

Foundations: Well, Well, Well
By Jason Huff
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Zephaniah 3:14-17; Romans 8:28-33; Genesis 21:22-34

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 21:22-34. Listen now to God's precious, perfect, and holy Word. "At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do. Now swear to me here before God that you will not deal falsely with me or my children or my descendants. Show to me and the country where you are living as an alien the same kindness I have shown to you." Abraham said, "I swear it." Then Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized. But Abimelech said, "I don't know who has done this. You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today." So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a treaty. Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs from the flock, and Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart by themselves?" He replied, "Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well." So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there. After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time."

We can learn a lot from things that are small and incidental. The Gettysburg Address was less than three minutes long, yet it has become an indelible part of American history. That same day, US senator and former governor of Massachusetts Edward Everett gave a two-hour speech before President Lincoln gave his 271 words. And yet nobody knows about Edward Everett now, let alone his speech. It's a good reminder to us that we should be careful what we might otherwise dismiss as inconsequential because of its length or its seeming unimportance.

That's especially true when it comes to Scripture. Many times, the Bible gives us details and stories that don't seem to follow the central narrative. After so much about the coming birth of Isaac and the promises made to Abraham, last week with Isaac's arrival and the rejection and exile of Hagar and Ishmael, today's passage seems almost out of place. Why do we even need to know about this transaction, this treaty between Abraham and Abimelech, the king of the Philistine lands? I had thought of just skipping over this passage for our study. And yet if God decided it should be in His Word, then maybe there's something here for us that we just might not see on the surface.

You might remember Abimelech...we ran into him a couple weeks ago when he took Abraham's wife Sarah for his own. Because he didn't do it intentionally – he had heard that Abraham and Sarah were brother and sister, which was the rumor they had spread to keep Abraham safe – God spoke to him and warned him of the wrath that would come if he did not return Sarah to Abraham. Abimelech turned out to be a faithful character who came off much better than Abraham, who'd been caught in his lie. Some time has passed, Abraham and Sarah now have their miracle child Isaac, and Abimelech returns to the scene.

We might think that Abimelech might still be sore about his previous run-in with Abraham. That's not the case at all. Abimelech is here to make a treaty with Abraham. And why is that the case? Why would Abimelech be here beseeching Abraham to treat him kindly, to not deal falsely with him? Because, as Abimelech says, "God is with you in everything you do."

I want us to stop right here and think about this for a minute. This is a pagan guy in a pagan place. Abimelech refers to God using the common term for him in Hebrew, "Elohim." This is a word used respectfully of God throughout Scripture, but it's often the term used by outsiders who don't know God personally. Later in the passage, Abraham will make a sacrifice and it's specifically directed to YHWH, as God revealed Himself to be to Abraham. It is not that Abimelech is a worshipper of YHWH, but he knows that God has blessed Abraham, has even done the impossible for Abraham. As we saw before, he is a wise and gracious man. He can see what is before his eyes. To be on the side of Abraham is to be on the side of God.

And so my first thought of the day, first thing that struck me is, *people respond to God's blessings that they see lived out in front of them.* Abraham is not going on a missionary tour of Canaan; he is not trying to convert everyone to believe in YHWH. For the most part, he's going about his business, taking care of his family and his people, checking on the herds. For a man who lives nearly 200 years, we don't see a lot of his daily life. But what we do know is that he's blessed. He's amassed a sizable fortune in his travels, and that despite being a foreigner from a thousand miles away. He has an heir born to him at 100 when his wife is 90. Even when he and his wife make serious mistakes like they did with Abimelech before, they wind up walking away unscathed and blessed. Abraham doesn't have to say a word about YHWH for those with eyes to see to perceive that Abraham has a unique blessing from the God he worships.

This is not exclusive to Abraham. There were plenty of God-fearing people in the ancient Near East who were drawn to Judaism because they saw God's blessings on the Israelites. As a people group, they survive when virtually every other major group in Canaan in wiped out or scattered. When they are following the Lord, the blessings are obvious. Yet even when they aren't, even when they are exiled, even when they are taken over by the Romans, anyone with a knowledge of history knows that God's hand is uniquely with these people.

