

Genesis in Biblical Perspective: The Gospel of Christ from Genesis – A Pagan Prince and a Premier Patriarch

Genesis 21:22-34

By [Dr. Harry Reeder III](#)

Genesis 21:22–34 says

[22] At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do. [23] Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.” [24] And Abraham said, “I will swear.”

[25] When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, [26] Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” [27] So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. [28] Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. [29] And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?” [30] He said, “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well.” [31] Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. [32] So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. [33] Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. [34] And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

His name is Moses. He is the author of Genesis, inspired by the Holy Spirit. In fact, he is the author of the first five books of your Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit. In the second book, the book of Exodus, a moment is recorded that has a relationship with this. This account is going to be given to the people of Israel who have come out of slavery, through the wilderness, but they won't be going into the land of promise because they had played the harlot. They left faithfulness

to the Lord to worship at the idols of Baal. They have grumbled and complained and even said they want to go back to Egypt. So there is a startling moment in Exodus 33 where God now comes with discipline. He has promised to give them the land and He will do go all the way with His promise. They will have a land flowing with milk and honey and have economic prosperity. God will give them military victory over every tribe in that land. God will give them political ascendancy over everyone in the region. The last thing He says is that He will give them an angel but they won't get God. He says "If I went with you I'd destroy you. So I will give you all of what I said but you won't get Me." Moses will respond to that. I will come back to the response of Moses in a few moments.

This text will relate to Moses' response, because this text, while it has a number of marvelous insights for us as believers, the one thing that comes through this very clearly that a pagan prince declares is that believers are most winsome and influential because of the evident presence of God in their life. It is not their military superiority which is why Moses will know that and not their economic prosperity or their political ascendancy. They may be the political minority or militarily oppressed or economically deprived but they still have influence and are still winsome if one thing is present – the evident presence of God that distinguishes them. Let's look further in the text now.

Genesis 21 starts out with Isaac's miraculous birth and then God clearing Ishmael out because of his opposition and persecution to the child of promise. The child of the free woman is opposed by the slave woman and the child of the flesh. So that is removed by the hand of God. Abraham is going through all that and now at the end of Genesis 21 we have this little interesting thing that happens. A pagan prince shows up with a patriarch in progress. That patriarch is Abraham in progress in his development by grace and here comes a pagan prince in order to establish some kind of relationship with him.

Where are they? They are down in the Northern part of Philistia. They are actually out of the land of promise. Somehow Abraham has in the meantime has moved south approximately 25 miles from Gerar. He has arrived at a place called Beersheba. We will find out in this study why it was called Beersheba. While he is there up comes the King of the Philistines, Abimelech. He has already had dealings with Abraham. He is the man who took Sarah into his family as a concubine because Abraham had lied to him saying Sarah was his sister, even as he had lied to Pharaoh earlier about the same thing. So they have had dealings with each other already.

There are five Abimelechs in your Bible. This Abimelech is the King of the Philistines. Abimelech asks Abraham for a covenant. Abraham will enter into a covenant with him. One might be thinking "Is it appropriate for Abraham to enter into a covenant with Abimelech?" It is appropriate because this is not an alliance covenant. He is not binding them together as nations. It is a covenant of a non-aggression peace treaty. They are not going to be aggressors against each

other. Abraham can do that because the Philistines are not in the land of promise. Abraham is in their land but they are not in the land of promise at this point in time. So he makes this non-aggression pact that they will not come against each other. Abimelech realizes the Lord is with Abraham in all that he does so Abimelech is willing to even do this pact in the name of God. Abimelech is not converted, he's not a believer but he is willing to do this pact in the name of God because God is with Abraham in all that he does. To prove his integrity Abimelech shows up with this his military commander. In other words this isn't a ruse where he plans to attack Abraham from the rear. He is showing his integrity and he wants to enter into to this non-aggression peace pact with Abraham. Abimelech asks Abraham to swear that and Abraham says "I swear it."

That had developed some kind of confidence or liberty in Abraham because upon entering into that covenant Abraham brings up a problem. Abraham brings to him a complaint. This is not the complaint like many of us think of it today. It's not a complaining complaint but it's a legal complaint. It's as if Abraham was taking on a lawyer. He is bringing to Abimelech a case to declare facts to see what's right and the case is, I've dug a well and your people have taken it over. Abimelech says "Wait just a minute, I didn't know it. This is the first I've heard of it and if it's true I'll take care of it." So Abraham, then encouraged, enters into a second covenant and this is a covenant to gain the water rights from the well of Beersheba as his well for his people.

