

## Scripture Reading: Genesis 21

“17 And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. 18 Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation." 19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. 20 So God was with the lad; & he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, & became an archer. 21 He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. 22 And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech & Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. 23 Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me & to the land in which you have dwelt." 24 And Abraham said, "I will swear." 25 Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized. 26 And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today." 27 So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. 28 And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. 29 Then Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?" 30 And he said, "You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well." 31 Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there. 32 Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. 33 Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of Jehovah, the Everlasting God. 34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days. ”

# 'Abimelech's Covenant'

There is one final event recorded for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Book of Beginnings that we will consider this morning... Then it is very appropriate that we will come to the greatest test that God will give Abraham's faith: The sacrifice of his only son of promise which clearly foretells the coming of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, as we celebrate His coming next week on Psalm Sunday!

Last week we saw that there were important lessons to learn from even the account of the bondwoman and her son Ismael and this week there will be some to learn from a Gentile King and his general!

Of course last week it was pretty easy for us to see Jesus since the Apostle Paul made use of that account as a very important allegory of the Christian life contrasting the liberty we have in the freewoman with the bondage of the Law in the bondwoman. And of course as I have already hinted my task next week will be pretty easy when it comes to the account of the sacrifice of Isaac on a mountain near Moriah.

- This week will be a bit tougher, but as Jesus promised, He will be there to see if we have eyes to see!

Now before we dig into the text, let me give us a bit of background so we can properly set the table!

First we should have a sense of the geography involved: Abraham was called out of the Ur of the Chaldeans which was the region around our modern Iran and Iraq. Abraham was brought to the Promised Land where he has now wandered for about 25 years. This Promised Land that God would give Abraham's heirs would stretch from Tyre and Damascus in the north down to the Sinai Peninsula.

Basically his wanderings began in the northern part of the land near Bethel and moved south until the famine drove him into Egypt. After this he returns to Bethel and then after the birth of Ishmael and the destruction of Sodom he journeys to the region of Gerar.

- We then meet King Abimelech when he takes Sarah thinking she was Abraham's sister.

After this is resolved Abraham remains in this region! In that first account King Abimelech refers to his kingdom as a righteous kingdom and thus I think we are to see him as one of the many God-fearers that we encounter in the Old Testament outside the nation of Israel. This King dealt fairly with Abraham in the first encounter and now comes wanting to make a covenant!

We will also see Abimelech again in a few chapters with a very similar encounter with Abraham's son Isaac and his wife Rebecca. In our account before us this morning we see Abraham naming this place Beersheba which will be the dwelling place for Isaac and where Jacob will actually leave from when making the journey to Egypt to be reunited with his beloved son Joseph.

- Down through the history of Israel the Promised Land will often be described as stretching from Dan to Beersheba with Dan being the northern most tribe.

The region of Beersheba was given to Judah which is why we find King David beginning his reign in this area and battling so often with the Philistines.

- And of course Jesus would be born as the Son of David in tiny Bethlehem just to the north.

Thus we see an important region identified in the Scriptures thanks to the actions of a gentile King, so let's dig into our text and see what lessons we can learn...

**"22 And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech & Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. 23 Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me & to the land in which you have dwelt."**

As I mentioned we have met King Abimelech before but now he comes with his chief captain or general who we see at the beginning and end of this portion of Genesis. Abimelech appears to come to Abraham with a show of force, but also with great respect... He knows from their first encounter that God was with Abraham & we can assume he was familiar with the events surrounding the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah as well as the birth of Isaac.

The King wants to establish a covenant or a peace treaty between them for the sake of peace in his time and for the protection of his heirs. These are wise and reasonable requests and Abraham's short response indicates his willingness to do so...

**24 "And Abraham said, "I will swear.""**

- However, we see that there is an issue that needs to be resolved and Abraham quickly brings it up which is appropriate...

This is what we see in 'contract negotiations' or even the courtship time in a personal relationship.

It can even be seen at a formal wedding service where the minister will often ask directly if anyone has any just reason why the couple cannot be wed.

- Abraham knew there was an issue that would have to be resolved if their covenant was to be an honest covenant and thus he voices his concern in verse 25:

**"Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized."**

I think we are to assume there was more to this exchange than was recorded for us where Abraham explained what he was talking about and why the situation needed to be resolved. Thus the King responds:

**26 And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today."**

Abimelech again proclaims his innocence as he did with the taking of Sarah and as was the case there, he does seem to want have his cake and eat it too... In his confession to God about Sarah he conveniently left out the part about just taking her and here he seems to avoid his responsibility as a King to know and be responsible for the actions of his servants.

- However, he does make it clear it was not his plan and that he knew nothing of it until this day.

Abraham appears to accept what the King says and again we can assume there is a bit more discussion about returning the well to Abraham and thus he can respond as we see in verse

27 “So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant.”

There is a LOT of discussion about just what happens here with a lot of questions that we must in the end leave unanswered... or at least as speculations. There is certainly an element of gift giving here on the part of Abraham which was not uncommon in this type of arrangement...

- A showing of good will or friendship, perhaps responding to the earlier kindness shown by Abimelech to Abraham.

While there is no mention of any sacrifices I would assume there was a division of some of the animals, or others as they ‘cut the covenant’ in a similar manner that we saw back in chapter fifteen when God alone passed between the pieces to confirm the covenant. Here both Abraham and Abimelech would have passed through. Then we come to verse 28:

“And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.”