In the New Testament era, people coming to faith in Jesus for the same things. Not because they have the wealth of Abraham because they don't, they're impoverished, but they have something else. The apostles show the miraculous power to heal. Christians show grace and love and mercy in ways completely foreign to Roman culture. Despite incredible pressure and persecution, God's love shines through them. And because of the witness of the early Christians, the church continues to grow and stands today on their shoulders.

And so for us, the question is, as the people of Abraham – because we are Abraham's children by faith, Jesus says, we belong to Abraham's line by adoption through Jesus – as the people of Abraham, are we living in such a way that people are seeing the blessings God has bestowed upon us? Not necessarily big homes, big cars, material stuff, but in terms of joy? Contentedness? Peace? Kindness? Because people don't need a deep thousand-hour lecture on theology to come to grips with God. They really need to see that God is real and alive and blessing His people.

Tim Keller is the retired pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. Took a couple dozen people interested in reaching the city for God, and now Redeemer has multiple locations through the city with over 5,000 attending each week, in this city that many people had written off as godless. Here's what he had to say recently – “The future of evangelism in America...is not in programs. You're going to have to talk to the people who are closest to you. You have to stop hiding who you are to the people around you. If Christ is at the center of your life, then anybody that you're close to, the only way those people can not know about Christ and never hear the gospel is if you hide who you are.”

One thing is for certain: for all his failures, Abraham worshipped the LORD openly in a pagan culture that didn't know YHWH. He did not hide that God was blessing Him. We can't either. Let your friends and family and co-workers know who you are. And if you don't think God is blessing you enough that anyone would care, then maybe it's time to stop and pray, and challenge God, and challenge yourself, to be the kind of person who rejoices in the blessings God has given you, no matter what they are, so others can see. Because if they see the blessings you have received and they come to believe and worship God as well, the blessings will just continue to them and on down the line to those who they reach with the message.

Moving on to the next part of the passage...there's a dispute about a well. There's two parts to this I want us to think about today. The first is the way that it went down. When Abimelech comes to make this treaty, Abraham is a little pushy, a little upset – “your servants have taken one of my wells and I'm not happy about it.” Abimelech is kind of life, “slow down, partner, this is news to me. This is the first I'm hearing about it from you, and I don't even know who's involved. We can get it settled, but I couldn't do anything when I didn't know about it.”

And while something spiritual isn't at the root of this conflict, this isn't what the passage is directly about, it does say something to us in the church as a reminder – *as a family of faith, we want to help one another, but we can only do so when we share our lives with one another.* Many times, I find out quite late that someone's been in the hospital or had a struggle getting their car fixed. Most of the time, it's because we don't want to be a bother to one another. And yet, we miss out on the blessings our church family can be to us when we keep everything to ourselves.

During COVID, it's been easy to kind of wall ourselves in, try to keep ourselves safe, not to see anyone. While COVID is probably far from over, we also have ways to manage it and our safety now. We need our church family back, people we can meet with, share our struggles with, pray with, worship with. I'm really excited to start our worship service at our new place and time next week. Because we need each other. I want to see you in person and greet you and hear how things have been. And I admit, I'm a flawed person. Sometimes I need reminders of what's going on in your lives to help find solutions. And sometimes we don't have a well creating problems in our lives. We just need company. We just need to know our friends in the faith are there for us. Coming back together is the way we can do that for one another.

So at the end of the day, Abimelech and Abraham make their treaty, and Abraham supplies some animals. In particular, he separates out seven ewes specifically to pledge to Abimelech that he dug the well himself. Abimelech is surprised by this at first, but it's Abraham's way of saying that he isn't interested in taking anything that doesn't belong to him. He wants to do right by Abimelech. And he apparently does, because Abraham settles in the land of Abimelech's people, the Philistines, for a long time. Abraham's son Isaac eventually renews the treaty with Abimelech. The Philistines would eventually become enemies of the Israelites, but to do so, they had to break a treaty that stood for a long time between their peoples.

Part of the reason that the well doesn't become an issue again is because of something we see as another thought for the day: *believers don't use their blessings from God to take advantage of others*. Given what we've seen of Abimelech, he would have probably handed over the well to Abraham without another thought. He was already very generous with Abraham over the incident with Sarah, and Abimelech knows that blessing Abraham will bring him blessings too. Yet Abraham is specific and direct about making sure Abimelech is compensated for the well, even though Abraham dug the well himself.

