The Patriarchs from the book of Genesis Part 15 – November 26, 2023

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The Genesis Record by Henry Morris; https://www.gotquestions.org/Beersheba-in-the-Bible.html

**Genesis 21:1-34:**

*Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.*

The Lord keeps His promises, no matter how unlikely they may seem from a human perspective. Not only had God promised to make Abraham a great nation, He had promised specifically that this nation would come through Sarah, a vow made twice within the last year (Genesis 17:16–21; 18:10–15). Now the Lord visits Sarah "as he had said" and the Lord does to her "as he had promised." Somehow, in this visiting, the Lord made Sarah, finally, able to conceive a child with Abraham.

God's timing is perfect. He had said within the hearing of both Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child within a year from a specific moment (Genesis 18:14). Though Abraham and Sarah had attempted to scheme a way to gain a son through another woman (Genesis 16:1–2), God specifically meant to provide them with their own natural child (Genesis 17:15–16). Despite their disbelieving laughter (Genesis 17:17; Genesis 18:12), that's exactly what happened. Not only does God keep His promises, He keeps them specifically.

It's interesting that, though most of God's promises about the great nation that would flow from Abraham have been made directly to Abraham, the focus of the promise's fulfillment rests on Sarah. God maintains a relationship with her and His promise is made to and through her.

The repetition and phrasing in this verse is meant to slow us down and cause us to notice that God is faithful. He does as He says.

Abraham named his son Isaac, which means "he laughs." The repetition of the phrases here—"the son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him"—is meant to force us to ponder what has happened. Two primary points stand out.

First, of course, God kept His promise. He is faithful. He said this would happen, and it did.

Second, Abraham and Sarah were old and well beyond conceiving and bearing children. Further, Sarah had been barren for her entire life up to this point. Genesis intends for us to fully appreciate the idea that Isaac is a miracle baby. A normal married couple might reasonably have ten children, or even more, during their childbearing years, leading to numerous offspring for generations to come. This particular couple, though, through whom would come the nation of Israel, had just one son under miraculous circumstances. There should be no mistake that this birth was anything but the very work of God in the lives of His people.

*4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.*

On the very same day when God had changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah, He told Abraham that Sarah would have a son within a year and they would call him Isaac. Abraham had laughed (Genesis 17:15–17). On that day, God had also commanded Abraham to be circumcised, along with every male in his household, and to circumcise all future male children born to his household at eight days old (Genesis 17:10–13).

This ritual is deeply symbolic, echoing God's sovereignty over fertility and children, the uniqueness of His people, and the permanence of His influence. God would continue the requirement for circumcision in the laws given to Israel through Moses (Leviticus 12:3).

Now Abraham obeys that command with this promised son Isaac, circumcising him on the eighth day of his life.

*6 Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” 7 And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”*

Here, we are witness to Sarah's joyful emotional response. In a play on words, she gives all the credit for the birth of Isaac to the Lord. He has "made laughter" for her—Isaac's name means "laughter." Everyone who hears her story will laugh over her or with her, or perhaps she means people will laugh "at" her. Most scholars interpret this statement to mean Sarah believes her story will bring the joy of laughter to others. Some suggest that perhaps she believes others will laugh, as she did, at the idea that a 90-year-old woman could bear a child.

In any case, it has happened. She has laughter, at last.

Now she asks, who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? The implied answer is that nobody would have said such a thing. The truth, though, is that the Lord said exactly that thing to Abraham.

Sarah concludes her expression of joy by saying that though nobody could ever have predicted it, she has indeed borne Abraham a son in his old age.

*8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.*

Not only was the miracle child Isaac born, he survived being weaned. Compared to modern times, this era had extremely high infant mortality rates. A substantial number of infants did not survive to become independent adults. A child who survived the helplessness of their early years, until they were no longer directly dependent on their mother for food, took a step towards surviving to adulthood. Women of this time may have breastfed their children as late as two or three years old, so Isaac was likely a toddler on the day of this great feast thrown to celebrate his life.

