

Finer Grounds

Genesis

Lesson 11: Abimelech and Isaac

Read Genesis 20:1-18

As we pick back up in the text, Abraham is on the move. The destruction of the cities in the valley that we read about last time would have obviously left quite an atrocious site and tons of damage to the land. If you recall from Genesis 18:24, God rained down brimstone, or sulphur, so the area probably smelled putrid for some time as sulphur has the odor of rotten eggs. Perhaps these things have something to do with Abraham's decision to vacate the premises and decide to settle in Gerar.

Abimelech is the king of Gerar which is in the land of the Philistines (Genesis 21:34). Genesis 10:14 tells us that the Philistines descended from Noah's son Ham and were the ones who migrated towards Egypt into Africa. The Bible's accuracy concerning the Philistines' existence in this area during Abraham's time was debated in previous years. However, they can now archaeologically link the Philistines to ancient Egypt and to having a presence during this era. Although the majority of Philistines would not migrate to Canaan until a few centuries later, there definitely is evidence of some Philistines dwelling in the area during the time frame of Genesis 20. Once again our knowledge is growing and proving we are the ones in error, not the word of God. As a side note, the Philistines who came to Canaan later are believed to have relocated from the island of Crete (possibly the whole Aegean region) which is why they are also known as the "sea people".

We see that Abraham is still struggling to be completely honest about his wife and this time deceives Abimelech, who does indeed take Sarah. I want to pause here and consider that Sarah is around ninety years old at this time. In fact, she was at least sixty-five years old the first time this happened when Pharaoh took her to be his wife back in Genesis 12. This begs the question of why these men wanted her. We know from Genesis 12:11 and 12:15 that Sarah was still a beautiful woman, so much so that "Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh". It is probably important to note here that Abraham lived to be one-hundred and seventy-five years old (Genesis 25:7) and Sarah lived to be one-hundred and twenty-seven years old (Genesis 23:1). One could argue that she was only half way through her life, which in today's life expectancy would be comparable to around forty years old. That could explain Pharaoh's interest, but what about Abimelech?

Genesis 18:11 tells us that Sarah was past child-bearing age and she herself laughs at the thought of having a baby, calling both herself and Abraham old in Genesis 18:12. We are not told that Abimelech is specifically attracted to Sarah, although that could still be a possibility. There may also be another reason he decides to take her. Remember the Philistines are not the powerful people yet that they will later become. Additionally, and more importantly, Abimelech almost certainly knows about the Lord's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which would naturally produce a healthy fear of the God of Abraham. In fact, it is Abimelech who will

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seek a peace treaty with Abraham in chapter 21 stating “God is with you in all that you do” and he will later be fearful of Isaac (Genesis 26:16) and will seek peace with him for the same reason (Genesis 26:28). Also, it was not uncommon in that time to marry for connections and peace, nor was it unheard of to add older women to your harem for those purposes. Sarah could have still been attractive and/or Abimelech may have just wanted connections to Abraham, a very wealthy man whose God could easily wipe him off the face of the earth.

As the story goes, Abimelech encounters God in a dream, defends his integrity, and is given the chance to rectify it which he promptly does. Abimelech has done wrong unknowingly, but God does not treat it as justified, instead He corrects it and expects immediate repentance from it. This reminds me of Saul in the New Testament when he persecuted the church with a clear conscience. I think Abimelech and Saul can teach us a valuable lesson in that our conscience can only be our guide if it is governed by the certain will of God.

Abimelech confronts Abraham in Genesis 20:9-10 wanting to know why he would do such a thing and letting him know that it “ought not to be done”. We might ask how Abraham could do this AGAIN, but if we are honest, we have to confess that we often struggle with the same sin AGAIN and AGAIN just like he did. Instead of focusing on Abraham’s sin, I hope we can focus on what really matters – God’s faithfulness throughout Abraham’s sin. God uses Abimelech to correct Abraham. That doesn’t mean Abimelech is now righteous and Abraham is now unrighteous. Sometimes I think we act like our Christianity is off and on based on our sin quota

for the day, but that does not seem to be how God sees it. Yes, we must repent and keep seeking perfection in Him, but **GOD IS FAITHFUL**. We fail. We fail often, but God and His promises never fail.

Think About It:

Have you struggled with a repetitive sin in your life as Abraham did?

If you have overcome that sin, how did you overcome it?

If you have NOT overcome that sin, what can you do to change that?

Has God ever used a non-Christian to teach you about His will and, if so, what?

Why do you think God has Abraham pray for Abimelech instead of allowing Abimelech to pray for himself? (Genesis 20:7,17)

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Can you think of other times in Scripture when God had someone else pray for people? Why?