If you see where Beersheba is, you'll know why water is important. Water, cool, clear water, all day I've taste the barren waste, without a taste of water. That is a quote from Frankie Lane just in case you missed it. Everybody under 50 probably has no idea who he is. He is not dead yet but I'm sure he's close. If you're living in that area there is nothing more important than that water. So they enter into covenant and he gives him seven ewe lambs and oxen and probably went ahead and sacrificed them to ratify the covenant although the text doesn't directly say that. So it is declared that those water rights belong to Abraham, even though it's in the land of the Philistines and so Abraham plants a tamarisk tree which is a long growing big flowing tree. Some translations call it a grove of trees and it would be a thing a nomad would do to say he is going to plant some roots there. Then it says that he lives a long time there in the land of the Philistines.

It also says he takes this place and consecrates it for worship and this is the fourth time he has done that. There have been four times in our study of Abraham where God blessed him and where God blessed him Abraham consecrated the place there and worshipped. He did it at Ai, Bethel, Hebron and now he's done it a fourth time Beersheba. Here he consecrates it and say "Let's worship." Very specifically he says "Let's worship El Olam" which means everlasting God.

Now this is the fifth name of God in our study of the life of Abraham. There is El Elyon which means God of all, the only God of all. There is El Roi which means

the God who hears. There is El Shaddai which means God Almighty. There is El Olam which means God everlasting, the eternal everlasting God who does not slumber nor sleep. This is an everlasting God. We will get a fifth name in our next study which will be Jehovah Jireh which means the God who provides. We'll find this in Genesis 22 when Abraham has to kill laughter, Isaac and all of the lessons that are built around that.

By the way, there is book out on the names of God and there are 365 names of God in the Bible. There is a devotional for every day, by taking one name or title of God for each day of the year. So that has what has happened in the text.

Now I'd like to give you three basic lessons around this transformational truth. Here are the three takeaways. Takeaway number one is the providence of God. Takeaway number two is a promise from God and takeaway number three is a priority to God.

So let's take the first one. What providence from God do we see in this text? It is good news and then better news. Here is the good news. In the providence of God, when God takes you through a time of adversity, challenge, disappointment, discouragement or despair, first of all those things are not accidents. Those are divinely designed trials to grow you and develop you. Now I'm not saying this happens all the time but usually it seems to happen this way. When God takes you through a trial to grow you, a challenge or adversity to refine you, and you're just poured out, most of the time the providence of God will take you into a period, time or respite of encouragement – consolation, renewal, refreshment.

Here is Elijah who faces down the prophets of Baal and takes off running from Ahab and Jezebel. He is overwhelmed and at his wits end. What does God do? God says, "Here is a cherith, a gorge that has a brook and I bring some ravens to feed you. I am going to strengthen you because I have more for you to do." After he has been through those trials He brings him aside, encourages him and gives him a period of consolation of renewal. That seems to be the way God works. He brings the adversity for growth. We don't grow in prosperity. When things are going well we start getting puffed up. God, when things are going well for me just keep me praising Your Name because I know I'm not going to learn anything. We don't learn until we get to the end of ourselves and that's usually in adversity.

I'm not an arborist and I'm not even sure that's the right word. I don't know much about trees but I do know this. If you want to know how old a tree is, you count the rings. Every time there is a growth spurt it lays down a ring. The growth rings for believers are the seasons of adversity. That is when we grow. *[2] Count it all joy, my brothers, when (not if) you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* (James 1:2–4 ESV) Even Jesus in His perfect humanity had adversity and you can find that in Hebrews 4 and 5. Hebrews 5:8 says *[8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience*

through what he suffered. That's how we grow and when we grow. It is in the days of distress, disappointment, discouragement, failure, challenge and adversity that we grow.

I have good news for you. Adversity is when God is ringing the school bell. After you have learned your lessons, God sends you to a recess. He says, "Let's just have some renewal, restoration, and encouragement here." That's the good news I want to share with you from this text. Hasn't Abraham been through it? Abraham has experienced the birth of Isaac and now he has to be a part of sending away his own flesh and blood, Ishmael. It said in the previous chapter that it distressed him and his soul. What if the Lord commanded you through the voice of your wife that you had to send away one of your children? You may be thinking that because it's with Hagar who wasn't really his wife then it wasn't as big a deal, but it's still his child. Have you ever had a wayward child that all of a sudden you just don't love them?

So he has been through a stressful time and now God brings him to a moment where a pagan king says "I've been watching you. God is with you. Can we get a non-aggression pact?" I can just see Abraham thinking "I don't have to be a Mr. Braveheart anymore and go liberate five kings by defeating four kings. I don't have to go and fight for Lot anymore. I've got peace with someone who could be my enemy." There is a rest, consolation and a period of encouragement so much so that he even plants a tree and settles in. Pain gets better and that's the good news. That's what God is telling us.

