

# Calvin Speaks



Vol. 2, No. 7

© 1981, Geneva Divinity School

July, 1981

## An Introduction to Calvin's Sermons on the History of Melchizedek

John Calvin preached through Genesis in 1559 and 1560. In 1560, a selection of his earlier sermons in the series was published at Geneva, in French, bearing the equivalent title to that of the later English transition. These sermons actually came later than the *Commentary on Genesis*, which Calvin wrote in 1554, and at some points reflect an advance in his thinking.

The *Sermons of Maister John Calvin on the Historic of Melchizedek* were published in London in 1592, in a transition by Thomas Stocker. There were ten sermons in the volume: three on Melchizedek proper, four on the faith of Abraham, and three on the sacrifice of Isaac. The remainder of the sermons on Genesis, not all of which are extant, have never been published either in French or in English, to my knowledge.

*Calvin Speaks* intends to offer the first three sermons, on Melchizedek proper, and then return to the sermons on Deuteronomy. The sermons on Melchizedek

are not only a fascinating curiosity, they are also important in that they deal with certain fundamental questions, such as the right of revolution, the relation of church and state, and tithing.

It is our prayer that you will find these sermons as edifying as we have. The editor, who is responsible for updating the archaic English and adding the footnotes, is Mr. James B. Jordan of Geneva Divinity School.

One further word. Calvin's speaking style is not very literary, and the form in which these sermons are found in French and in English is highly oral in character. Extremely long sentences abound, connected together by words such as "indeed, yea, and, notwithstanding, yet, afterwards," and the like. Mr. Jordan has shortened many of these by breaking them up, but many are still rather long. The trick, if you get confused, is to read aloud; it all comes clear then.

## THE FIRST SERMON ON THE HISTORY OF MELCHIZEDEK (1559)

### (Part 1)

Genesis 14:13. And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew; for he dwelt in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner: and these were confederate with Abram.

14. And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan.

15. And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus.

16. And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.

17. And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king's dale.

We are to proceed in the history we began studying yesterday concerning the deliverance of Lot. First of all, we should behold the great goodness and favor of God toward Abram, in giving him the means to rescue him.

### Abram and His Neighbors

Note that Moses particularly says, *There came one that had escaped, to Abram the Hebrew*. There is no reproach in calling him this, for the tribe of Eber was thus called, and Eber was descended from Shem, as we have declared in previous sermons. So we see that God had separated Abram in such a way that he would not be tainted or polluted among the Canaanites. Nevertheless, regardless of the case, Moses gives him this title as if to say, "You are only a stranger, and a newly arrived guest in the land of Canaan." And besides, no wonder no account was made of him, since he had neither relatives nor friends there. And yet for all that, God granted him such favor and privilege, that at the proper time and place he was told of the evil that had

befallen his nephew, that he might help and rescue him.<sup>1</sup>

Now Moses adds that he was in league with some of his neighbors. And yet we see that previously he had been driven to wander from place to place, this way and that, because he was discourteously treated everywhere, for no matter where he came, he was driven to the worst. In fact, God had commanded him to tread over the land far and near, to test him; all the same, before that he had been driven of necessity to do it. Now there can be no doubt but that his virtues had gained him such credit and authority that he was accepted among them, and even the chiefest men of that country counted him as their friend, and allied with him to join together one with another.

Yet this also is certain, that all the virtues in the world sometimes cannot bring a man such a good turn of events unless two other things occur together with them. The one is this: Those who would behave themselves justly and soundly, must first conform their lives according to the prescriptions of the Word of God. And as long as they serve God, they will also show a humane affection to their neighbors, and thereby redeem to themselves peace on many occasions, and stay the malice of those who otherwise would be ready to grieve and vex them. In fact, St. Peter, in handling this argument (1 Pet. 2:19, 20), when he exhorts servants to well-doing, and to serve those whom they are bound to serve, says that they may thereby obtain such favor as not to be beaten or severely dealt with. Howbeit, he says, no matter how it goes, if you endure grief and suffer wrong for well-doing, and yet by the testimony of your own consciences you take it patiently, then are you worthy of thanks before God. This is what we need to note here.

