



**Date:** 2-25-2024

**Scripture:** Genesis 14:18-20, 15 (LSB)

**Sermon Title:** A Promise Keeping God.

**Context:**

**Genesis 14:18-20 (LSB)**

18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. 19 Then he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; 20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." Then he gave him a tenth of all.

Who is Melchizedek?

**Genesis 15:1 (LSB)**

1 After these things the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

**Genesis 15:2-3 (LSB)**

2 And Abram said, "O Lord Yahweh, what will You give me, as I go on being childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no seed to me, behold, one born in my house is my heir."

**God is not \_\_\_\_\_ of our questions.**

**Genesis 15:4-6 (LSB)**

4 Then behold, the word of Yahweh came to him, saying, "This one will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He brought him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your seed be." 6 Then he believed in Yahweh; and He counted it to him as righteousness.

It is through \_\_\_\_\_ alone that we are made right with God.

**Genesis 15:7 (LSB)**

7 And He said to him, "I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."

**Genesis 15:8-11 (LSB)**

8 And he said, "O Lord Yahweh, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and split them into parts down the middle and laid each part opposite the other; but he did not split apart the birds. 11 Then the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

**Genesis 15:12 (LSB)**

12 Now it happened that when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror [and] great darkness fell upon him.

## **Genesis 15:13-16 (LSB) – Summary**

### **Genesis 15:17,18 (LSB)**

17 Now it happened that the sun had set, and it was very dark, and behold, [there appeared] a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day Yahweh cut a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your seed I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

**Our God is a \_\_\_\_\_ God.**

### **Challenge:**

Stop chasing \_\_\_\_\_.

**Ephesians 2:8-9 (LSB)**

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, [it is] the gift of God; 9 not of works, so that no one may boast.

## **Life Group Questions:**

Get to know you question (optional):

1. Share a time you were genuinely terrified.
2. Read Genesis Chapter 15 (prior to life group): When you read through the scripture take note of anything interesting, unique, or questions that come to mind when reading. Take some time and dig in deeper in the following areas.

### Genesis 15

Why is Genesis 15:6 such an important passage? What are some other Bible passages that teach this same principle of salvation through faith alone? What can life look like if we understand this passage? What can it look like if we don't understand this passage?

In Genesis 15:12-18 it outlines the covenant agreement between Abram and God. Discuss what a covenant is, other places you see covenants in the Bible and what is unique about this one. The smoking oven / pot and the flaming torch represent God. What are other times you see God represented in this way (fire). How might it tie back to this passage?

3. What are the ways we can try and earn our salvation?

**Melchizedek** (מֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק, *malki-tsedeq*). The king of Salem and priest of God Most High. Blesses Abram in Gen 14, referenced in Psa 110 in God's promise to bless the Davidic king, and invoked in the letter to the Hebrews to affirm the priestly status of Christ.

## Introduction

Genesis 14:18–20, Psa 110:4, and Heb 5–7 mention Melchizedek, whose name means “righteous king” or “my king is righteousness.” Scripture does not include details about Melchizedek's background and identity; this has led to a wide range of speculation in Jewish writings from the Second Temple and early Christian eras.

## Melchizedek in Judaism

Jewish tradition surrounding Melchizedek originates with two Old Testament passages and is developed further by a number of extrabiblical sources.

### *Old Testament*

**Genesis 14.** Melchizedek first appears after Abram's victory over Chedorlaomer (Gen 14:1–12). The king of Sodom and Melchizedek, “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High” (Gen 14:18 ESV), approaches the victorious patriarch. Melchizedek shows hospitality to Abram and pronounces a poetic blessing upon him. Abram responds by giving him a tenth of his spoils (Gen 14:18–20). Genesis provides no additional details about the identity of Melchizedek and doesn't explain how a Canaanite city-king came to be a priest of God Most High. Further, Melchizedek does not appear in any genealogy.

The historical data contained in the first half of Gen 14 is obscure, making it difficult to date Melchizedek's story and raising doubts about its historicity (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 134–35). Abram's discourse with Melchizedek also gives a composite feel to the chapter, as it interrupts Abram's interaction with the king of Sodom (Gen 14:17, 21–24). This may indicate that the Melchizedek episode is a later addition to the text.

