

Calvin Speaks



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THE FIRST SERMON ON THE HISTORY OF MELCHIZEDEK (Part 2)

Summary of the First Half of the Sermon

The sermon deals with Genesis 14:13-17. In the first part, Calvin pointed out that Abram was a stranger in the land, so that it was a mark of God's favor that a refugee from the battle should seek him out to tell him of his nephew's distress. Calvin exhorts us to live at peace with our neighbors as much as possible, so that we might earn their esteem as Abram did his.

The question is raised: by what right did Abram take up arms, since he was not an ordained magistrate but a private person. Calvin goes to great lengths to impress on us that no private person should ever revolt against ordained government. In Biblical times, God did occasionally instruct men, such as the Judges, to take up arms; but these Godly men, so far from jumping at the chance to become warriors, had to be persuaded to it by miraculous means. Gideon is Calvin's archetype here. At any rate, Abram had in fact been constituted ruler of Canaan, and thus it was legally right for him to act in this case, even though he had not yet taken possession of the land.

*Calvin goes on to assert that Abram was totally ignorant of war; a debatable point. What is not debatable is that God did **give Abram a miraculous victory, which** was a token of His general blessing and also of His promise that Abram would indeed someday rule Canaan, through his posterity.*

Blessings Through Affliction

What happens next, that the king of Sodom came to him, magnifies the great favor and grace that God bore to Abram. For we have already noted the saying of Ezekiel 16:49, which says that the Sodomites were extremely proud. This pride was the very wellspring of all the enormities that provoked the vengeance of God utterly to root them out. Now no matter how proud the king of Sodom was, yet he was glad to come and do homage to Abram, because he knew that both his life and all his country were due to him.

From this we see that it was God Who had the direction in this matter, and blessed His servant Abram. True it is that it would have been much better for him not to have

gone out of his tent to risk his life so dangerously, but it was God Who stretched out His hand to him, because He wanted him to know by experience His power and assistance in the matter. This consequently greatly profited Abram, for it he had tarried in his house without understanding the suitable defense of God, without all doubt he would have never been so thoroughly convinced as afterwards he was.

And therefore we see that when God sends us any afflictions, even though at the first they be very hard and grievous, yet for all that in the end the issue of them is profitable and beneficial to our good. For, as St. Paul says, patience endures trial (Rom. 2:4; Is. 49:24), to the end that we might effectually know that it is God Who has succored us, and when we once know that, that we might more and more be confirmed to trust in Him. And hope never makes us ashamed, says Paul, for whosoever shall have recourse to God shall never be confounded. And therefore we see that we can never rest quiet and be peaceable until such time as God shows us why He has afflicted us, and in the mean time He makes us feel that it is for our good, and so consequently we have occasion to bless Him and call on Him more assuredly.

Melchizedek

Now where it says that the king of Sodom came to Abram, he adds that Melchizedek, king of Salem, also offered bread and wine; and that since he was the high priest of God, he blessed Abram; and that Abram gave him the tithe of all the spoil.

Here we see as notable a history as any in the Holy Scripture, and not only a history, but such a one also as is a lively image representing our Lord Jesus Christ, as in Psalm 110 it is written. For it is not without cause there set down that God had sworn and would not repent thereof, that He would never break the solemn oath which He had made; which is that Jesus Christ is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. If there were nothing else but the history thereof, we would see that Melchizedek is called priest of God. Regardless, he is in estate and degree most like Abram, yet not quite. For as we shall see later on, Abram is

called the father of all the faithful and of the whole church, and all such as are the children of God must be his Spiritual children. And therefore Melchizedek in one respect must be his inferior. It is far from the meaning of Moses to prefer him before Abram, as the apostle rightly does in Heb. 7:4-7, as hereafter we shall see.

Some have thought this to be Shem, but there is no likelihood of any truth in that conjecture. For if it had been so, would Abram have tarried so long before he had been to see the patriarch Shem, from whom he was descended? No doubt he would have gone to visit him at the very first, and have dwelt with him, for he would have been king of Salem. And of course, Abram might very well have shielded himself under his protection; but he wandered all over the country, and all that while there was no mention made of Melchizedek.⁷

Moreover, it was not without good cause that the apostle noted that Melchizedek had neither father nor mother, without beginning and without end, as if he had been an immortal man immediately descended from heaven; not but that Melchizedek was a man, but the apostle means to show that he is brought in as though he had never been born. For no man knows who was his father or his mother. No man knows his kindred nor how he lived. And no man knows where he died. Yet he is a priest of the living God. Nevertheless, he manifestly showed himself, and afterwards hid himself, and was buried, but no man knows how or when.