*9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”*

The joyful arrival of Isaac as the keeping of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah is clouded by the existence of Abraham's older son Ishmael, perhaps 16 years old now. This is not the first time Sarah has reacted with anger and hurt feelings towards Hagar and Ishmael. That prior incident complicates our understanding of Sarah's actions in this passage. Sarah is partly responsible for Ishmael's place in their family. She was the one who had convinced Abraham to try to have a child with her servant girl in hopes of having her own child by proxy (Genesis 16:1–2). Almost immediately after it worked, however, Sarah had become outraged with Hagar's new status in Abraham's life and her contemptuous attitude (Genesis 16:4–6).

Now that Isaac has been born, it seems, Sarah simply cannot bear to have either mother or son around any longer, as will become clear in the following verses. She would have reason to be concerned, on one level, that Ishmael would somehow take Isaac's place as Abraham's heir.

On the day of the great feast thrown by Abraham to celebrate Isaac being fully weaned, Sarah sees something that upsets her. She sees Ishmael—"the son of Hagar the Egyptian"—laughing or mocking. The text is not clear what exactly is meant about Ishmael's laughing. It's possible that he was simply laughing or even playing with Isaac. Given the response described here, it's more likely that he was making fun of something, perhaps even ridiculing little Isaac in some way. Whatever he was doing, it was enough to make Sarah angry.

It would be 1200 hundred years later that Solomon would write: Proverbs 21:9 — *'Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. '* And Proverbs 21:19 — *'Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife.*

*11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”*

The language verse 11 indicates that Abraham expressed great emotion. He was very displeased with Sarah's sudden demand to cast out his firstborn son, Ishmael. The word "displeased" is not often used in the Old Testament and only to express great anger. Abraham was very displeased.

Clearly, Abraham loved Ishmael. When God revealed that Isaac would be born within a year's time, Abraham had immediately mentioned his wish that Ishmael could live before God (Genesis 17:18). God had assured Abraham that Ishmael would be greatly blessed, but that the covenant would pass through Isaac.

Sarah, on the other hand, is expressing a similar level of anger and bitterness as she did earlier in Ishmael's life (Genesis 16:4–6). She claims to be concerned that Ishmael will interfere with Isaac's inheritance. That's not completely unreasonable, since Abraham is obviously attached to his teenaged son.

Despite Sarah's insistence, Abraham would not likely have let Ishmael go if the Lord had not instructed him to do so in the following verse. This instruction comes along with an assurance, from God, that Ishmael will be blessed. Even though Ishmael was the result of Abraham and Sarah trying to scheme towards their own desires, God still faithfully keeps His promises. Ishmael will not be punished or treated unfairly on account of his parents' dispute.

*14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.*

Remember that Hagar was considered a servant or slave. It was not uncommon in this era to give a slave his or her freedom. With that freedom, however, would come the understanding that any children born to the slave, by the slave owner, would lose any claim on future inheritance. This appears to have been Sarah's intent in demanding that Abraham cast out Hagar and his firstborn son Ishmael.

After being instructed by God to do so, Abraham now complies. At first glance, this feels cold and uncaring. At the same time, we need to remember that God has promised to prosper Ishmael (Genesis 21:13). So, Abraham gives Hagar bread and water and sends her off to wander in the wilderness. We're not told of any parting words or additional provisions. From Abraham's earlier reaction, we can only assume that it wounded him deeply to send them away in such a fashion.

It's helpful to understand that Ishmael was likely about 16 years old at this time. He had been born when Abraham was 86. Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born, and this takes place after Isaac was weaned, likely at the age of two or three. When the passage says that Abraham placed the skin of water on Hagar's shoulder, "along with the child," we should not read that he placed Ishmael on her shoulder.

Mother and son walked away together into the wilderness of Beersheba, which would be in the desert region of the Negev. We're told they wandered. They had nowhere to go.

*15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.*

If the skin was a goat skin, as was apparently common, it could have held about 3 gallons, or 15 liters, of water. That wouldn't last two people very long in the desert, and now it was gone.

The pair were likely quite dehydrated. From a human perspective, they probably felt they had little hope of survival. Hagar found some bushes and put Ishmael under one of them in the shade.

Now, she walks quite a distance away from him and sits down herself. She tells herself she doesn't want to see the death of her child. This might indicate that Ishmael was faltering due to a lack of water. Or, it might simply mean that Hagar was anticipating his eventual death.