The second thing that needs to accompany virtue is for God to bless those who walk justly, and for Him to mollify the hearts of men toward them. So then, when we hear it said here that Abram had come to join with him, there can be no doubt—it may easily be seen—that they were such as earlier had had no use for him at all; or else they were the kind of men who love to live riotously and partake of the spoil, for certainly such men were inclined enough to join with him. To say the truth; however, this alliance of theirs was to continue only for a short time. For it is certain that Abram would never spend his life with those whom God had already condemned, even though He had stayed their executions; and it had been also contrary to the promise.<sup>2</sup> And therefore Abram was careful always to stand on sure ground, because he did not wish to lessen the blessing

promised to him.

Nevertheless, however it was, he did not refuse to ally himself with them, because he wanted to live peaceably with them, and not be a prey and a spoil among them. From this we are admonished, as I have said before, in such a way to live with men. Yea, although they be as it were sharp pricks to prick us, despitefully to use us, and maliciously and severely to deal with us, yet we should yield to it, because from this they will perceive that we desire nothing but peace and the procuring of their welfare. And even if they went about trying by all possible means to hurt us and injure us, yet notwithstanding we should still rest in this hope, that God would change their cursed and venomous hearts, or else so bridle them that even though we were as sheep among ravenous wolves, yet we should be guarded and secured by the hand of this Heavenly Shepherd. Thus we see what we are to learn from this.

### Just Warfare and Private Vengeance

Now the cause of the war is, moreover, set down for us, in that Abram, seeing his kinsman taken prisoner, took up arms. They had long before that given him many occasions to fall out with them, and yet all the damage they had done him, and all the loss that he had received at their hands, could never induce him to make war. He bore all those things patiently; only the captivity of his nephew moved him to war.

Here a question might be asked, whether it was lawful for Abram to take up arms or not. For although (as we say in common proverb) blood cannot lie, so that he would have a strong desire to recover his nephew and could not be faulted for it, yet nevertheless we must hold to the general rule that it is not lawful for just any man to take up arms (Rem. 13:4). For it is God alone Who must do that. It is He (as St. Paul says) Who arms kings and princes. And when he says that it is they who have the right and superiority to punish the wicked, and who carry the sword, it is not that they should use it as they personally please, and act as other men in the wielding of it. No, rather God must be the Author of each use of the magistrate's sword. Thus you see why I have said that no man may use force and violence unless he has received the right from Him to Whom it belongs. And therefore, there are none but kings, princes, and magistrates who may lawfully take up arms, and with whom men may join themselves.

And this is a point upon which we must surely ground ourselves and take our stand. For what a thing it would be for each man to take to the field when any wrong is done to him. Without a doubt that would bring in horrible confusion everywhere. Moreover, St. Paul, to keep us within bounds and to exhort us to patience, cites the saying of Moses in his Song, "Vengeance is Mine," says the Lord (Rem.- 12:19; Deut. 32:35). Whereupon he concludes that we must give place to wrath and anger. God takes this office of revenge to Himself, if there be any extremity and wrong committed, because it is His office to punish the same. Now then, if each man takes this on himself, and each private man thrusts himself in to be

1. This seems to be a summary of a previous sermon, unknown to me. Calvin's point, which may have eluded the reader, is that since Abram was new and unknown in the land, it is curious that an escaped man would come straight to him with news of his nephew's capture. That this came to pass, Calvin says, is wholly of the grace of God. (On the question whether Abram was really so small and insignificant a force, see footnote 5 below.)

2. This is a bit obscure. I take it that Calvin means that the continuing presence of the Canaanites in the land seemed contrary to God's promise to Abram, yet Abram did not interpret this to mean that he should join them in a common lifestyle.

avenged; no doubt of it: that man robs God of His honor and right, as if he would exclude Him completely from all.

If, then, we wish to leave room for the wrath of God; that is to say, if we want to have God show Himself as our protector and defender and take our wars in hand; if we wish to be avenged on our enemies; then we ought to be quiet and peaceable. For he that arms himself robs God, as I have already said, of the jurisdiction which He gives to Himself for the defense of his own. To be short, private persons ought not only to abstain from all kinds of violence, but also to have a quiet and peaceable mind, willing to endure suffering whenever it pleases God to humble them. And meanwhile, as St. Peter exhorts us (1 Pet. 4:19), we are to commend both our souls and our lives to Him, Who is both the protector and owner of them.

