

GENESIS 21:22-34 (THE WELL OF THE SEVEN)

Introduction: Today we're going to learn about the importance of oaths and agreements and see how God watches over them, even thousands of years after they are enacted. Every oath we take and every vow we make is done in the presence of God and therefore they are as binding as if they are made directly with Him.

Today's verses may not be as deep and exciting as some we've traversed, but they are as important as any other. God wants us to learn from them and to then abide by the instructions and the lessons they provide. Let's do our best to take heed to them as we live in His presence as followers of Jesus Christ.

Text Verse: You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name. Deuteronomy 10:20

Some people believe based on Jesus' words in the gospels that we should make no oaths at all. But this is a misreading of what Jesus was telling us. When we make oaths, however, they are not to be taken lightly and they are only to be made in the Lord's name. Any vow or oath which is made under any lesser name will ultimately diminish His glory in our perception of Him and is actually an act of idolatry and so... May God speak to us through His word today and may His glorious name ever be praised.

I. Abraham's Vow

In the coming verse, the first thing we need to do is to try to determine when it actually occurs –

²² 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.

There are three possibilities as to when Abimelech came to Abraham. The first is that it was from the passage in Chapter 20 when Sarah was taken into Abimelech's home. If so, it would skip over both the birth and weaning

of Isaac and the story about Ishmael which included his growing up and becoming an archer.

The second possibility is that it was after the birth of Isaac around the time of the feast when he was weaned. The third is that it happened much later, when Ishmael had grown up to become an archer.

The first option is unlikely because there is a progression of events which leads from one thing to another right up until the time of Ishmael and his mother leaving the home. The third option, when Ishmael is grown up, is also unlikely.

That is more of an addendum on the timeline to note that he survived the ordeal of being in the desert and eventually married and became an archer. The most likely time is around the time of Isaac's weaning when Hagar and Ishmael were sent away.

The reason why this is likely is because by having the record of them being removed from the camp assures that what is coming in today's account is intended to include the people who descend from Isaac, not Ishmael. If Ishmael were still in the home, there could be a claim by him and his descendants to what is coming.

Now let's read the verse again to refresh it in our minds – "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."

The king of Gerar, who had already interacted with Abraham in the matter concerning Sarah his wife, comes along with the commander of his army to make a formal treaty with him. His word to Abraham, "God is with you in all you do" is something God promised Abraham all the way back in chapter 12 –

² "I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing." Genesis 12:2

By this meeting with the king, the Lord has fulfilled the promise to Abraham. It was as obvious to Abimelech as the nose on his face that God was looking out for him. When he took Sarah into his harem, God came to him in a dream, called him a dead man for taking a prophet's wife, and told him he had better return her.

He also was fully aware of the large size of Abraham's camp in people, livestock, and wealth. Now, he had heard that a son was born to him and had lived to the age of weaning, meaning he would become the inheritor of Abraham's camp. And the camp was powerful. Anyone in the area would know that with his fighting men he had overthrown the 4 kings of the east.

God was with Abraham and so Abimelech came to make a treaty with him now before died. Once he was dead, the son would take over and a new regime would be established. It would be easier to work with Abraham now than to do so with his son in the future.

Another question arises though, why did he bring along his army commander? He is mentioned by name and therefore God is telling us that he is important to know. His name means "the mouth of all" or literally "strong." Bringing him along does a few things.

The first is that it will demonstrate that the pact to be made has the full support of the people. It also acknowledges Abraham's military superiority over his own kingdom. Abraham's might was renowned and bringing the commander who was named "Strong" was an implicit acknowledgment that Abraham was stronger.

This is in line with Jesus words in a parable in Luke 14 –

³¹ Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. ³³ So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.

Abimelech may or may not be a believer in the true God, but he is acknowledging that Abraham is superior to him in military power and that his God is more inclined to Abraham than anyone else, including him.

Before we head to the next verse, we should probably evaluate our own lives and see if we're willing to heed what Jesus is implying in the verse I gave you from Luke. He is the commander of the strongest army there is and so we should be brave enough to stand up for our convictions and let others, not us, sue for peace.