The length of a bowshot, however, is not quite far enough away to be completely out of view. She doesn't abandon him. Perhaps she doesn't want to hear Ishmael weeping, or she doesn't want him to hear her. In any case, this is a sad moment.

*17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”*

God hears and arrives to save. Specifically, an angel of God calls from heaven to tell Hagar that God has heard the voice of the boy. Of course, God could have heard Hagar's voice, as well. It's not clear why the angel emphasizes that God has heard Ishmael's voice. Perhaps it was to comfort Hagar with the understanding that she was not alone in caring about Ishmael; God would care for the boy, as well.

Hagar first met the Lord, also in the wilderness, when she fled from Sarah's wrath after becoming pregnant by Abraham. That time, she called the Lord the "God of seeing." She said she had seen the One who looks after her (Genesis 16:13). Now the Lord makes clear to Hagar that He will look after Ishmael, as well.

Now the angel instructs Hagar to get up and move back to her son, to lift him up and embrace him. In other words, it's not time to give up. The angel renews God's promise that Ishmael would become a great nation. This is the only reason Abraham agreed to Sarah's demand that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out: God's promise to prosper Ishmael, not to destroy him (Genesis 21:12–13).

A common theme of the book of Genesis is that God's plans are often fulfilled in ways we would not have expected. They sometimes take longer to complete than we'd prefer. Hagar's story serves to remind us that our individual stories aren't done until God's promises to us have all been fulfilled, no matter how bleak things look in the moment.

*19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.*

*20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.*

Normally, a father would arrange his son's marriage. Hagar took on that duty, finding a wife for her son among her own people in Egypt (Genesis 12:16; 16:1).

When Hagar first met the Lord while pregnant with Ishmael, He had revealed to her some details about Ishmael's future. He would be a wild donkey of a man in conflict with everyone. He would dwell over and against his kinsman, meaning his extended family (Genesis 16:12). God had revealed even more to Abraham. Ishmael would father 12 princes and become a great nation (Genesis 17:20). God would not fail to keep His promise to bless Abraham's firstborn son. This verse establishes the beginning of these promises coming true.

*22 At that time Abimelek and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, “God is with you in everything you do. 23 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 now reside as a foreigner the same kindness I have shown to you.”*

We remember from the previous chapter that Abimelech is the king of Gerar and Abraham had lied about Sarah not being his wife (Genesis 20:2). Abimelech had taken her for his own wife only to be struck with an illness and threatened with death by Abraham's God (Genesis 20:3–6). After confronting Abraham about the reasons for his lie, Abimelech had returned Sarah to Abraham, untouched, along with gifts of animals, servants, silver, and the land upon which Abraham was now settled (Genesis 20:8–15).

Apparently, realizing how abundantly God was blessing Abraham, now including the miraculous birth of a promised child, Abimelech set aside any lingering resentment over the incident and hoped to become Abraham's formal ally.

He brought with him the commander of his army and opened by stating flatly that it was apparent to him that God was with Abraham in everything he did. Having spoken to God himself in a dream, Abimelech had firsthand reason to be impressed with the level of God's favor for Abraham.

Abimelech also asked Abraham to swear to deal kindly with him and with the land, in the same way that Abimelech had already been kind to Abraham.

The following verse contains Abraham's reply.

*24 Abraham said, “I swear it.”*

*25 Then Abraham complained to Abimelek about a well of water that Abimelek’s servants had seized. 26 But Abimelek said, “I don’t know who has done this. You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today.”*

Abraham is also asked to swear to act kindly toward Abimelech and the land, in this case meaning the kingdom. Abimelech seems to want to be included in, or least associated with, the blessings Abraham has obtained from God.

Now Abraham replies with what seems to be a short, blunt reply and reveals Abraham has a complaint he wants to address with Abimelech. Abimelech's servants had seized a well of water from Abraham, one we will soon learn that Abraham dug himself. Water, of course, was of vital importance in this part of the world. Without a reliable source of water, Abraham could not remain in Abimelech's kingdom.

Abraham was understandably upset that Abimelech's men had seized his well. He believed himself to be the owner of the well. Why would Abimelech's men do this?

