

Dealing Rightly

Genesis 21:22-34

Sunday February 13th 2011 Morning Service

Jonathan Skinner

Abraham was insecure.

He was living as a roaming nomad in other people's lands. Yet he knew God had promised a homeland to those of his family who would come after him. He had God's promise of security in an insecure world. He had the promise, but no signs of the fulfilment. In this chapter we see God giving tokens that he would look after Abraham until the promise of the land would be fulfilled. This passage helps us trust God's promises in an insecure world.

How do we handle conflict?

How do we deal with situations that are tense and where there are opposing interests? How do we come to some amicable arrangement when we don't trust someone, when we have been lied to by them in the past? Is there a way forward in a fallen world full of people who are in no way perfect, even when those people profess to follow God?

The trouble is that situations are sometimes messy, and applying clear biblical principles is not at always easy.

What if one person is a hypocritical Christian and the other a kind of vague believer in God where you don't quite know exactly where they stand? What if there have been dishonest dealings between the parties in the past? What if the two parties found each other deeply threatening? What we have here is just such a grimy and confusing situation. Abraham, the apparent man of faith had previously lied to this king of the Philistines, bringing down God's judgement on him and his people. There was deep mistrust here; the relationship was scarred. And then Abimelech, as far as we know from information we have about the peoples of the ancient world, did not rule a country that had a god-fearing population. In all probability they were pagans following fertility gods. The king himself was a bit of an enigma. He seemed to be a God-fearer and with a significant level of decency. Both Abraham and Abimelech appear confusing and contradictory characters. Here is the weak man of faith who at one point is faithful, and at another is faithless. And the other is the apparent God-fearing king of a pagan nation. Nothing is simple.

A crisis needed to be averted.

Competing interests and mistrust made this difficult. A treaty was needed. Verses 22- 23 show us Abimelech's motives. He knew God was blessing Abraham, and yet verse 23 shows us that he didn't trust him. He knew Abraham was supernaturally dangerous. He wanted an agreement. But as soon as he calls for this treaty Abraham shows us in verse 25 what is concerning him: Abimelech's servants had seized his well. Abimelech claims in verse 26 that he didn't know who did this and that he had only just heard about it. The two leaders decide to make a treaty (verses 22-23 and 27-30).

Abimelech recognises that God is with Abraham and everything he does.

He sees God's blessing as the most important thing and he shows in verse 23 that he is afraid of Abraham misleading him again. What he does is to call Abraham to account before the God he professes to believe in. He says, in verse 23, 'Now swear to me here before God that you will not deal falsely with me or my children or my descendants.' He reminds Abraham that this promise is done in God's presence, that God sees it, that God hears it, that he is accountable to God. How practical. He is reminding us that when we promise to do things we do so before God. God sees our promises and our commitments and we are accountable not only to the person we made them to but to the Lord himself who hears our words.

In verse 23 Abimelech makes Abraham promise that not only will he not deal falsely with him, but also that he will show him and his country kindness in the same way he had shown Abraham kindness.

This king has amazing insight; he not only knows that God is with Abraham but that through Abraham he and his people can be blessed. This pictures the gospel and the fact that through Abraham all nations will be blessed. Here in a cameo is a sketch of gospel truth. Those who enter into relationship with the promises of Abraham receive blessings from God. Those who enter into a treaty covenant with Abraham's ultimate perfect successor, Jesus Christ, will be blessed through him.

In making the treaty Abraham gives Abimelech 'seven ewe lambs from the flock' as a witness that he had dug this well. This was a sort of seal on the agreement.

It was an outward sign, like gathering around the Lord's Table is a reminder of the promises God has made to us in Jesus.

Abraham then calls this well Beersheba, which can mean, 'Well of Seven' or perhaps, 'Well of the Oath' or it may be a play on the words indicating both meanings. This became a significant place as in several texts it marked the southern boundary of Israel (Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20). It was a marker saying 'this is Israel.' This is God's kingdom. Spiritually, it shows the permanence of God's kingdom.

How exactly was the conflict resolved?

They met and recognised their problems, and then having done that they brought God into the picture. They swore their oath 'before God', recognising that God was hearing their promises. They were accountable to someone higher than themselves. Then, with common sense they discussed a common agreement that they could sign up to. Having done this Abraham sealed his side with an act of commitment. After this he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God; here he asked for strength. Here is an outline for conflict resolution in the midst of the struggle of human relations.

We read in verse 33 that Abraham at some time planted a Tamarisk tree there, probably to give shade to his people who would use the well, but also possibly as a sign of permanence.

It would be unusual for a nomad to plant trees. It seems that he was planting a marker; this was his and his descendants property. The tree was a declaration of faith, of something better, of living permanently in the land. It is like us looking forward to our eternal home. It is something in the present that makes us look to a secure and fruitful future.

And then we hear something unique happened; we read in verse 33 that Abraham 'called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.'

This is a phrase unique to this passage. Again the theme of permanence is here. We have a covenant which looks forward, then we have the planting of a tree which looks forward, and now we have Abraham calling on the name of the Lord in a new way, El Olam, God Everlasting. Olam means world, universe, everlasting time or space (Psalm 90:1-3; 93:2; Isaiah 26:4).

Abraham had met the Lord who walked with him and talked with him as a man. But he also sees God as the God Everlasting, the God of the whole universe, eternal in space and time, upholding all creation.

Here we have a view of God that pictures the eternal God beyond our comprehension and the communicating God who comes to us in an understandable human form. John puts this much later most succinctly when he writes (John 1:1): 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.' Here in the life of Abraham we see this in seminal form. God is transcendent and God is imminent; he is above creation and he steps into creation. This coheres with the New Testament totally. The Bible is a wonderful whole; its truths unfold like flowers.

Abraham calling on God is a sign of faith and dependence in the midst of uncertainty.

This is an example for us to follow.

www.widcombebaptistchurch.org