Any Christian who isn't willing to speak up for his faith and for the truth of the message of Jesus Christ is neither properly executing, nor worthy of, the title of "Christian."

Whether the people around us acknowledge it or not, the God we follow is the only God and because He is, then nothing can stand against us. So if you're timid about whatever issue you're facing, don't be. He is right there with you as He was with Abraham.

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."

However Abimelech knows... he knows that Abraham isn't going to just be a powerful leader and then fade away, but that his line will continue forever. Because of this, he asks for him to speak not only for himself, but for his son, and his future descendants too.

What he is asking for is something we would call the Lex Talionis or "an eye for an eye." What kindness or evil I show you, you will show me. What I think about this account, and several more like it, may not be popular, but I believe it is 100% correct.

The covenant between Abimelech and Abraham is as binding today as it is when it was made. It seems to be written into the Jewish mind and actions even now. I do not care even a little bit what the rest of the world says

about the actions of Israel. They never act as the aggressors in their actions against their neighbors.

On August 31, 2004, 16 were killed in two suicide bombings on buses in Beersheba for which Hamas claimed responsibility. On August 28, 2005, another suicide bomber attacked the central bus station, seriously injuring two security guards and 45 bystanders. During Operation Cast Lead, which began on December 27, 2008, Hamas fired multiple Grad rockets from Gaza into Beersheba.

On almost every occasion in their history, Israel responds to attacks on the people they covenanted with, but they do not actively attack them. In the Bible and in modern history, when this isn't the case, the Lord sees and acts. Let me give you an account from 2 Samuel 21 when Israel violated such a covenant –

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, *“It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites.”*² So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.

People may forget these things over time, but the Lord never does. This covenant with the Gibeonites was about 400 years earlier and yet God held Israel to account for it. His eye is on both sides of these struggles and He attends to violations in man's word in surprising and fulfilling ways.

This is a lesson we need to remember as individuals and as a nation. When we sign a contract of peace with a group of people, it is binding and is not to be dismissed by us first, only in retaliation for an aggression initiated against us.

²⁴ **And Abraham said, “I will swear.”**

In Genesis 15, God told Abraham that it would be 400 years before he would take possession of the land and so he has two reasons to agree. The first is that Abimelech came to him on friendly and submissive terms. Second, by such an agreement, in a land which he doesn't even own, he is receiving a guarantee of safety.

This would be like making an agreement with your landlord. He comes to you with his lawyer and says, "I know that God is with you in all you do and so I want to guarantee that I will prosper through you.

"So, would you be willing to live in this house for free – you and any of your descendants who want to for the next 400 years? If so, I'll pay all the bills and throw in a security system too."

And so you agree. Abraham agreed too...

The agreement is made and it will be confirmed in a covenant. Abraham's word is *i'shaba* – "I will swear" and is the same root as the number seven - sheba. An oath of this type will be confirmed in a rite involving the number seven.

II. Oh, Well!

Before you sign the lawyer's papers, you want to clear up a small problem. He came to you and so he's obviously willing to bargain and wants to see the deal done and so now is the very best time to clear any outstanding matters.

On the back of the property is a big shed that you built. The landlord's employees have been coming onto the property and filling it with their stuff. Before you sign the papers, you want your shed and you want it left alone.

Abraham has his own terms which he wants settled before he confirms the oath with Abimelech...

²⁵ Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized.

Water is where it's at. If you've never been to Israel, just go on line and type in "Beersheba," which is where this story is happening. You'll see lots of sand, lots of rocks, and you can feel the heat shimmering off the photo.

There are two rain seasons in the land – known as the former and latter rains which come in the fall and the spring. In the off seasons, or in the times when the season doesn't get rain, a well is the only source of water. It is the only way to irrigate, and the only way for the people and animals to drink.

Abraham is more concerned about this well than any other part of the meeting and it will be a continued source of trouble if it doesn't get settled. Abimelech's servants need to leave it alone or the oath will only have hints of unhappiness associated with it.

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."

This verse shows the gracious nature of Abraham for two reasons. First Abraham agreed to the oath even before the issue of the well was brought up. And secondly, Abimelech was never told in the past about what was going on.