If this was true of Abraham, it should be even more true for us. We have the promises of eternal life through Christ. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit. God has blessed us in countless ways. We want others to know the joy of Jesus in their lives. And so, something we must watch for is making sure we don't use our title "Christian" as a tool for getting ahead.

Over the years, this has happened a great deal. There was a surge in the church in the 1950s, with the first great blossoming of church membership. A lot of that had to do with business as much as it had to do with real faith. Businessmen found that coming to church gave them the air of moral respectability. Church was a place where you could make connections. Belief could take a backseat to making a deal in the parking lot with a fellow church member. That happens less now that belonging to a church is seen as a liability in many circles. Yet it does still happen.

While churches around the world are broadcasting now, there's still televangelists that use their pulpits as a way to bring in lots of money for themselves. I still remember a warning I got when we moved down to a town in Kentucky where I went to seminary. They told us to be wary of anybody that put a Christian ichthus fish sticker in their window to convince you that you should support their business because they were Christians. Thing was, anybody in that town worth your business had a good reputation because of their Christ-like actions. If you needed a sticker in your window to convince people to do business with you, you were probably going to try and take advantage of them. (Sure enough, that proved true with the car repair business in town!)

Friends, our faith is not something we have so we can profit off of it. Our faith is a gift from God, just like our salvation through Christ. Our goal is to spread that faith. Perhaps the idea of gaining something out of our faith from someone else has never crossed our minds. That's just as well. As Christians, we want to support one another in the family of faith. But our goal should never be to take advantage of others – Abraham's example shows that we should go to great lengths to be fair with others, even if we're the ones wronged in the process.

Last thing for today – Abraham and Abimelech go their separate ways. Abraham settles in Beersheba, which is the very southern edge of the land God promised Abraham’s descendants; he’s in Philistine territory now. He plants a tree there, symbolizing his intention to stay there and be rooted there just like that tree. He calls upon the LORD in that place. All of these things are reminders that Abraham is not going to be the recipient of every promise God made, but many of the promises are for those who will come after him. God has already told Abraham that nearly half a millennia will go by before his descendants will claim Canaan for their own. For now, Abraham is content living at the edge of the promised land, satisfied with this place where God has allowed him to live freely and make peace with his neighbors. It isn’t perfect, but it is God’s provision.

And so that brings me to my final thought: *we are grateful for God’s provision no matter the form it takes*. I am excited for us that we are going to have the chance to once again have a regular place to worship at The Upper Room, which is a part of NeWay Creative in downtown Mount Clemens. Those of you who are CrossWay regulars have a letter coming to you in the mail about the move, which is going to happen for next Sunday, November 14 at 9:00am. It is awesome that God has provided a space for us with an owner who loves the Lord and is working to try and help churches throughout Macomb County. It’s truly a blessing we have been praying about for months.

Now you might think: why Mount Clemens? Why 9:00am? It’s not where we were pre-COVID, and it’s definitely earlier than we’ve had worship services in the past. We can focus on those things and become bitter or frustrated or, even worse, just decide not to come. But I choose to take the Abraham route and be grateful for the provision God has made.

We do not know what God might have in mind for us worshiping on a regular basis a little further south. We will be in downtown Mount Clemens, which might give us more ways to reach out to the community and to become known in the area. And while 9:00am is early, I’m glad we can use the space at all, as another church will be worshiping after us in the same space at 11:00am. After making countless fruitless contacts in Macomb and Chesterfield, I am so thankful that this opportunity presented itself.

Might it add to your drive? Maybe. Will it mean getting up earlier on Sundays? Probably. And yet those things are minor when it comes to our calling to worship the living God. He is worthy of all praise, honor, glory, and worship. He is our maker, redeemer, sustainer, and savior. Surely He is worth getting up a little earlier and driving a little further. Honestly, I’m excited. I think it’s a blessing. I think, Lord willing, it will give us the chance to plant some roots like Abraham’s tree.

Next week, I really hope you’ll join us in The Upper Room as we discuss the greatest test yet of Abraham’s faith. I’m excited to share it with you and talk about it from a fresh angle. For now, may the story of Abraham and Abimelech at the well touch you this week. We’ve been given a lot of things to think about in this story. May the Holy Spirit lead you to think about what He’d like you to receive from this message this week, and may you find contentment in the Lord our God as Abraham did.