The apostle builds on this the teaching that he was a figure of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who although He is the everlasting Son of God, yet notwithstanding He had no father after the common manner of men, because His divine essence is Spiritual and eternal; and also, He was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit, beyond the order of nature. And even though He died, yet He lives forever; yea, and has obtained life for us in that He died for us. And therefore He is without beginning and without end: without beginning because He is God eternal, and without end because we live forever in Him, as it is said by the prophet Isaiah (53:8), "Who shall tell the line that shall come from him?" The church, by the virtue and power of our Lord Jesus Christ, is immortal; and therefore by a far stronger reason He must be without end. But we will handle this matter at greater length later on; we have run over it briefly now in order to show that Melchizedek was not Shem; and also to see why David especially counts the Redeemer that was to come as comparable to Melchizedek.

Remnants in Idolatrous Lands

Howbeit, before we go any farther we are to note that it was a wonderful grace of God that Melchizedek could keep himself pure, considering that all the land at that time was full of idolatry. For Abram's father's house was a den of idols, as we have earlier declared, and as the Holy Spirit tells us by the mouth of Joshua (Josh. 24:2). Seeing then that all was so corrupted in the land of Chaldaea,

7. Of course, the Bible is not designed to give a complete biography of Abram. For all we know, he and Melchizedek may have been frequent companions. The fact that the Bible records this encounter does not mean there were no others.

which was very near to the place where Noah had dwelt continually, and where Shem and his household also were living; seeing then that the Devil had perverted and so foully defiled the service of God, how is it possible that in the land of Canaan, where the people are so wicked, where there is nothing but impiety, contempt of God, and rebellion, where there is nothing but iniquity, deceit, cruelty, and violence, that yet there should dwell a priest of the living God?⁸

By this we may see how God oftentimes has His church, as we might say, raked up from among ashes and so not visible to the eyes of men; but it suffices that God sees it. We have a testimony of this here in Melchizedek. A man would have thought that there could not have been at that time one man that worshiped God sincerely and simply. For, seeing that the grandfather of Abram and all his relatives were given to Satanic errors, and served idols, what must we think of the rest? A man would have then judged that the church of God had been utterly abolished; but we may see, that He had reseeded a little seed thereof by willing that Melchizedek should be a priest there, yea even in such a land as more exceeded in all iniquity than any of the rest.

Let us then apply this to our own use, for it is a dangerous temptation for us to think that God has no church in the world, for then it must fall out that His promise is vain and of none effect. And besides, when a man thinks himself to be left alone, he becomes so careless and negligent that he falls into despair, as we see how nearly Elijah was drawn into it when he said, "What shall become of this matter? For they have killed Thy prophets, have set up their idols in every place, and I myself alone am left" (1 Kings 19:10). He was as it were a poor dismayed man, being ready to cast himself down headlong into the bottomless pit of despair. But what? God comforted him and said to him that He had still reserved to himself 7000, that is to say a fair number, who had not bowed their knees to Baal (1 King 19:18). So then, as I have already said, our faith would be tremendously shaken, yea utterly overthrown, if we were to be persuaded of the idea that God had so forsaken the world that He had no church left in it.

And therefore let us learn not to judge by the outward sight of the eye whether or not there is a church, but let us rather renounce our own insight, because God has told us that He will often have a little seed of it hidden, just as the grains of wheat are not seen as long as there is a great heap of straw lying on them, because the grains are small and few which are covered with it. Even so, sometimes it seems as if all the faithful servants of God have been completely rooted out from the face of the earth; howbeit, the Lord has incomprehensible means for the upholding of his own; and He must necessarily be continually worshiped and served, not that He is looking for a great, glorious, and pompous multitude in His church; but it may suffice us that He knows who are His.

8. From this whole discussion it is apparent that Calvin took the chronology of the Bible seriously. Modern evangelical, even defenders of Biblical inerrancy, are fond of dismissing the Biblical chronology with the slogan, "There are gaps in the genealogies." For a defense of Scripture at this point, see James B. Jordan, "The Biblical Chronology Question An Analysis," *Creation Social Sciences and Humanities Quarterly*, Vol. 2, Nos. 2 & 3, Winter 1979 & Spring 1980; available from CSSHS, 1429 N. Holyoke, Wichita, Kansas 67208. Send a couple of dollars if you request copies.