Don't get upset with God because you have told your children the same thing. Do you remember when your child gets a splinter? I used to get splinters all the time. My dad would go into my mom's sewing kit and get the biggest needle he could find. Then he would get a match, strike it and sterilize the end of the needle. This was a ritual and then he would say "Son, this is going to hurt but once we get the splinter out it's going to feel better." I couldn't wait to have my own children and they would get a splinter. I did the very same thing to my kids and my wife even had a red pin cushion just like my mother did. I lit the match right in front of them and said "this is going to hurt but once we get the splinter out it's going to feel better" as the covenant goes from generation to generation. They are having a hard time processing the fact that pain makes me better but they look at dad and say "Okay I trust you." That is what God tells you.

You are in a broken world and here comes some pain but through this it's going to get better. You're going to grow and what happens after that? Once the splinter is out you say "look, see it's out" and you put them up on your lap and you blow on it. Then you kiss it and they just quiet right down. The Lord is taking Abraham through a time and look where he's growing. He was a rank idolater and now he is a worshipper of God. A liar has been disciplined twice and is growing. A man who would laugh in unbelief will now have the laughter of joy in belief. God has this patriarch in progress. Now he is in a little bit of a spot and

God wants to encourage him. God is going to blow on it, kiss it and make it a little bit better here. So Abraham is at that moment.

You might be thinking, “you said there was good news and better news, so what’s the better news?” The better news is God also does this to encourage you from your previous trial and when do you grow? You grow in adversity. So God also does this to get you ready for the next trial. That’s better news. More trials are coming and that’s what is happening right here. Genesis 22:1 says *[1] After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”* Okay we’re going to get another growth ring in Genesis 22, but before we get there God says “I’m going to refresh you from the last test, encourage through a number of years right here, under that tamarisk tree in Beersheba and then we’ll move ahead to the next test” a few years later. We will cover that in our next study. So the first thing we’ve seen from this text is providence.

In the second takeaway we have a promise. What is the promise? I want to ask a question here. Don’t you want to be influential in your neighborhood? As a church by God’s grace don’t you want us to be influential in the state of Alabama? I’m not talking about for our own glory but for people to come to Christ – hear the Gospel and respond. Don’t we want to be winsome to draw people to Christ, to see Christ proclaimed throughout the world? So how did a pagan king come and be willing to enter into a theistic covenant based on the truth of the reality of the One God whom he didn’t even believe in, this idolater and pagan – what drew him to do that? We don’t have to wonder because it’s right there in the text. He says “I want to do this because God is with you in everything you do.” It was the presence of God that drew the pagan to the influence of Abraham.

Does Moses know this? In Exodus 33 God has told Moses He would give him land, economic prosperity but the one thing He wouldn’t give him was Him. So what does Moses say? Exodus 33:12–16 says

[12] Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ [13] Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” [14] And he (God) said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” [15] And he (Moses) said to him (God), “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. [16] For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? (The word favor in Hebrew is equal to the word grace in the New Testament (Greek).) Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”

I know that when I'm in the world I have to talk 'Americanese' to reach Birmingham, Alabama. I also know I need to dress so that I don't stand out on one side or the other. I am in the world but I'm not to be of the world. I am to be a Christian in the world but not a worldly Christian. How is that done? I don't connect with the world by adopting the values of the world and introducing them into the covenant community. That is not what draws people to Christ. I also don't draw people to Christ by not being in the world that is being an anachronistic museum three centuries ago. Talk the language, understand the problems of the age but what will win the world is the distinctiveness of God's people, not how much like the world they are but how distinct they are.

Before you think I'm saying, 'I don't play cards, I don't go to movies, I don't smoke, drink, cuss, chew and I don't date women that do' what is it that makes God's people distinctive. It is the presence of God that God is with them. They come to a worship service in I Corinthians 14 and it says the unbeliever will fall on his face and why will he do that? It's not because the worship service has been transformed into an evangelistic rally in which the unbeliever is the focus of everything, nor is it because the worship service has been transformed into a classroom for Christian discipleship. It is because the people have gathered with one purpose and that is according to God's Word, truth, with all of their soul (bless the Lord O my soul), they have lifted up the praise of God and you say these people mean it. It says the unbeliever will fall on his face and say 'God is in the midst of these people.' They really believe in Him and that He is with them.

If that is true I have a great Word for you. Jesus says "You will be My witnesses." In the name of winsomeness a lot of Christians give up faithfulness. In the name of faithfulness, a lot of Christians give up winsomeness. What holds a winsome, faithful believer together, is the presence of God. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 28:19-20, [19] *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* Where two or three are gathered together, He is there in their midst. The question is, is our joy in Him? He is our joy. He is not some guru to rub on the belly of Christianity to get health, wealth and prosperity for me. It's Him!