If this is so, however, it is unclear why the text was added. Von Rad argues that a later editor added the exchange to lend support to the Davidic dynasty by connecting Abraham with a king in Salem (i.e., Jerusalem; *Genesis: A Commentary*, 180–81). Westermann focuses on the religious language of the passage—none of which fits within the patriarchal period—arguing that an editor included the episode to affirm the paying of tithes and

syncretize the Canaanite deity *El Elyon* (“God Most High”) with the God of Israel (*Genesis* 12–36, 203–5). While Brueggemann also believes that the Melchizedek episode is a later addition, he cautions that “our knowledge of association between Israelite tradition and Canaanite religion is as thin as our knowledge of the political history reflected in verses 1–11” (*Genesis*, 135).

McKeown focuses on the function of Melchizedek within the narrative, drawing on the contrasting parallels between the kings of Salem and Sodom. Both kings approach Abram after the battle, but only Melchizedek comes bearing gifts. The first words of the priest-king form a poetic blessing, while the king of Sodom issues a command: “Give me the persons” (Gen 14:21 ESV). Within the broader context of *Genesis*, Melchizedek reminds the reader that Abram has been blessed by God. The character turns Abram’s victory into “a sign of God’s ability to deliver on the promises that he has made” (McKeown, *Genesis*, 88).

**Psalm 110.** Melchizedek’s only other Old Testament appearance is in Psa 110, a psalm addressed to the king of God’s people. In it, Yahweh promises to bring victory in battle and to establish the king as “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Psa 110:4 ESV). The psalmist then declares that God will stand at the right hand of the king, using him to bring judgment upon the nations (Psa 110:5–6).

It is debated whether Psa 110 actually references Melchizedek. Ganerød draws a distinction on the basis of genre. The episode in *Genesis* is a narrative, and the context clarifies that “Melchizedek” is a personal name. However, the poetry of Psa 110 lacks similar context; because of this, “Melchizedek” could be a formal title meaning “righteous king” (*Abraham and Melchizedek*, 168). Some modern Jewish translations, such as the JPS Tanakh, render Psa 110:4, “You are a priest forever, a rightful king by my decree.”

The parallel between Abram’s divinely sanctioned victory and God’s promise to bless the king of Israel is clear. Haney asserts that the connection to Melchizedek would have been apparent, especially given the political advantage of linking the authority of the Davidic monarch to the Abrahamic traditions of Israel (*Text and Concept Analysis in Royal Psalms*, 117). The evolution of Psa 110, as it was interpreted throughout Jewish history, sheds light on Melchizedek’s own growth from a marginal Canaanite priest-king into an important figure in the eschatological



imagination of Israel. Allen estimates that the psalm emerged at some point during the early monarchy—most likely as part of a royal coronation ceremony in Jerusalem (*Psalms 101–150*, 111–12). During the Babylonian exile, the psalm was an expression of faith in God’s promise to redeem Israel and restore the monarchy. By the time it was included within the Psalter, Psa 110 was read as a vision of the kingdom of God, expressing the people’s hope for a Messiah (Waltner, *Psalms*, 539).

This eschatological reading of Psa 110 piqued the curiosity of Jews and later Christians, especially in regard to Melchizedek. Hughes illustrates: “Psalm 110 declared that God was going to do something *new* by bringing into history a priest-king like Melchizedek. His priesthood would last ‘forever.’ He would be appointed directly by God. A divine oath guaranteed it: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.’ What an intriguing prophecy. God was going to establish a totally new priesthood” (*Genesis*, 215).

### *Extrabiblical Sources*

Although Melchizedek appears in only two texts from the Old Testament, extrabiblical Jewish literature contains many references to him. Some of these documents aim to fill in gaps left by the biblical narrative, while others present Melchizedek as a semidivine messianic figure. Pearson observes, “The interpretive imagination devoted to Melchizedek in extrabiblical sources stands in inverse proportion to the sparsity of data found in the Bible about him” (Pearson, “Melchizedek,” 176).

