

Prayers

Opening prayer

God of all knowledge, love, understanding and compassion; give us an inward desire to know You more, each day. Reveal to us Your perspective on the world in which we live, teach us to love our neighbours, to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to care about truth, peace and harmony in the world. Then, may we live in confidence that You can and will work in this world through us, who are Your people. We praise You, Almighty God: **ALLELUIA!**

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: HEALING

1. For yourself

Pray for your own health, pray for any long term illnesses you have or for which you take tablets each day

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any of your friends who are ill, pray for their healing, pray specifically that God will bless each one by His grace

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the church's ministry of healing. Pray for any who are involved with the healing ministry, and if there is no such ministry within your church, then pray that God will raise it up

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who are involved with the delivery of health to the people of your nation. Pray that God will use their work for the good of all, and reveal Himself through healing power.

Meditation

We open our hearts to hear Your Word, Lord God,
And if we are not sure what we will hear,
Keep us alert, listening for that moment ...
A glimpse of truth within a conversation,
A hint of inspiration, solitary, not perceived by others;
Something more than mere words on a page,
But that which opens up the very heart of God.

For we will not know the where or when
Of how our hearts will feel the Word of God,
The heart of God, the mouth of God
by which all mysteries are revealed
has no discernable accent.
There are no rules for hearing a spiritual voice,
Except a willingness to hear it.
And when we hear, we feel, we find this touch;
The spirit leaps with joy within
as revelation flows from God to human spirit!

Praise and glory!
The heart will hear, the mind will think,
The soul will understand, and all else fade away;
As souls rejoice to grasp the truth revealed;
And God and Man are one.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 21: 22-34

²² At that time Abimelech, with Phicol his army the commander, said to Abraham,

‘God is with you in all that you do; ²³ now therefore swear to me before God that you will not be treacherous to me or my children and descendants. Show me and the land where you live as a foreigner that you will deal faithfully with us, as I have with you.’

²⁴ Abraham said,

‘I do so swear.’

²⁵ Then, when Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that his servants had seized, ²⁶ Abimelech said,

‘I don’t know who has done this. You didn’t tell me, and I only heard about it today.’

²⁷ So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. ²⁸ Abraham put seven ewe lambs from the flock to one side, ²⁹ and Abimelech said to Abraham,

‘These seven ewe lambs that you have set apart? What do they mean?’

³⁰ He said,

‘Accept these seven ewe lambs from my hand, and be a witness for me that I dug this well.’

³¹ So this is why the place was called Beer-sheba. Both men swore an oath there, ³² and after they had made their covenant, Abimelech, together with Phicol his army commander, left and returned to the land of the Philistines.

³³ Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and it was there that he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. ³⁴ Abraham lived as a foreigner for many days in Philistines territory.

Review

The story of Abraham’s life has been leading us towards a great climax in which he offers his son Isaac on the altar (Gen 22). Just before this, today’s story comes as a surprise because to modern eyes it seems incidental to the bigger picture of Abraham’s life. We would be wrong to think that this is unimportant, however, because it is about the land of Canaan, which is an essential part of God’s Covenant promise to Abraham. From the beginning of his call, God revealed to Abraham that he would have descendants who would make a nation (12:2,3) and that these descendants would have a land in which to live (13:15). Isaac, the child of promise had now been born (21:1-8) and established as the sole heir of Abraham (21:9-21), so we should now expect scripture to confirm the promise of the land which Isaac would take as his inheritance.

Abraham had encamped in the far south of Canaan, about 45 miles south of the Jerusalem we know and almost on the edge of Philistine territory. The local Philistine king, Abimelech of Gerar had already come across the wealthy nomad Abraham and his wife Sarah, after mistakenly taking Sarah into his harem (20:1,2). At that time, Abraham had been rather deceptive, but Abimelech had shown himself to be a person who respected God (20:3ff). Because of this, if Abraham wanted to settle in the region and claim it as an inheritance for Isaac, he would need to enter into a formal agreement with Abimelech which would give him land rights. In those days, land rights were closely linked with the supply of water, so the whole story revolves around agreements made between Abimelech and Abraham to settle these issues. Abimelech wanted to know that Abraham would no longer act deceptively towards him and his authority (21:22-24), and Abraham wanted to claim the rights to a well that appears to have been a matter of dispute (21:25-26)

The details of the covenant made by Abimelech and Abraham were agreed through the sacrifice of cattle (21:27) and the giving of gifts (20:30), but there are further clues which tell us a little more than what is on the surface. After Abraham made the covenant with Abimelech to settle the dispute about the well, he put seven ewe-lambs to one side as a gift and a sign to Abimelech of his honesty in claiming the well (21:30); and this was accepted. However, this shows us that Abraham had learned something from his past mistakes and

weaknesses, for everything he did in this story was marked by honesty and integrity. The number seven represents this honesty, and crops up in the naming of the place as 'Beersheba', which means 'well of seven', or 'well of honesty'. As if to emphasise this feature of the story, both Abraham and Abimelech's names occur seven times in the Hebrew narrative of this story!

