

Abraham and Abimelech Make a Covenant

Genesis 21:22-34

Genesis 21:22-34 – *“And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and 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 and 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 the LORD, the Everlasting God. ³⁴ And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.”*

Background Notes

In Genesis 20 Abraham migrated into the land area controlled by Abimelech, who was one of the early Philistine kings in Canaan. When he moved to this area, Abraham lied about his wife to protect his own life, saying that Sarah was his sister. As a result, Abimelech took Sarah into his harem - but God overruled and protected Sarah.

Then Abraham moved to the area that is now known as BeerSheba. Abimelech’s control and influence reached all the way to the BeerSheba area. *“Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days” (v34).*

The fact that Abimelech wanted to make a covenant with Abraham shows that Abraham was not just a humble Bedouin shepherd who had wandered into the area. He was wealthy and powerful. Abimelech brought Phichol, the general of his army, along with him to this summit meeting. Do you remember, even back in Genesis 14, that Abraham was able to defeat the four kings of the east with his small, but well-trained, army?

So Abraham had become a major force in the area, and Abimelech wanted to ensure peaceful co-existence for the future by making a treaty. Abraham agreed, and in accordance with the customs of that day, they “cut a covenant.” (See the Talk on Genesis 15 for a discussion of the “cutting covenant” God made with Abram.) The sheep and oxen given by

Abraham (v27) were cut in two and the covenant was ratified. The seven ewe lambs that Abraham gave Abimelech were to emphasize that the treaty included Abraham's exclusive right to the well that he had dug at BeerSheba. *"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'"* (v30).

An ancient well exists at the archaeological site of ancient BeerSheba. It's called "Abraham's Well," and it may be the very well mentioned in Genesis 21. In Hebrew, BeerSheba means, "well of the oath," or "well of the seven" (after the seven ewe lambs). The exact meaning of the name is unknown, but BeerSheba became well known in biblical history. In fact, the land of Israel is still referred to as the land "from Dan to BeerSheba"!

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should try to live peaceably with unbelievers.

The Bible teaches that we should work hard at living peaceably with fellow believers, and the Bible teaches that we should try to live peaceably with unbelievers as well! Romans 12:18 says: *"If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."* And Hebrews 12:14 says: *"Pursue peace with all people."* So believers should try to live peaceably with unbelievers.

There's a great illustration and example of this truth here in Genesis 21. Abraham the believer and Abimelech the unbeliever made a peace treaty. Rather than fight over the well that Abimelech's servants had seized, Abraham made it part of this peace treaty. Notice that the treaty was not just for the immediate present time - it was meant to be a long-lasting peace (v23). The offspring and posterity are considered in the treaty, so a real effort was made to live at peace with one another.

And we should do the same! We should try to live at peace with our unbelieving neighbors, and our unbelieving colleagues at work, and our unbelieving student friends on the college campus. Even though they are unbelievers and usually don't want to hear the gospel from us, we should try to live peacefully with them.

When our two sons were teens, they built a skateboard ramp in our back yard. The neighbors on one side of us did not appreciate the noise that was generated as the skateboards went up and down on the ramp, so we worked out a peace treaty! The ramp was open only during certain hours of the day. During the evening hours when the neighbors were sitting out in their backyard, there was no skateboarding. The treaty worked, and our neighbors appreciated us for this. An interesting note: an older relative lived with those neighbors, and he was quite disappointed that the skateboarding hours were curtailed. He was hard of hearing so the noise didn't bother him - and he enjoyed watching our boys skateboard. Sadly, his entertainment was cut in half!

Well, I think you see the point of the illustration. Whether it's unbelieving neighbors, or unbelieving colleagues, or unbelieving friends - as believers, we should try to live peaceably with them. Even when it's very difficult, believers should try to live peaceably with unbelievers.

2. Believers should not jettison justice for the sake of peace.

In establishing the peace treaty, Abraham didn't just toss justice aside. Abimelech's servants had seized a well that belonged to Abraham. That was wrong, and the wrong had to be made right. Fortunately, when Abimelech heard about the theft of the well, he agreed that justice must be served, and Abraham's well was given back to him in the treaty. So in living peaceably with our unbelieving neighbors, or relatives, or colleagues at work, we are not asked to sweep sin under the rug, or pretend that nothing happened if an injustice has taken place. Believers should not jettison justice for the sake of peace.

We can always give up our **rights** in the interest of peace, but we should not jettison **justice**, or toss it aside, in the interest of peace. Let me illustrate this with another neighbor story (different neighbors this time!). Someone gave us wind chimes, and we liked them, but the sound bothered our neighbors. When our neighbors mentioned it, what do you think we did? We took the wind chimes down. We didn't **have** to take them down. They weren't overly loud. It was our right to have wind chimes on our own deck. But in the interest of peace we gave up our rights to have wind chimes, and we took them down. Notice - this was not a situation where **justice** was jettisoned for the sake of peace.

But suppose your neighbor moved the property line markers three feet in his favor in the middle of the night. Now a crime has been committed, and that's wrong! Believers are not called on to ignore injustice in the interest of peace. In fact, it would be wrong not to bring this crime to light and have justice served. You don't have to let the unbeliever get away with sin. Believers should not jettison justice for the sake of peace.

Practical Applications

1. Do your non-Christian friends have to say, "Don't deal falsely with me?"

It was obvious to Abimelech that God was blessing Abraham. Abimelech said to Abraham, "*God is with you in all that you do*" (v22). Then why did Abimelech go on to say, "*swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me*" (v23)? Abimelech probably said that because Abraham had "dealt falsely" with him in the past, when he lied to him about Sarah (chapter 20). What a sad testimony! It could not be denied that God was with Abraham, but it was very sad that Abimelech had to say "Don't deal falsely with me."

Do you have a consistently upright testimony - or do your non-Christian friends have to worry that you may "deal falsely" with them? How sad it is if our non-Christian friends, neighbors and colleagues know, on the one hand, that we are

Christians, but on the other hand, they still have to worry that we won't be completely honest with them! I hope your non-Christian friends don't ever have to say, "Please don't deal falsely with me."

2. Do you know God as "El-Olam" - the God of Eternity?

Look again at verse 33: "*Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God*" – or the "God of eternity."

As you know, in the Bible God revealed Himself by a number of different names. In the context of Genesis 21, El-Olam, or "God of Eternity," emphasized the **immutability** of God. It emphasizes that **God does not change**. People change, time changes, situations change, everything else changes - but **God doesn't change!** Continuity and stability are associated with God who is "El-Olam."

El-Olam is the name for God that is used in Isaiah 40:28-31: "*The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, He neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*"

Do you know God as "El-Olam" - the unchanging, everlasting God of Eternity?