The *Genesis Apocryphon*, a paraphrase of Genesis composed in the second century bc, clarifies Salem as Jerusalem, and attempts to iron out the composite nature of the story by having the two kings meet before journeying together to congratulate Abram (Mason, *You Are a Priest Forever*, 148). Josephus also identifies Salem as Jerusalem and explains that Melchizedek’s name means “righteous king” (*Antiquities* 1.180). He describes Melchizedek as the first priest, founder of Jerusalem, and builder of the first temple (*Jewish War* 6.438).

Philo’s treatment of Melchizedek in his *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* includes the same etymology used by Josephus, as well as “king of peace” in place of Salem (3.79). He identifies Melchizedek as the divine Logos (3.82) and uses Abram’s payment as justification for tithing (*Prelim. Studies* 99). Pseudo-Eupolemus, a Samaritan text that equates Salem with Mount Gerizim, took similar liberties (Pearson, “Melchizedek,” 183).

Melchizedek's status reaches new heights in Jewish apocalyptic texts. A Qumran document authored in the second century bc, the Melchizedek Scroll (11Q13/11QMelch), transforms the priest-king into a semidivine being, referring to him at one point as "God" (2.24–25). The text presents Melchizedek as an eschatological figure, "reserved in heaven till he should appear at the last to establish the true Day of Atonement and usher in the final cosmic Jubilee" (Dunhill, *Covenant and Sacrifice*, 165). *Second Enoch* provides Melchizedek with a miraculous birth narrative. Born posthumously to the barren wife of Noah's brother, the child is taken into heaven by the archangel Michael for protection from the flood (72:9). The text then predicts that Melchizedek will become "the head of a new kind of priesthood that did not suffer destruction" (Thompson, *Hebrews*, 146). Such imaginative takes on the origin and eschatological significance of Melchizedek are countered by later rabbinical literature. The targums, midrashim, and Talmud typically identify Melchizedek as Shem, clarifying that he is not the royal Messiah (Pearson, "Melchizedek," 185–86). Dunhill interprets this as an attempt to undercut early Christian speculation about Melchizedek (*Covenant and Sacrifice*, 164–65). Hayward disagrees, arguing that the rabbinical sources draw upon an established tradition which viewed Shem as a priestly figure and ultimately inspired the Christocentric reading of Hebrews ("Shem, Melchizedek," 74–77). The difficulty of dating the material makes it impossible to know with certainty who was responding to whom.

### **Melchizedek in Christianity**

Christian tradition embraces Melchizedek and relates him to Jesus. Hebrews and the musings of the church fathers indicate that Christian developments emerged as an outgrowth of the biblical and extrabiblical sources. Understood as a precursor to Christ, the character became an example used to assist God's people in relating to their Savior.

#### *The New Testament*

The first reference to Melchizedek in the New Testament is a quotation of Psa 110:4 found in Heb 5:6. The writer quotes the passage to affirm that Christ was appointed as heavenly high priest: "And being made perfect, [Christ] became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:9–10 ESV). Hebrews 7, a commentary on the Old Testament appearances of Melchizedek, elaborates on this teaching.

Reflecting on Gen 14, the author gives the same etymologies for Melchizedek and Salem found in Philo, while pointing to the eternal scope of his priesthood (Heb 7:1–3). The author argues that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham because the patriarch tithed to the priest-king; this supports the belief that “the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Heb 7:7 ESV). The author then argues that the order of Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priesthood, which counts Abraham as its ancestor (Heb 7:9–10).

The author of Hebrews then turns to Psa 110, citing God’s promise to appoint a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” as indication of the Levitical priesthood’s imperfection (Heb 7:11 ESV). Christ fulfills the eschatological hope of the psalm not by meeting the legal requirement of descent, but by the eternal quality of His life (Heb 7:13–17). He is a superior high priest, bringing a new covenant that grants salvation to all who believe (7:18–25).

