadowing of the Lord's supper ordained by Jesus so many thousands of years later, but thousands of years after Jesus we still share this meal as a witness to God's goodness and eternal promises. We celebrate this meal as a witness to our trust, faith, and expectation that God's kingdom will be fully realized – in God's time. As part of the priesthood of all believers, we stand in line today as part of that same priestly order. You and I are ministers proclaiming the mystery of God revealed,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Blessed may you be by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth.

Amen.

Prayer

Lord's Supper

Questions:

1. Have you ever strayed from God (backslidden, drifted, wandered) and returned? Can you see a difference in how you responded to challenges and difficulties? How is your life different walking with God than it was walking apart from God?
2. How do you deal with mystery? Are you willing to trust God's faithfulness even if it means you will not see those promises fulfilled in your lifetime?
3. What does the Lord's supper mean to you? How would you explain it to someone unfamiliar with the faith?