

# The Treaty at Beersheba

## 21: 22-34

**DIG:** What is Abimelech concerned about (Chapter 20)? What was Abraham concerned about? How is this treaty confirmed? With what lasting result? What did the planting of a tamarisk tree represent to Abraham?

**REFLECT:** Have your past actions stumbled an unbeliever in his or her trust in you? How can you restore their confidence in you? Where in your life do you suspect that God is especially close to you right now? Why? What does this story suggest about the importance of any kind of oath that we take?

It had been about two or three years since **Abimelech** had offered **Abraham** permission to live anywhere **he** wished in what would eventually become Philistine territory (20:13). **Abraham** was living about twenty-five miles from **Gerar**. At that time when Ishmael and Hagar were sent away, **Abimelech** and **Phicol**, the commander of his forces, said to **Avraham**: **Elohim is with you in everything you do** (21:22). God was blessing **Abraham** and that became obvious. Even the Gentiles had come to recognize the presence of **God** in **Abraham's** life, and therefore, **Abimelech** desired to protect his own future by forming an alliance with **Abraham**. It was time for the two men to make a treaty.<sup>349</sup>

**Abimelech** declared: **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** (21:23). **Abimelech** said this because **Abraham** had dealt falsely once before with Sarah and the king of **Gerar** didn't trust him. **Abimelech** had a problem. He knew **God** was with **Abraham** in everything the patriarch did, but he had a history of being deceptive. When you are dealing with a powerfully deceptive person, you would like to have more assurances, and so **Abimelech** asks for such. **Abraham** was perfectly ready to agree to a treaty (21:24), but first he had a complaint that needed to be cleared up.

Then **Avraham** complained to **Abimelech** about a well of water that **Abimelech's** servants had seized (21:25). The Hebrew verb suggests that **Abraham** had to make his complaint several times. Perhaps **Abimelech** was adept at elusive tactics. Strife over wells was common. Later, herdsman of **Gerar** would quarrel with **Isaac's** herdsman (26:20).

But Abimelech exonerated himself by saying: I don't know who has done this. You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today. Abraham seems to be satisfied with this answer. So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a treaty of peace. Avraham set apart seven ewe lambs from the flock. Abimelech noticed that Abraham had done this and asked of him, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart by themselves?" He said: Accept these seven lambs as a visible sign from my hand as a witness that I dug this well (21:26-30). The fact that Abimelech accepted the lambs shows that he recognizes Abraham's claim and the well became his permanent possession. Consequently, the treaty was not only one of peace, it was also one of justice.

So that place was called Beersheba, *Be'er Sheva*, which literally means *the well of the seven*. The Hebrew words for seven and oath are the same. Therefore, it was called that because the two men swore an oath there (21:31). *Sheva* comes from the root *shevar*, which means *to swear*.

After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his forces, returned to the land where the Philistines would eventually settle five or six centuries later in the twelfth century (21:32). Abimelech and Phicol were the forerunners of the Philistines; they lived in the same territory that the Philistines would control later. Then Abimelech and Phicol went from Beersheba back to Gerar.

In honor of the treaty, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba. The planting of this long-lived tree, with its hard wood, and its long, narrow, thickly clustered evergreen leaves showed that he intended to stay in the land of the Philistines for a long time (21:34). This would be his home and he began putting down roots. And there he called upon the name of the LORD, *ADONAI, El-Olam*, meaning *ADONAI the Eternal God* (21:33). Although he made a treaty with an earthly king, Abraham recognized that *ADONAI Himself* had made an eternal *blood* covenant with him, to give him and his offspring all of the Promised Land forever. Isaac was probably born there and grew up to be a young man.<sup>350</sup> And just as Avraham's life started to look routine, it took a shocking twist.