Abraham had the power to take the well back by force and keep it guarded, but instead, he graciously kept the matter concealed. Abimelech is hearing about it for the first time. I like what the Geneva Bible has to say about this verse – "Wicked servants do many evils unknown to their masters."

You'll find many times in the Bible that this is so. Poor King David had a very faithful army commander named Joab, but he did all kind of things that he shouldn't have done. Should you be a boss, you know that even the best of employees make some rather dubious decisions from time to time.

Abimelech is gracious back to Abraham just as Abraham was to him. In the end, the covenant will go forward and it will last as a testament to this congenial meeting between these two men.

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

In verse 23, it was Abimelech who asked for the agreement, and in verse 24 Abraham agrees to it. Abraham is the one who offers the animals because he is the one who is granting the request.

He took “sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech.” Abraham provides the animals and Abimelech is the one to kill them and divide them in two. After that, both of them will pass between the pieces and the covenant will be confirmed.

The significance to this ancient rite is that if either party broke the covenant, they would be treated in the same manner as the animals that they passed through. In other words, “What has been done to these animals is what I am binding myself to.”

²⁸ And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.

Some scholars say these seven lambs are the animals that were sacrificed and the other sheep and oxen were gifts to Abimelech. However, this doesn't make sense and it is exactly the opposite. The terminology, both before and after this verse, indicates that the seven lambs are a witness to the covenant, not the sign of it.

²⁹ Then Abimelech asked Abraham, “What *is the meaning of* these seven ewe lambs which you have set by yourselves?”

Abimelech is standing there looking at these seven cute, fluffy little lambs and wondering what they mean. The animals for the sacrifice have been slaughtered and divided and all of a sudden Abraham walks up with seven more lambs.

He probably stood scratching his head or maybe pulling his beard and wondered what was going on.

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.”

I’ve been to this place and looked down this well. Yes, the well is still there, but the lambs aren’t. So where is the proof that Abraham actually gave them to Abimelech and where is the proof that he accepted them? Anyone?

The proof is in the document we’re reading. As the noted legal scholar and principle founder of Harvard Law School, Simon Greenleaf states, “Every document, apparently ancient, coming from the proper repository or custody, and bearing on its face no evident marks of forgery, the law presumes to be genuine, and devolves on the opposing party the burden of proving it to be otherwise.”

It’s important to remember this because there are copies of the Bible which go well back into antiquity and which predate any other claims on this well or any of the other biblical sites coming into contestation in modern times. This may seem like a side issue, but God has recorded this deed and we need to take heed to it, as well as several others in the Bible.

People argue over Israel’s right to the land. They argue over a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount, they argue over Israel’s very right to exist. So, knowing the Bible is the most important tool that we have to refute these baseless claims.

The seven lambs were offered by Abraham as proof that he dug this well. They implicitly state that the land around the well was for his use. If Abimelech accepts the lambs, then what is implicit becomes explicit. Remember, it was Abimelech in the previous chapter who said this to Abraham –

“See, my land *is* before you; dwell where it pleases you.” (20:15)

³¹ Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there.

“Therefore...” We’re reminded to think on the previous verses of today’s sermon and come to a conclusion or accept one that has been made. So let’s review:

Abimelech and Phicol came to Abraham, acknowledged that God is with him in all he does, and so they ask him to swear by God that he won’t deal falsely with him, his son, or his descendants, and that there will be established an agreement based on the *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye, if the agreement is broken.

Abraham agrees and after his agreement he brings up the subject of the well. Abimelech says he had no knowledge of the problem and Abraham takes animals for a sacrifice to cut a covenant. He also sets aside seven ewe lambs as a witness that he dug the well. If Abimelech agrees to this, then the covenant will be sealed.

“Therefore...” because of all of these things, the well is called Beersheba. Why is the naming of the place the conclusion of the matter and the reason for our “therefore?” The word in Hebrew for “therefore” is *al* and can be translated, wherefore, therefore, so, and, etc. But it is used to demonstrate a result.