And yet, nevertheless, we see here how Abram was approved (for Melchizedek in blessing him says that the victory which God gave him was guided by Him), even though he was only a private man; for he was neither king nor prince, but dwelt in the land of Canaan as a stranger. Howbeit, there is one thing we ought pre-eminently to notice: Abram had already been constituted and ordained to be lord and master of this country. And although the possession thereof was not as yet given to him, yet for all that the right and title thereof belonged to him. For God had pronounced it by His own mouth, saying, "Behold, this land is yours and your posterity's" (Deut. 12:7; 13:15). And therefore Abram is not to be regarded in the same category as other private persons, since God Himself had testified to him that He gave him possession of this land, even though he did not presently enjoy it.

Now then, we must look into the difference between Abram and other private persons. For some will reply that it is not enough that he was to become the owner of it eventually. To this objection we reply that the case with Abram here is like Moses' later on. For when Moses slew the Egyptian (Ex. 2:12), the time of the redemption of the people had not yet arrived. It was still forty years distant; and yet notwithstanding Moses did not forbear to take up the sword, nor can it be said that it was rashly and foolishly done, because God approved the fact (Acts 7:25): St. Stephen stated that Moses thought his brethren knew that God had ordained him thereunto, and had appointed him to that office. And therefore Moses thereby declared that he was not thrusting himself into that action of his own willfulness (Ex. 3:1 f., 13; 4:1; 10:13). And in fact, forty years later when God called him, he excused himself and used all kinds of reasons and shiftings to avoid the commission. This shows that he had not acted earlier in any foolhardiness; and God Himself also therein declared that He had reserved His servant, by making him commit the earlier solitary act, to employ him afterward, when the time was ripe, in matters of greater importance. And therefore God might for once give leave and liberty to His servant Abram to exercise the force of the sword, even though he was not as yet put in possession of the

land which He had promised him.

Additionally, we ought also to note that God sometimes gives singular inclinations to His servants, which we are not to imitate. There are excellent illustrations of this in the book of Judges; for when that book speaks of certain men whom God had stirred up to aid His people, these men are so many testimonies to us, to show that we should not think that there is always an assured and certain election to determine when any one man should be armed with the sword and with authority. Did Gideon know for certain that he had been chosen? No, surely he did not. Neither did Samson, nor any of the rest. I do not need to go into detail on each, for as I have already said, all were chosen of God, yet they themselves knew it not.

We see how Gideon doubted and was in great perplexity, and therefore would have God give him a manifest token of his vocation and calling; and a man would have thought that when he had obtained the thing he craved, that it would have doubled his courage; and yet this was not the case, for we see that he was very fearful. All the same, God had so chosen and appointed him for the deliverance of the people, that with 300 men he put to flight a great number, yea even a great and mighty army.

And yet, all that is here recorded for us is not for us to make a general rule out of it. For it would be mockery and a foolish argument for us to reason in this way: "See how God has redeemed His church from the tyranny of the wicked and the infidels, by the hands of Jephthah (Jud. 11:33), Samson (Jud. 13-16), and Gideon (Jud. 7), and such like. So therefore, when we see the children of God unjustly oppressed, it is lawful for us to take up arms to aid them." Now this argument is very two-horned; it poses a dilemma. For it is also necessary that we should have the spirit of those we are pretending to imitate; that is to say that we should be assured that God has also called us to the task. And why? because as I have already said, they had their singular inclinations, as if they had been privileged thereunto by a public law.<sup>3</sup>

We are in all things to note that when God does an extraordinary work, ~~being grounded on His Word,~~ that privilege is not to be usurped by us. For it is the office of a king or a council to grant the privilege [of taking up arms] to any man, nor is it my business necessarily to know why he grants the privilege. For if I take upon myself the right to do the same thing [take up arms] as those commissioned for the task, I join with those who have separated from the common order [I become an anarchist]. So, we must leave the authority of kings and magistrates to them, to do whatever they know to be best for the common good, and well we should do so.

3. Calvin's argument in brief is this The Judges did not take upon themselves the right of revolution. Indeed, they were reluctant to do so, and God had to grant them special revelations to induce them to it, just as He had to grant to Moses. Since we no longer live in the age of special revelation, such special tailings no longer occur. Now, as then, only the ordained magistrate is privileged to take up arms. This doctrine is known in Reformed theology as the right of the lesser magistrate to rebel against iniquitous authority.