Read Genesis 21:1-34

Speaking of God's faithfulness, the fulfillment of His promise of an offspring through Sarah comes to fruition in the first part of chapter 21. It has been twenty-five years since this promise was first given, but the joyful day has finally arrived! God had already told Abraham in Genesis 17:19 what to name his son and in verse 3 of this chapter we have confirmation of that name. Isaac, or *YITSCHAQ* in Hebrew, means "he laughs" and seems very fitting considering Abraham and Sarah both laughed about the possibility of his existence in Genesis 17:17 and 18:12 respectively. Of course Abraham is faithful to circumcise Isaac on the eighth day in accordance to the covenant God made with him in Genesis 17:9-14.

The celebration given for Isaac's weaning in verse 8 is a practice that still occurs in some cultures today. It is difficult to pinpoint how old Isaac would have been at this time with some estimates ranging as high as five years old, but it is generally accepted that he would have been two or three years old. Considering Abraham was eighty-six when Ishmael was born (Genesis 16:16) and he was one-hundred when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5), we know that Ishmael was already fourteen years old when Isaac finally made his appearance. If you add these two or three years of nursing, Ishmael was probably around sixteen or seventeen years old when Sarah sees him "mocking" Isaac in verse 9. The word "mocking"

in this verse is the same root word that is translated "laughter" just like Isaac's name. It would appear from Sarah's response however that, in this context, the word has a more malicious undertone than his name.

This "mocking" of course does not end well. Sarah's words seem very cold and detached as she says "drive out this maid and her son". Despite Sarah's words, Ishmael is not just Hagar's son, he is Abraham's first born son as well. Abraham obviously does not want to send Ismael away. From the Nuzu tablets that we talked about in a previous lesson, we know that the wife (Sarah) was specifically forbidden to send the handmaid's children away. This would explain why she requested it of Abraham in verse 10 instead of handling it herself and would also provide another reason why it took God's permission for Abraham to actually do so. Thankfully, God comforts Abraham and assures him that He will make Ishmael into a great nation as well. It is times like these that showcase Abraham's great faith. He just obeys God and trusts that He will keep His promises. He obeys when that means he may risk looking like a heartless father to others. He obeys even when it means he has to send his first born teenage son into the desert with virtually nothing. Isaac was not Abraham's first son to be "sacrificed".

The last section of chapter 21 involves basically a peace treaty between Abraham and Abimelech and a dispute over a well. As stated before, Abimelech is aware that God is with Abraham and he is wise enough to know now that peace with the Almighty requires peace with His servants. So, when Abraham complains about the well being seized by some of Abimelech's servants, Abimelech is more than

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willing to resolve the issue. He accepts Abraham’s gift of the seven ewe lambs that bear witness that Abraham dug the well. In those days and in that place, wells were vital to life. If you dug a well, you automatically had rights to that well and the surrounding property. However, if you allowed it to dilapidate, someone could repair it and then you would have to give up those rights to them. Abraham names the place where they make their covenant Beersheba which means “well of the sevenfold oath”.

The chapter concludes with Abraham planting a tamarisk tree. There are tons of theories out there about the significance of him planting this type of tree. There are somewhere around fifty to sixty different species of this tree (or shrub), but the one typically found in the area even today is an evergreen with grayish green needles. It can grow up to fifty feet tall and can reproduce by both submerged stems and by seeds. They are the only trees on the Dead Sea’s shore as they do well in high salt concentrations. They absorb a tremendous amount of water, which causes them to be an aggressive invader of the area. It also secretes salt in the heat of the day. At night the salt absorbs the water from the air and then the water evaporates in the morning which has a cooling effect on the tree and the shade underneath it. Whether or not the type of tree has any symbolism or not is debatable, but it was surely commemorative.

We will leave this chapter with Abraham again “calling on the name of the Lord” and giving God yet another title, “the Everlasting God”. However, this is not the best passage to prove God’s eternal nature as you may recall that there is no true Hebrew word for “eternal”. The word used here in verse 33 is that same *OWLAM*

word that we discussed in an earlier lesson and simply refers to something long-lasting or something with an undefined beginning or end. In this case it really does mean “everlasting”, but because of the ambiguity of the word, other passages are probably better suited to show that point. We will leave Abraham for now “in the land of the Philistines for many days”.

Think About It:

What was required of Sarah for her to conceive Isaac? (See Heb. 11:11)

What kind of thoughts and feelings do you think Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael each had as Hagar and Ishmael were driven out?

Why do you think God continued to bless Abraham and Sarah despite the wrong actions they sometimes committed?

Do a search to find some verses about God’s protection of and faithfulness to His people and meditate on them.

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Read Galatians 4:21-31.

What is the type and ante-type found in these verses?

Who are we in these verses (vs. 28) and what does that mean? (See also Rom. 9:6-9)

I pray you are all growing stronger in the Lord and more confident in your faith daily. I want to take this moment to remind you that I am just as fallible as Abraham and Sarah, more so even. Please remember to be “examining the Scriptures daily, to see if these things [are] so” like the Bereans in Acts 17:11 and may God cause you to grow by leaps and bounds through your diligent study!