“Therefore” – the result of all the things we talked about is the name Beersheba. The word *be-er* means well. The verb *sheba* means “oath.” So, or therefore, the result is the “Well of the Oath.” But the root of *sheba* also means “seven.” So, or therefore, the result is the “Well of the Seven.”

The “therefore” is that the well and the surrounding area is called Beersheba, and the name came from this oath. The oath is the grant and the name is the testament to the grant. Who owns this land? The descendants of Abraham through Isaac, not Ishmael, and also not any of the other people in the area... The deed stands.

III. The Lord, The Everlasting God

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.

Both agreed – Abraham and Abimelech, and so the covenant is confirmed and it's done as the verse says, "at Beersheba." The inclusion of the name in this verse is given specifically to demonstrate that it came from this account.

The fact that the name of this place has lasted for 4000 years tells us that God is carefully watching over His land and is demonstrating the significance of these accounts in His word.

As the Palestinians continue their assault against Israel – each time they do, they violate this ancient covenant which came between these two men. You see, the term Palestine comes from the Hebrew word *plishtime*, which we translate as Philistine.

These people cannot claim the title while rejecting the obligation to it. It either goes all the way or it doesn't go at all. Hence, the town of Beersheba is in the news and will continue to be in the news as long as these wicked people are hostile to their Jewish brethren.

The history of the place is rich and it will be mentioned many, many more times as the Bible unfolds. It will become synonymous with the very southern spot of the Land of Israel.

This spot is where God meets with Jacob just before he leaves the land of Canaan on his journey to Egypt. From the time he leaves Beersheba, it will be several hundred years before the people return from there.

³³ Then *Abraham* planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.

Verse 33 introduces a few terms and a pile of debate. Abraham planted, according to the NKJV a “tamarisk tree” and others say an “oak tree.” The KJV says “grove.”

The term is *eshel* and is used only used two more times in the Bible. Both times, a tree and not a field for plowing, seems likely.

Study your Bibles and make your conclusions. I go with a tree, not a grove because a tree seems to be tied into what Abraham is doing. He is calling on the Lord, the Everlasting God. This is the first time in the Bible this term is used – Yehovah, El Olam.

He is the Eternal One. He is unchangeable and therefore he is sure and able to watch over the covenant made between these two men. Because of this, Abraham plants a tree – a symbol to men of permanence and reliability. As my brother once said to me, “The definition of an optimist is a person who plants a tree.”

A grove gives the thought of neither permanence nor reliability. In fact, it gives just the opposite. A grove is something temporary and which changes with each harvest, but the Bible says otherwise about the tree –

In Isaiah chapter 6, he is told by the Lord to proclaim His word to the stubborn and dull eared people. They are told to keep on hearing, but never listening. They are told to keep on seeing, but never perceiving. Eventually, Isaiah cries out –

“Lord, how long?” And He answered: “Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, The houses are without a man, The land is utterly desolate, ¹² The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places *are* many in the midst of the land. ¹³ But yet a tenth *will be* in it, And will return and be for consuming, As a terebinth tree or as an oak, Whose stump *remains* when it is cut down. So the holy seed *shall be* its stump.”

Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, their stiff-necks, and their unwillingness to hear, God promises to preserve a teeny remnant of the people and they

will be as the stump of the tree which will sprout again at the scent of water.

Abraham has planted a tree acknowledging God's faithfulness and permanence. It's as if he sees the future of his people and acknowledges God's sovereignty over them and His eternal faithfulness to them, even when they nail His Son to another tree.

Concerning this treaty between Abraham and Abimelech and their descendants after them, it is Yehovah, El Olam who will vindicate the just and who will judge the unjust who breaks the agreement. He is Abraham's infallible Source of rest and peace.

In Ecclesiastes 3, we read this – "I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does *it*, that men should fear before Him."

The form and appearance of the things around us may change, but what God determines is permanent and everlasting. Nothing that He decides can be frustrated or hindered. Even though the tree Abraham planted is temporary and changing, it is in itself a shadow of something that is eternal and unchanging.