Abimelech insists he didn't know anything about this issue. He didn't even know which men had seized the well. This was all new information to him. This is similar to his claims that he was unaware of Sarah's marriage to Abraham in chapter 20. We're not told how or if Abimelech offered to resolve the issue, though the men continue with their covenant, so Abimelech clearly planned to return the well to Abraham and his men. Abraham will specifically include this well in the oath, described in the following verses.

*27 So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelek, and the two men made a treaty. 28 Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs from the flock, 29 and Abimelek asked Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart by themselves?”*

*30 He replied, “Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well.”*

*31 So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there.*

In addition to giving Abimelech sheep and oxen as a sign of the broad covenant between them to treat each other agreeably, Abraham has set aside seven ewe lambs for a specific purpose. Here, in verse 30, he reveals their exact purpose. He wants Abimelech to take the lambs as a witness that he dug the well that is in dispute between them.

In broad terms, Abraham is offering to formally buy back his own well, in order to once and for all resolve the issue of who it belongs to. Abimelech apparently agrees to this, and the two swear their oaths.

*31 So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there.*

The formal treaty between Abraham and Abimelech seems to have been significant enough to warrant changing the name of the well involved in the transaction. Beersheba means "well of seven" or "well of the oath."

The two men swore their oaths in that place, giving Abraham the official ownership of a well in the land of Canaan. Their agreement also included a promise for their respective households to treat each other agreeably. Abimelech had originally been the one to approach Abraham, seeking to benefit from Abraham's favor with God.

The taking of an oath is a significant event in the Bible. God's Law would command His people to always keep their oaths, at any cost. Jesus would later tell Christians to avoid taking oaths, to prevent even the possibility of breaking them. Instead, we must be so trustworthy that our "yes" and "no" require no additional swearing to be believed (Matthew 5:34–37; James 5:12).

*32 After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelek and Phicol the commander of his forces returned to the land of the Philistines. 33 Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God. 34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time.*

Now Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, return home. We're told that Gerar is located in the land of Philistines. These Philistines may have been the forerunners to those who would later plague Israel in the time of Saul and David. Or, the text may be saying that Gerar was in a region which would later be occupied by the Philistines.

Abraham further puts down roots, so to speak, by planting a tamarisk tree. Tamarisk trees could reach 30 feet high and would provide excellent shade in the desert climate of the region. The planting of a tree required a reliable water source, and this further symbolizes the importance of this location.

The planting of this tree may have been related to Abraham's calling on the name of "El-Olam," the Everlasting God. Much later, Abraham's son Isaac would meet the Lord here at Beersheba and build and altar to Him. Beersheba becomes a significant spot for Israel's patriarchs and the nation.

Following in his father’s footsteps, Isaac moved into the land of the Philistines when there was a famine in Canaan (Genesis 26). When he began to settle there, he found that all the wells his father’s servants had dug had been filled up with dirt by the Philistines. He reopened those wells and dug some new ones (verses 18–22). After that, Isaac went to Beersheba.

There the Lord appeared to him as He had done to his father Abraham and made him the same promise of a multitude of descendants (verses 23–24). As Abraham had done, Isaac built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord. In a repeat performance, Abimelech arrived and asked for another treaty with Isaac, identical to the one made with Abraham. Isaac agreed. He prepared a feast for the king, and the two swore an oath of peace to each other (verses 30–31).

On the same day, Isaac’s servants discovered water in a new well they were digging (verse 32), and Isaac called the place Shibah, which means “oath” or “seven” (verse 33). In this way, Isaac perpetuated the name his father had given the place, and Beersheba became the name of the town that would later be built near the wells that Abraham and Isaac had named.

The proverbial phrase from Dan to Beersheba is used nine times in the Old Testament to describe whole of the Promised Land—Dan being in the north, and Beersheba in the south. The distance from Dan to Beersheba was approximately 270 miles.

Beersheba can be seen as symbolizing those events in our lives that cause us to call upon the name of the Lord. Tragedy strikes, heartaches happen, and the Lord shows Himself strong on our behalf (2 Chronicles 16:9). The date or place where we experienced a turning point becomes a memorial in our hearts, much as Beersheba’s altar, well, and tamarisk tree were to Abraham and Isaac. When God reveals His will to us or rescues us in some way, we can create a personal “Beersheba” in our hearts. Then, when times of doubt or conflict come, we can return there over and over in our hearts for assurance that God is fulfilling His plan.