And so let us depart from all iniquity, that we might call aloud on His Name, and join ourselves with our brethren, although we know them not. And we can do this trusting in the adoption of God, when He witnesses to us by His Holy Spirit that He has a great number of faithful ones; it is not needful for us to know them. It is His will and pleasure that they should be dispersed throughout the face of the whole earth, and have no reputation before men, but be contemptible and despised persons, and (to be short) to be no more known and esteemed than if they lay trodden under the feet of men. So much for this.

And yet we are to gather from this place an exhortation not to follow the multitude. For Melchizedek might have fallen into idolatry as well as the rest if he had had a regard to what they were doing, for there was nothing in his environment but a thorough pollution of the service of God, and yet he continued in that which he knew to be good and just according to what God had taught him.⁹ Moreover, there was no law written at that time, but God had given him certain knowledge, by such men as Noah and Shem, as much as was necessary for salvation. Now, if so small an instruction as Melchizedek had was able to establish him constantly in pure religion, how shall we be able to excuse ourselves when God daily speaks in our ears,¹⁰ when He has set down a Law which shows us how He wants to be worshiped and served, when He has given us prophets to explain it to us, when He has also given us a gospel which is a trumpet not only to sound into our ears but also thoroughly to pierce both our thoughts and affections? Therefore, when God has set up so many means to keep us within bounds to serve Him purely and sincerely, if we depart from the same and are carried away by men under some type of excuse, such as that we are of purer eyes than to behold some custom, or that some abuse has not been checked but is received and accepted, so that we go and dwell and live among infidels and idolaters; what a condemnation that shall be to us, seeing that Melchizedek so constantly and firmly persisted and stood soundly in his faith and belief?

Let us therefore lift up our eyes to God, have our ears fixed as it were to His Word, and all our senses attentive, that we be never carried away, even if we should be tossed up and down here below as it were in the sea, and driven to and fro with winds and tempests. And if there were a people that held to some religion, and had a great king that told them to govern themselves in such and such a manner, yet let us learn to hold always to our God alone. It is enough for us to beware that we never step out of the way He has showed us by His Word. It is enough for us that the bright shining light of the law and gospel be ever before us. It is enough for us that we shall never err as long as we know God to be our guide and leader. Thus we see what we are to learn from the example of Melchizedek.

9. Calvin's description of the situation is a bit exaggerated. If Melchizedek knew the truth, others doubtless also knew it. Also, as king of an entire city, he was certainly not the only believer there, for he was also priest of the whole city. Conceivably, Salem was a wholly righteous city.

10. Worship was conducted daily in Geneva; in fact these sermons come from the daily services. Calvin firmly believed that daily worship was the ideal, and that the continuance of merely weekly worship was only an accommodation to the flesh.

King and Pi'test

Let us now come to the text of Moses. It is said that Melchizedek, king of Salem, offered bread and wine, and was a priest of the living God, and blessed Abram. Here is how the text is to be understood: Melchizedek, inasmuch as he was a king, received Abram and gave him bread and wine for the refreshing of his people; and inasmuch as he was a priest, blessed Abram and Abram gave him the tithe of all the spoil. Here we see that Melchizedek is set before us both as king and as priest.

We are to distinguish the different acts by the different offices. For as I just said, inasmuch as he was a king he dealt liberally with Abram, refreshing him and all his company; and inasmuch as he was a priest he blessed Abram. Now it was a common thing among the ancient fathers for every king to be a priest, and the heathen show that this was the custom in many countries. For kings were not contented with their kingly estate, but desired also through ambition to be priests, because they thought it to be a more holy dignity than the majesty of a king. And thus we see why they would often become priests. In fact we see that this was a most ambitious desire, and that those who coveted credit and estimation would always aspire and climb that way; but however it is, it is certain that Moses notes this as a singular thing in Melchizedek.

Nevertheless we see that God has in His law made a difference between the one and the other, and will not have them both to rest in one person. Even though Moses was an excellent a man in all perfection of virtues as ever was born into the world, yet would not God for all that have him to be a priest also (Ex. 28:1), but appointed Aaron his brother to take up the office of priest because Moses had enough to do with the civil government that was laid upon him.¹¹

We can go further and see how Uzziah was punished (2 Chron. 26:21), for, being a king, he was arrogantly puffed up to usurp to himself the priesthood as well, and for the sole act of offering incense on the altar he was stricken with leprosy, put to great shame, and made a recluse all the days of his life. And yet for all that it might seem that his devotion was good, or at least that he might be excused for an error. God, however, was not merely punishing an outward act, for God knew well enough the pride in king Uzziah's heart. And besides, it is said that obedience is better than all the sacrifices in the world (1 Sam. 15:22). And because he thrust himself into an office which God expressly forbid, and troubled the calling and order which should have been inviolably kept, we see why he was punished. And since he would not be content with his estate and degree, it was fitting that he should be made infamous and detestable, and be completely separated from the company of men.