One more little tidbit about this verse for you – at the beginning of this chapter, way back in verse 1 when the Lord visited Sarah and brought about the conception of Isaac, which was two sermons ago, the name of the Lord "Jehovah" was mentioned.

It hasn't been mentioned again until now 32 verses later. Through Isaac's weaning, through the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael, and through the entire account with Abimelech, only the term "God" is used. This is because of the relationship between the people in those accounts and God was general and not intimate.

But His relationship with Sarah as the mother of Isaac and His relationship with Abraham, the man of faith, we see a personal and covenant based relationship. And so the chapter begins and ends with the divine name,

Jehovah. It is this name which, until the incarnation of Jesus, demonstrates communion with man.

This is how life was intended to be. When man was created, it was the Lord who was with him in the Garden, but since then He only appears at certain times and for specific reasons in human history.

The intimacy between God and man was all but gone and can only be restored when we follow His rules. Once we do though, Paul tells us about the restored relationship –

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, Romans 8:14-16

³⁴ And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.

This is the last verse of chapter 21 and it is given to show us God’s faithfulness to Abraham. After the treaty, after calling on the name of the Lord as the Everlasting God, we see that this same God was both capable and willing to provide for Abraham, even in the Land of the Philistines.

The verse implies that there were no disputes over the well with Abimelech or with anyone else that would have necessitated him moving on. God remained Abraham’s source and place of rest.

Before we leave today’s passage behind us, we should reflect on this personally. What we’ve learned today is as much about oaths, their establishment and fulfillment, as anything else. Some of us here have taken an oath in marriage.

I will tell you that God looks at that oath in the same light as He looks at the oath between these two men. God is still watching it carefully 4000 years later and He is watching for our faithfulness in the covenant of marriage as well.

He's also watching our other oaths – things we have sworn to accomplish. This includes loan agreements for a car or a house. It includes testifying in a courtroom or witnessing transactions. God watches over our actions and our oaths, expecting full and complete compliance.

If we are really Abraham's children, we are children of the Lord, and so we need to be competent and faithful to represent Him in all we do.

Next week: Genesis 22:1-8 (By Faith Abraham)

The Well of the Seven

And it came to pass at that time
That Abimelech and Phichol the commander of the army
Spoke to Abraham what was on their mind
God is with you in all you do and we see your life is barmy
Now therefore, swear to me by God
That you will not deal falsely with me or my offspring
And with kindness we will interact while in this life we trod
You will do to me as I to you, please agree to this thing
And Abraham said, "I will swear."
Then he rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water
His servants had seized it, without any care
It needed to be resolved before the animals they would slaughter
And Abimelech said, I don't know who has done this thing
You never told me, nor have I heard till today
So Abraham to Abimelech sheep and oxen he did bring
And gave them to him for a covenant display

And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock to the side
And Abimelech asked their meaning, and Abraham replied
You will take these seven lambs from my hand in order to tell
As a witness that it was I who have dug this watery well
Therefore, he called that place Beersheba
Because the two of them swore an oath there
Thus they made a covenant at a place which rhymes with Toshiba
Not much else does and I had to put something there

So Abimelech rose with Phichol the commander of the army
And they returned to the Philistine's land
They were hoping their life would also be quite barmy
And that God would bless them from His open hand

Then Abraham in Beersheba planted a tamarisk tree
And there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God
And he stayed in that land many days happy and carefree
Because he was a man of faith and faithfully he trod
Each of us enters into agreements and covenants too
And God expects us to obey them in all that we do

Let us be faithful to the contracts we sign
And to the vows we make as we speak with our lips
God instructs us that this is His design
He is watching that we don't make any slips
He is faithful to us in each and every way
And so we are to be like Him each and every day

Let us be faithful to our husband or wife
Let us be honorable each day as we work
In every way we need to live an integrity-filled life
Not letting things slip like some kind of a jerk
God promised so very long ago
That He would send His Son to make all things right
Thankfully He didn't change His mind and decide to say no
Because only through Him can we see heaven's light

Great and awesome God,
Let us in they light trod
Great and marvelous in all your ways,
May we return to you all of our praise

Hallelujah and Amen...