And therefore, as often as we shall see God minded to remember the redemption and deliverance of His church by those He has ordained to be, as it were, ministers of His own preparing, we must understand that these were singular acts which have passed from His own hand, and those men were chosen by Him and armed also with His authority and power.' But to say that any man may take upon himself to do as much, the same would bring, as I have already said, horrible confusion. Thus we see what we have to learn concerning the matter here recorded for us about Abram. That is, that God had already given him a token that He had not in vain constituted him lord and master of the country of Canaan.

### A God-Given Victory

And besides, God was giving Abram a little taste of victory, so that when his successors should enter the land, no matter what forces should come against them, nothing would prevent them from conquering the whole land. And even though the army of those kings of whom we spoke yesterday was not over thirty or forty thousand, yet nevertheless Abram had only those of his household, which were by 318 men. Now for any man to say that they were experienced soldiers would be nonsense, because Abram was not brought up in the wars; he did not know how to handle either sword or shield.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, he would hardly have been made the more confident and bold by the presence of his confederates. Just as likely, their presence made him even more afraid. For they might have reasoned, "Why, this stranger wants us to go and have our throats cut. For do we not here see four victorious kings which have already spoiled Sodom and Gomorrah and all their neighboring cities round about? Will it do any good to

set upon them? Surely to do so would be to cast ourselves wittingly and willingly away." Therefore Abram, seeing himself in such a situation, should rather have desisted and lived in peace, in the common opinion of men.

Now at first sight, it seems great folly for him to make war with only 318 men, himself being an old man, acting as captain, he that had never known what either war or battle meant, as we have already said; yet now he hazards death so readily.<sup>5</sup> And therefore we are the more earnestly to observe something I have already touched upon, which is that God wanted thereby to show him that when He intended to put his successors in possession of the land, it would be easy for him to do it. This was shown Abram by the noble victory God gave him, a thing not to have been believed if a man were to judge it by human reason. Here we see in sum what we are to learn concerning this point, where it is said that Abram armed his household men.

We see by this with what wisdom God endowed him, even though he had never been trained in the wars, nor even acquainted with any stratagems or war maneuvers whatsoever. Yet notwithstanding we see that he surprised his enemies, charging them suddenly in the night, yea even at a time when they thought themselves most safe and secure, being sated with good meats and strong drinks, and enjoying the spoils of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now we know that after such victories there is much riot and filthiness committed. And yet Abram had so much cunning as to surprise his enemies, although in fact the victories which his enemies had earlier won would have been enough to have greatly daunted him.

And again, his so very sudden and speedy arrival must have brought with it a great todo and tumult, had not God by His Holy Spirit governed the same. By this we are to understand that God had to take this matter in hand to Himself, and not only for Lot's sake, but also because He wanted Abram to know that the promise of God was neither vain nor frivolous when He gave him the dominion and superiority over the whole land of Canaan. And this is what we are to learn from these verses. (to be concluded)

6. There seems to be a contradiction. Either Abram had his confederates with him in the attack, or else he attacked with only his 318 servants. Calvin explains in his *Commentary on Genesis* that Abram divided his forces (Gen. 14:15), and probably led one force consisting of his own 318 men, while his confederates led the other forces.

4. This sentence has reference to Biblical heroes, not to any supposedly inspired men in church history.

5. According to an important study by Folker Willesen, "The Yalid in Hebrew Society," *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958): 192-210, Abram was no small sheik. The 318 "homeborn servants" were not men born as infants into Abram's household, but men who had been "born again" by adoption into a privileged status within the household by the ceremony of the circumcision of the ear, described in Exodus 21:5, 6. Such men were, Willesen shows, usually skilled fighters. Willesen estimates that Abram's household at this time numbered at least 3000 people, and more likely 12,000, including both "homeborn" and domestic servants.

Thus, Calvin is amiss in his assumption that Abram was ignorant of war. A man of his stature would surely have been a skilled warrior. Calvin's general points, of course, are true enough.

Geneva Divinity School's correspondence course program is now underway. Write for more information if you are interested in studying Reformed theology in your own home.

Calvin Speaks is published every month by Geneva Divinity School. It is mailed free of charge to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. Address: 708 Hamvassy Drive, Tyler, TX 75701. Donations are tax deductible; checks should be made out to Calvin Speaks. Back issues can be sent only to those making a contribution.