Thus we see that in the Law there were two things which were not to be tolerated in one man; that is, kingdom and priesthood. And therefore seeing it is so, we must conclude that this example which is here set down is absolutely singular, and pertains not to the Law. It is true that at that time the Law had not yet been written, and the tribe of Levi had not yet come into the world to take up the

11. Calvin is arguing for the separation of church and state in the Old Testament.

right of priestly dignity. All the same this example is set down here for our instruction, so that the Law might remain in her full strength and the church thereby might be edified, as appears from Psalm 110, mentioned earlier.

And therefore we must conclude that Psalm 110 was not speaking of Solomon, nor yet of any other king descended from the line of David. For those who were kings were not to intermeddle with the priesthood, for if they did they were apostates. Thus, when it is said that there was to come a king after the order of Melchizedek, in his estate, this shows that it was not spoken concerning the line of David, descending from him according to the flesh, except until the arrival of our high priest the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true that He is the son of David and of his seed. But there is regarding Him a special, indeed solitary, matter to be kept in mind, which is that He made an end to the priesthood of the Law because His kingdom is Spiritual; and also that His kingdom makes an end of this earthly kingdom, which was established but for a time, until His coming. Now, when it is called perpetual, the meaning is that He has continued in the person of the redeemer.

And therefore this is what we are to observe from these words of Moses, when he says that Melchizedek was king of Salem and that he was at the same time a priest. We see then that these two offices belong to none but to our Lord Jesus Christ, according to the rule which God has set down in His law, and therefore we can have no doubt but that it was the priesthood of Jesus Christ which was displayed before Abram, so that his faith by that means might be sealed and better confirmed.

For, since the "body" was not seen, it was fitting that there should at least be some "shadow" of it. And therefore the fathers had the shadows of it for the upholding of their faith, while they still looked for the appearing of Jesus Christ. They had, I say, shadows and figures. And even though we do not have this in common with them, still it is very profitable for us. For we are to gather that Jesus Christ was not sent in haste to us, nor that God determined to send Him to us immediately as our redeemer, for He was already the true redeemer, even though He has not as yet taken upon Him our nature, nor yet manifested Himself, nor was the gospel published. We see from this that the faith which we have at this day is extending itself far and wide, even though in one sense the gospel has been in existence from the beginning in such a way that the ancient fathers were built on our Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him was their hope and salvation. To be short, this is a help that is not to be neglected.

But, when we compare the shadows with the body, we see that our redemption is more desirable than the estate of the fathers. And therefore we see why it is said that blessed are the eyes which saw that which the disciples had seen, for many kings and prophets had an earnest desire to enjoy such a sight, and yet could never attain to that which they sought for, but contented themselves with a sure confidence that the promise of God should be accomplished in a convenient time (Luke 10:24). And we shall see more of this later on, when we get to Gen. 49:18, where Jacob says, as he passes out of this life, "I shall see Thy saving health, O Lord, and will put my confidence therein." Now then, when we make such a comparison, we must be mightily strengthened, and be angry at whatever the Devil may thrust in to withdraw us from the purity of the gospel, and be so much the more stirred up to embrace our Lord Jesus Christ, seeing that He has brought the full and perfect truth of that which was figured in the Law. Thus we see how we are to benefit ourselves by this place of Scripture.

Concerning the dwelling place of Melchizedek, it was most likely Jerusalem. Later we find the compound word *Jebusalem* because the Jebusites later occupied that place. Whatever the case, that was the city originally occupied by Melchizedek, and there also where Jesus Christ exercised His priesthood, not only when He preached the gospel, but also when He was crucified for us and offered up a holy oblation to God His Father, to reconcile us to Him forever, and to cleanse us of all our sins.

Prayer

Let us now prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our offenses and beseeching Him to receive us to his mercy; and seeing that we are condemned in our own selves, asking that we might by means of the Redeemer Who He has given us be delivered from the curse, in which we should be plunged if it were not that He had redeemed us by His infinite goodness; and that as He has stretched out His hand to pull us to our Lord Jesus Christ, that He would more and more confirm us in such a perseverance of faith that we might cleave to Him and never be withdrawn from Him by any temptations of this world; but that we should rather fight against all the tribulations Satan should set on us, until such a time as we come to that everlasting kingdom which was prepared for us before the creation of the world, and which was so dearly purchased for us; that it would please Him to show not only to us His favor, but also to all people, etc.

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