This adds to a bit of the confusion because it is not clear if they are an additional seven lambs or part of the original gift... I think Abimelech’s question and Abraham’s answer strongly point to seven additional lambs.

29 “Then Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?" 30 And he said, "You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well."

They are making a general covenant about peace between them and their families, but Abraham also wants to make sure that the issue of this well is settled once and for all. It would be similar to how parties might have an addendum attached to a general contract... *Like when buying a home.*

Then we read in verse 31: “Therefore [Abraham] called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there. 32 Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba.”

We have seen the importance of this region that Abraham names going forward in the history of Israel and I want to return to the significance of the name in a moment, but first our text gives us a few more details... “So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines.”

- The King returns with his general to their capital city of Gerar which was some distance to the west.

It would be in these regions that we would see the back and forth between Israel and the Philistines in the time of the Judges and the reigns of Kings Saul and David.

33 Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of Jehovah, the Everlasting God. 34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days. ”

Here again we find a great deal of discussion because we are not certain what a tamarisk tree is! Where they big or small? Did Abraham plant a single tree or a grove of trees?

- While the text is not so clear on those points I think it is clear that it signals a bit of permanence in the life of Abraham that this wandering shepherd had not had up until this point.

As I mentioned earlier, Isaac would be raised here and Jacob would spend a great deal of his life here and leave from here to journey to Egypt. And that is why Abraham's naming of the region is significant:

- Beersheba: meaning the well of the oath or the well of the seven reminding Abraham and all of his descendants of this occasion!

Let me draw a few practical applications from the use of an oath here and then come back to the importance of the well... Whether the name refers to the oath or seven or both it centers obviously on the covenant made at this well. Covenants are important because they are a part of what it means to be made in the image of God!

- The Trinitarian God of the Bible is not a monistic god like that of the Mormons or Muslims.

He is NOT a god who longs to or needs to create so he has someone or something to relate too. He is not a god who needed a creation to teach him about love or relationships which their gods could not experience in eternity outside of the creation.

On the contrary as the one God of the Bible reveals Himself as the self-existent & eternal Father, Son & Holy Spirit we learn that there has always been love because God is love & there have always been relationships because God is relational by His very Nature.

God is not learning to be loving or caring or even Just by being involved with His creation:

- No, He is the One who teaches us about such things and provides the true ultimate meaning they need.

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden they were to relate to God and to each other to demonstrate how they were made in the image of God. The most devastating result of the fall into sin was the destruction of these relationships and the reason that Jesus was sent as the Savior was to restore those relationships. So when we come across a portion of Scripture like this & start to think why is this event so important, we can and should remember what it is revealing:

- What it teaches us about God and man made in His image.

It should remind us that we are covenantal creatures and that this is worked out in things as simple as a hand-shake and as profound as wedding vows! This is why Paul cautions us about being unequally yoked with an unbeliever and why Jesus tells us to let our yes be yes and our no be no!

As we think about the character of God and how the persons of the Trinity relate to one another, it informs us about how we are to treat others as we make covenants with them and God has given us examples to teach us like the one before us this morning!

We should be loving, kind, honest and diligent. This is why the Proverbs often speak about just weights and measures because even how we treat each other in commerce reflects what we believe about God.

This is why Christian nations have been able to establish authority structures that can be respected as authorities but also be responsible to protect the rights of those under their care.

These principles apply to all covenants involving authority whether it is two neighbors agreeing to the height of a mutual fence to a nation of millions deciding the strength of their military defense.

And of course personal relationships are an even better reflection of God's image whether is it children relating to their parents, how friends treat each other or the pinnacle that Paul points to in marriage!

It is in that relationship where a man and women are joined together in marriage and become one flesh that we see most clearly the glory, majesty and wonder of our Triune God in this Creation!

- And of course Paul brings it back to the picture of the Church...
- Jesus and His bride!

**And that brings me back to the naming of the region: The Well of the oath!**

**It seems to bring all of these elements of covenants and oaths and love and relationship together all in one place! We have already seen two wells that played a role in the rescuing of Hagar both when she fled from Sarah's presence and when Abraham cast her out. Beersheba becomes the southern anchor for the Promised Land in the centuries that follow and in a few chapters we will see Isaac's wife is found at a well, as will also be the case with Jacob.**

**I could do a whole series on the wells of the Bible but let me close today with a very familiar New Testament account that draws upon all of these important images. I suspect you know where I am going, but let us turn over to John chapter 4: Jesus is returning to Galilee from Jerusalem and travels through Samaria and in the heat of the day He sits down by a well: Jacob's well which was famous in the northern Kingdom:**

**"7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." ...9 Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. 10 Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."**

**This woman points out that Jesus has no bucket and how proud they are of Jacob's well and so Jesus responds:**

**13 ... "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." 15 The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."**

**Jesus confronts her sin and then she quickly want to discuss religion...**

**20 "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24 God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."**

**The woman runs off to tell others about the Savior as we always should and then the disciples return and try to give Jesus something to eat...**

**34 "Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.""**

**Jesus met this woman at a well...**

**Let us reflect on these matters and in the end be like faithful Abraham who "called on the name of Jehovah, the Everlasting God."**

**Communion Meditation: Ps 23**

**"A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.**

**6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell a in the house of the Lord Forever."**