At the end of this brief story, Abraham, had honestly secured the land he needed for Isaac; and Abimelech, the god-fearing Philistine King, was content to leave Abraham in peace. The later history of relationships between Abraham's descendants and the Philistines would never again have such harmony, as the history of God's people shows (see Genesis 26). Abraham celebrated the eternal promise of land by planting a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and offering worship to God through a new name 'El-olam', meaning the Everlasting God. The whole story shows that Abraham had learned that long term honesty and faithfulness was required for a true relationship of faith not just with his neighbours, but with God Himself.

Going Deeper

The meeting of Abraham and Abimelech holds a number of interesting features. It shows us something of the way that men of that kind negotiated, and hints at the way covenant agreements were made between significant leaders. Most of all, it shows how Abraham put his faith in the future God had promised Him. He 'invested' in the future of the Promised Land, and in so doing, created a haven for His future family.

The Promised and the importance of wells

Abraham was a wealthy nomad who bred cattle and shepherded sheep, and it is remarkable that by the grace of God, he was in a position to come to an agreement on equal terms with a local 'Philistine' King, supported by his army commander! Both were, by all accounts, godly men. But whilst the revelation of God to Abimelech was through the natural world, Abraham had been chosen for the special task of being the means of God's blessing to the whole world (12:2,3). He had learned lessons of faith through many trials, and the Lord had faithfully sustained him even when he let down those he loved, as well as himself and God, and he was ready for the final test of his faith. The securing of land rights in Canaan was the first practical step taken by Abraham to affirm his own confidence in the future and in God's promise that his descendants would possess the land (13:15).

The land around Beersheba was where Abraham's son Isaac grew up and where he and his family returned to live; later stories in Genesis (especially chapter 26) illustrate the continued possession of this small plot of the 'Promised Land'. The stories of Isaac whilst he lived near Beersheba are remarkably similar to other stories of Abraham, and serve to emphasise the importance of the land and the continued inheritance of God's blessing which is at stake. Although our story today is about peace and reconciliation, the issue of land and wells quickly becomes contentious in Isaac's day (26:17ff) and it is a sad fact of human life that things which begin in honesty, peace and contentment can become lost as the generations pass by, and the good things of the past are either forgotten or ignored. Much of the trouble that the people of Israel experienced over the years had its roots in the breakdown of agreements made in good faith, and the same could be said of most nations!

Covenants and Philistines.

It is interesting to observe that the Philistine king Abimelech came to Abraham in search of some kind of mutual agreement and recognition, but Abraham took advantage of this offer to secure what he wanted. Abimelech's first words to Abraham were 'God is with you', which express both the peace in which he came and also his acceptance of Abraham as an equal. These words are important, however, and they are repeated in scripture describing all the early forefathers; Isaac (26:28), Jacob (30:27) and Joseph (39:3). They were also used later of David (1 Chron. 17:2 etc.), and in the Old Testament they indicate a special calling of the Lord which rests upon people chosen for specific tasks within the general call of God's people. It has the same meaning, of course, as the name given to Jesus at His birth in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 7:14) 'His name shall be called Immanuel ... which means 'God with us' (Matt 1:23). So in the New Testament and through Jesus, the special blessing of God's presence becomes a general blessing enjoyed by all the Lord's people.

Despite the compliment paid to Abraham, this was only an opening gambit on Abimelech's part, because he had a complaint against Abraham, which was that he had been deceitful in the past, and he needed to know that this would not be repeated in the future. Abraham understood this and swiftly replied 'I do so swear' (21:24) to Abimelech's request for honesty. This gave him the right to raise his own complaint about wells, in reply (2:25). At this early stage of the negotiations, it is not certain who dug the well at Beersheba in the first place. A well was a massive technological undertaking for those days which archaeology in the region has established would need to be chiselled through almost solid rock, and to a depth of more than 11 meters. When life depended upon water, this was no small matter, and the Hebrew (21:25) suggests that a dispute had been going on for some time about ownership of this well. In order to secure the rights, Abraham gave

cattle and sheep to Abimelech, which is interesting given the considerable number of the same animals given to Abraham by Abimelech earlier (20:14). A formal agreement would have required a sacrifice and a subsequent meal (for which the animals were probably given and slaughtered), but a covenant agreement required the consenting parties to both swear an oath of loyalty and also do something as a sign of that pledge.