The argument put forth in Hebrews was especially appropriate in its day. Christianity was born during a period of heightened fascination with Melchizedek, and the letter offers “a decisive claim against religious silliness often associated with such a shadowy figure” (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 140). While indebted to the extrabiblical speculation surrounding the character, the author’s goals are not limited by a need to provide fodder for curious readers.

Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who likely faced criticism from fellow Jews. The author invokes Melchizedek in order to provide Christ with a priestly status rivaling that of the religious establishment. The author’s main interest with Melchizedek lies as “an agent of dissonance to unsettle the fixed structures of conceptions of priesthood” (Dunhill, *Covenant*, 167). While not messianic in his own right, Melchizedek serves as a prototype for Christ by establishing the eternal priesthood that the Son of God now possesses.

The letter was also pastoral, written to reaffirm the faith of Christians who had been ostracized because of their beliefs. The author uses the heavenly reality of Christ’s priesthood to bring security to a struggling community. Thompson observes: “The exaltation of Christ offers the community the opportunity to ‘grasp the hope that is made available’ (6:18). As the author indicates in 7:19, the community now has a “ ‘better hope’ than that

provided by the Levitical priesthood ... giv[ing] the wavering community a reason to persevere, knowing of the future that awaits them" (*Hebrews*, 159).

Melchizedek provides Christians with a template for understanding the heavenly priesthood of Christ. This challenges our attempts to substitute human mediators for the divine, revealing a high priest whose saving work cannot be confined to any one culture or bloodline (Thompson, *Hebrews*, 164).

### *The Early Church*

Most of the church fathers evaluate Melchizedek from either the book of Hebrews or the Jewish tradition. John Chrysostom points out the similarities between Christ and Melchizedek (*Homilies on Genesis*, 35.16), while Origen affirms that Jesus fulfills Psa 110 (Pearson, "Melchizedek," 187). Ephrem the Syrian accepts the theory that Melchizedek was Shem (*Commentary on Genesis*, 11.2), while Theophilus of Antioch's commentary is similar to Josephus' (*Ad Autolyicum* 2.31).

Like the Jews, early Christians found creative ways to interpret the character of Melchizedek. Believing it was he who circumcised Abraham, Hippolytus compares the Canaanite king to John the Baptist at the baptism of Christ (Pearson, "Melchizedek," 187). Clement of Alexandria first invoked eucharistic readings of the bread and wine Melchizedek offered, further connecting the priest-king to Jesus (*Stromata* 4.25).

Some of the early church fathers present an anti-Jewish polemic in their presentation of Melchizedek. For example, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr uses Melchizedek to argue against the need for Christians to be circumcised (19). Tertullian presents a similar case, claiming that Melchizedek also refused to observe the Sabbath (*Against the Jews* 2). Other Christian sources were written in opposition to heretical teachings about Melchizedek. Hippolytus (*Refutation of All Heresies* 7.35–36), Pseudo-Tertullian (*Against All Heresies* 28), and Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 55.8) refute a sect known as the Melchizedekians, who believed that Melchizedek was a heavenly power greater than Christ and that Christ was made in his image. Looking to Melchizedek for salvation, they taught others to make offerings in his name to be saved. A fragmentary text found at Nag Hammadi may have originated with this sect.

While Epiphanius can be credited with supplying the name of the group, very little additional information is provided regarding the scope of the Melchizedekians and their broader teachings. Pearson suggests that the writers may have invented the group to quell smaller, unrelated movements that viewed Melchizedek as a divine figure (“Melchizedek,” 189). Horton disagrees, arguing instead that the lack of information demonstrates that the sect’s impact was small and lacked longevity. He identifies that the evidence points to a movement that lasted no more than 20 years (*The Melchizedek Tradition*, 100–101).

The Melchizedekians were not the last heretical group to be connected with the priest-king. Epiphanius mentions Hierakas, a heretical leader who taught that Melchizedek was the Holy Spirit (*Pan.* 67.1). Similar heresies would plague the church for generations. In the fifth century, Mark the Hermit disputed Christians who believed Melchizedek to be the Logos, Jesus, or even God (Pearson, “Melchizedek,” 191).

Dan Brockway, “Melchizedek,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).