



Lesson 13 | Abraham and the Nations

Genesis 21:22-34; 23:1-20

Have you ever had to wait a long time to see your faith in God rewarded? The book of Hebrews reminds us that the patriarchs kept living by faith even though in their lifetime they never received the promises God made to them (Hebrews 11:13). They did, however, see those promises from afar off and chose to treat those future promises as present realities. Abraham was told that through his offspring the nations of the world would be blessed, and that the land of Canaan would be his. As we come near the end of Abraham's life, after over 60 years wandering in the promised land, Abraham sees a faint glimmer of some of those promises starting to come to pass.

Why did God not allow Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob to see His promises to them come to pass?

How can the faith of these men be an example to us?

Two stories at the end of Abraham's life give us a small taste of what is to come for Abraham. We see him being a blessing to the nations and we see him owning a small plot of land in Canaan. As we watch Abraham interacting in both these scenarios, we see him exemplify the kind of behavior we would expect from a man of faith. God chose Abraham to be a channel of blessing to the nations, but also to reflect God to the nations. Abraham hasn't always done that well, but in these two stories we get a sense of how his life impacted those around him. His dealings with the Philistines and the Hittites give specific examples of Abraham's character and also show the respect he has earned from the people living in the land.¹ Reading these stories can help give a sense that, even though at times Abraham made mistakes, his overall pattern of life was one that left a good impression. So while these stories might seem random at first, they serve important purposes: They show us the beginning of God's promises coming to pass, and they show us Abraham's exemplary interaction with the people of the land.

As you think through Abraham's life so far in the story, what are some things he has done well regarding the other nations, and what are some things that he did not do well?

¹ There is some debate about whether the Philistines or the Hittites were in Canaan at this time. While the centers of both of these civilizations would have been outside Canaan during this time, this does not negate the possibility that there were some settlements connected to these groups living in other parts of the world.

Abraham and Abimelech

The last time Genesis mentioned Abimelech, Abraham had lied about Sarah and gotten Abimelech and his people in trouble. Unlike Pharaoh, who kicked Abraham out of the country after Abraham's deception, Abimelech responded with surprising kindness. He told Abraham to stay in the best part of the land and gave him lavish gifts. Now he sees God's continued blessing on Abraham and comes back to Abraham to secure a treaty.

Abraham and Abimelech Make a Treaty (22-24, 27)

God had told Abimelech earlier that Abraham needed to pray on his behalf, and God would forgive Abimelech for taking Sarah into his house (Genesis 20:7). This would obviously have suggested to Abimelech that Abraham was someone especially blessed by God. As Abraham continued living in the land, Abimelech and his people no doubt continued watching Abraham's life, and they drew the conclusion that God was with him.

Scripture doesn't tell us how Abimelech and Phicol knew that God was with Abraham. What types of things do you think they saw that led them to this conclusion?

After watching God's blessing on Abraham's life, Abimelech decides he would like to be in a more permanent relationship with Abraham. He wants to make a mutually beneficial pact with Abraham, and not just with Abraham but also between Abimelech's offspring and Abraham's offspring. Remember, at this time Abraham is a wandering shepherd, and Abimelech represents a people group that are established in the land. Yet Abimelech recognizes that Abraham and his family will be around for a while, and he wants to make sure that he and his country are on good terms with Abraham. Those who faithfully follow God will often find themselves being an example to the world around them about the positive difference that the gospel makes in our lives.

Can you think of other examples in Scripture where God's blessing on someone's life was evident to the world around them?

How do we reconcile God's blessing of believers with Christ's statement that the world will hate us?

Abraham and Abimelech Settle a Dispute (25-31)

Abraham uses this as an opportunity to address an issue that he has not yet addressed. At some point the servants of Abimelech had taken over a well that had belonged to Abraham. Since both groups were living in the Judean desert, wells were an important commodity. Abraham is willing to make a treaty with Abimelech, but wants to resolve this issue first. Abraham had previously simply endured the injustice and not said anything, but now that he is entering into a covenant with Abimelech he decides this is something that needs to be addressed.

Do you think Abraham was right to wait this long to address the problem? Why or why not?

Abimelech responds to Abraham's reproof by strongly stating he was unaware that this situation had happened and had no knowledge of who was at fault. Abraham then gives seven sheep to Abimelech as a sign that the well belongs to him. In so doing, Abraham was signifying that the well would truly belong to him. There's a wordplay going on in the Hebrew here, as the words for "oath" and "seven" sound very similar (*shaba'* vs *sheba'*), so that the name Beersheba has a dual reference to the oath that was taken and the seven sheep given as a sign of Abraham's ownership. This whole incident shows the integrity of Abraham and the respect that he had in the eyes of Abimelech and his general.