Beersheba, the seven ewe lambs and the Tamarisk tree

The seven ewe lambs were set aside by Abraham as the necessary pledge of his loyalty, as he was the one whose integrity had been questioned (21:23), a gesture that Abimelech accepted. This led to the naming of the place as Beersheba, 'the well of seven' (or 'honesty' – see above). You may read in some places that the name Beersheba means 'the well of the oath', but this is only because the Hebrew word for 'oath' is very similar to the number 'seven' (for which there are technical reasons within the meaning of ancient Semitic words). I have translated the text to bring out the connection between the name of the region and Abraham's covenant sign of seven lambs given to King Abimelech, because this is the intention of the Hebrew.

At critical points in Abraham's life, he had stopped on his journeying to build an altar to the Lord. He had done this at Shechem (12:7,9), Bethel (13:4) and Hebron (13:18). Now he had secured this deal, he had acted faithfully in pursuit of God's Covenant promise (unlike earlier in his first attempt to have a son, see Gen 16!) and the successful conclusion of the deal was celebrated by Abraham at Beersheba not by building an altar, but by planting a tamarisk tree. Trees were considered sacred by Canaanite peoples, and it is thought that Abraham's action not only worshipped God by providing a sign of protection and perpetuity (21:33), but also indicating to other people that for Abraham, this first possession in the Promised Land was a special, or 'holy' place.

Abraham's worship of the Lord then took a new turn as he expressed his faith by calling the Lord 'El-'olam', which means 'Everlasting God'. Throughout the story of Abraham, God had been progressively revealed through the names He was given at important moments; El-Elyon (God most high - 14:18), El-Roi (God who sees -16:13); El-Shaddai (Almighty -17:1); and now 'El-'olam' (Everlasting God). Each of these names says more about the nature of the Creator God revealed in the first few chapters of Genesis, and the way that they are given reminds us that God is always showing us more about Himself!

In this passage, Abraham sealed a covenant agreement with Abimelech which he expected to be a permanent agreement of land rights, for the future generations to be born through his son Isaac, and through this he realised afresh the on-going and everlasting nature of God's promises.

Discipleship

Application

There are a number of important points that we can take from this text, despite its apparently strange position in the story of Abraham's life. Firstly, there is something for us to think about in its discussion of honesty and integrity, and in plain speaking. This enabled Abraham to return to a man he had previously deceived and make a serious agreement, an 'everlasting' covenant. Today, the world constantly suggests to us that we deal with people cautiously, hedge our words with qualifications, and keep secrets from each other wherever possible. We have to take this into account in our dealings with the world, but it should not be the mark of the people of God. This story reminds us that Abraham took some time to learn this simple lesson, and he was more than 100 years old when he did!

Another important lesson can be learned from the history of the relationship between God's people and the Philistines. Scripture tells us that we should know our history and the agreements that our ancestors have entered into. If both Philistines and Israelites had remembered the covenant faithfulness of Abraham and Abimelech, much of their later painful history might have been different. God was able to use all that happened in Israel's history, but some of the lessons God's people had to learn were very hard, and were learned after much bloodshed between Israelite and Philistine.

Probably the most important outcome of this passage is Abraham's realisation of the eternal nature of God. He accepted that what God had been doing through him was not just a personal matter for him and his descendants, but something of eternal value and worth for the Lord. He had no revelation of the Kingdom of God, but his acceptance of God as 'everlasting' was a step towards this great revelation. It is so important that we learn the amazing truth that what the Lord is doing in our lives is of eternal value. It can be tremendously reassuring to know that what we are called to do is a vital part of all that God has planned for us, for His kingdom here on earth, and ultimately for His Kingdom in heaven.

Questions for groups

1. What are the key characteristics of formal agreements that we make today, such as marriage or house purchase, and how do these compare with this story?

2. Discuss the lessons of faith that Abraham has had to learn in his journey of faith up to this point in scripture.
3. Look through the different names of God revealed in the story of Abraham (see above) and discuss their meaning for us today.

Discipleship challenges

- *How honest are you? This appears to be a very presumptuous question, and if a friend asked it of us, we would be surprised. Try asking those who are close to you and discussing their answer with them!*
- *Over the period of a week, make a note of those things which you do which will have permanent and long term value. This could be a great deal, or it could be very little. Pray about what you discover about what you do!*

Final Prayer

Hear the words we speak to You, we pray;
Listen to our hearts, and feel our emotions;
Answer us when we call on Your name;
For in You alone, we have confidence. AMEN