Abraham and Abimelech Dwell Together (32-34)

The account ends with Abimelech and Phicol returning to their land, and Abraham continuing in their land. We read once again that Abraham called on the name of the Lord. After this meeting with the ruler of the land in which Abraham seemed to have a lot of power and influence, we come to the end of the chapter and see that Abraham is continuing to call out to God and remain dependent on him. He worships *'El 'Olam*, the eternal God. The agreement between Abraham and Abimelech and between their descendants is a reminder that the eternal God had big plans for Abraham in the future.

Following this incident, why would it have been easy for Abraham to have become proud and self-reliant rather than humbly calling out to God, and how can we learn from Abraham's example?

Abraham and the Hittites (Genesis 23:1-20)

We are skipping Genesis 22 for now, but we will come back to that chapter in our next lesson. Instead, we will be looking at another passage that involves a back and forth between Abraham and one of the people groups living in Canaan. This particular episode might seem a little odd to us, but likely reflects the social customs of the day that sought to be as gracious and hospitable as possible.

Abraham Asks for a Burial Plot (1-9)

After a good, long life, Sarah passes away and Abraham must decide where to bury her. By this time he is living with a group of Hittites, and he approaches them about the possibility of purchasing some of their land as a burial plot. Abraham's insistence on purchasing it and paying full price shows both his character but also his desire to have a strong legal claim to the land. Abraham wants a legally binding decision in which he pays for land that is undisputably his. As in the previous story, the Hittites reactions to Abraham shows the high regard they have for him. Abraham has lived in the land of Canaan for a long time – over 60 years – and during that time he has come to be well-respected by this Hittite group and likely others.

What are some of the ways the Hittites interact with Abraham that show their great respect for him?

Abraham Negotiates the Price (10-16)

After being offered the chance to bury his wife anywhere he would like in their land, Abraham mentions a specific plot that he had in mind – a single cave at the end of a field belonging to a man named Ephron. After Abraham asks for the specific plot of land, Ephron the owner steps forward and offers to give it to Abraham free of charge. The exchange that follows is interesting and a little bit challenging. We see Abraham refuse to accept it free of charge, but instead he insists on paying for it. Ephron then suggests a price, seemingly offhand, which Abraham takes as an offer and pays it. So what exactly is going on here? Several possibilities have been suggested.

It's possible that the Hittites wanted to “give” the land to Abraham so that later they could take it back and he would have no legal recourse. If Abraham paid full price, then it was legally his. If they just let him bury his dead, eventually it would revert back to them. While it is possible Abraham wanted a secure legal claim to the land, nothing in the story would suggest the Hittites were secretly playing hardball. Rather, the positive comments of the people point toward their seeing Abraham as someone worthy of generous treatment.

Ephron's offer of the cave for free might have been influenced in part that he was speaking in front of everyone in the gate. The gate is where important people met to conduct business, so after the community had offered Abraham any land he wanted, it would have been awkward for Ephron to lead off demanding payment for it. This also explains why when he finally does ask for payment, it is in a roundabout way that doesn't involve him actually Abraham for anything. Nevertheless, Abraham is able to read behind the lines and give Ephron what he wants for the land. It's hard to know exactly how much Ephron was asking for. Jeremiah would later buy a field for seventeen shekels of silver (Jeremiah 32:7-9), but that was much later and standards of weights and measurements varied. Earlier in the story, Abimelech gave Abraham 1,000 talents of silver to vindicate Sarah (Genesis 20:6), so this would seem to be a relatively fair price.

In the end, everyone was happy. Ephron had been shown to be generous in front of his people. Abraham had shown himself to be honorable. Ephron was paid. Abraham had a burial plot. The Hittites would have walked away from the encounter having their positive view of Abraham confirmed and strengthened.

How do we see Abraham's faith in God on display in this chapter? How might a faithless Abraham have responded differently in this situation?

What does it look for Christians to be people of integrity in the world in which we live in today?

Abraham Buys the Plot and Buries Sarah (17-20)

This would mark the first time that Abraham officially owned any land in Canaan. On one hand, this would be a big deal since it would be the very beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise. On the other hand, it was only a tiny cave good for nothing more than burying the dead. Depending on whether you looked at this occasion from the perspective of faith or of doubt, this was either a huge triumph or a disappointing reminder of how little Abraham really did own.

How can faith and unbelief change the way we look at things today?

What are some examples of things that look differently when viewed from a lens of faith?