When Andrew left John the Baptist to see Jesus, his words were "Jesus, where do You stay? I want to go with You." Jesus responded "You don't have to come stay with Me. When you believe in Me, I am in you." Jesus says "I will be with you to the end." Your money won't be with you to the end, your fame won't be with you to the end, your power in the business community won't be with you to the end, your house won't be with you to the end, but there is One who will be with to the end, to the last breath which is your promotion. Then you are with Him forever. It is the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ.

One of my mentors, James Boyce, got to that moment just a couple of years ago. People had gathered around him singing hymns, in his last breaths he was able to muster the word "victory!" There was no despair, but triumph. Then there is John Knox and as they listened to him, his fainting whispers were clear. His fainting whispers came out as "the anchor holds to the end." He is with you.

When I was a kid I loved to play baseball. The New York Yankees won all the time when I was a kid. Bobby Richardson, the second baseman for the Yankees was the only Yankee I ever liked. He was a friend of the family. My grandfather used to have a baseball time in Sumter, South Carolina and that's where Bobby Richardson was from. So I've always liked him but I also liked him because he had a profession of faith which was valued in my family. Bobby Richardson had a burden and we had a sport's ministry at Christ's Covenant and we'd have Bobby come a share a number of times. He talked about how he shared Christ with the other players, back before the Christian movement came to sports, but he had a burden for Mickey Mantle. He prayed for him and talked to him all the time. Mickey would just dismiss him.

A few years ago Mickey had a liver problem due to the dissipated life style he had and toward the end of his life he had some people talking with him. He did have a liver transplant and God kept working in his life. Mickey eventually made a commitment to Christ. The liver transplant hadn't really worked out and he was coming to his last days. When he had made his commitment to Christ he picked up the phone and called over to Sumter, South Carolina and he said "Bobby I want to talk to you about something that is very important in my life can you come see me?" Bobby said "Sure Mickey I'll be right there." He got on a plane, got there and went to the hospital in Texas. He saw this shell of a man who once was a powerful athletic man, just wasting away. He saw something different in his eyes. Mickey said "Bobby I wanted to tell you I have become a Christian. I have given my life to Jesus Christ. I want you to pray with me." Bobby said, "I can't tell you what this means to me but you didn't have to tell me and I don't have to be the one to pray for you." Mickey said, "I know that but you were the one that kept bringing Jesus to me and I'm at the end and I wanted to tell you."

Am I bringing Jesus to people? Abimelech knows Abraham isn't some ten year Sunday school pin type a guy. He has already encountered his lies but he also knows the Lord is with him because He disciplines him. He also knows the Lord is with Abraham. Why does a 100 year old man get a baby? The Lord is with him. The presence of the Lord is what draws people to Him. Moses knew it wasn't their military might, political might or economic might that draws people, but what declares that we are Your people is Your presence with us, so Moses says "God if you don't go with us then let us just die in the wilderness." Are you ready to make that deal? The Lord says, "I'll give you a big house, all the money you want, you'll never get sick again and I'll give you all kinds of prosperity the rest of your life, you just can't have Me." Moses could tell very quickly and says "No,

You keep all that, I want You.” The presence of the Lord is more important in my life than any success in life.

The third and final takeaway is the priority of worship. Here he comes and Abraham does something that I hope I can learn. God has blessed him again and every time God blesses him Abraham will go to the place where God blesses and he will consecrate it as a place of worship. It is the priority of worship. In all of the Christian life including evangelism, missions, discipleship, it all drafts on worship. Abraham says “I have a child, I’m at peace, I have a well and all of these things, but Lord I don’t want Your blessings to me to become idols in my life. Therefore I consecrate the place where I am as a place of worship to You.” By the way, Beersheba means the well of oath and now you know why two oaths, covenants were there. That is the kind of God centered worship that will draw unbelievers to Christ, encourage believers and move us to the next level. It is when we embrace worship where God is seen, lifted up and exalted. He reaches right to the Name of the Lord.

The Name of the Lord in worship go hand in hand. The first tablet of the Law says “you shall have no other gods before Me, therefore don’t make any graven images and therefore do not take the Name of the Lord in vain. Therefore remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” The love of the Lord is in worship as God’s people worship individually with their lives but then together and that binds us. It is who God is and we worship in the Name of the Lord.

My heart has been so broken this last week in one area. I keep reading and hearing of believers where I know their motivation is to make an impact for Christ, but the worship becomes everything but the centrality of God’s glory, as we begin to use it for anything and everything, even well-meaning things, except to lift up the Name of God. Dear friends, I long for that in us. Can there be a people who can’t wait to worship? They are like David when he says “I envy the birds in the temple for their nest is there. They never leave. They are always in the presence of God.” Praise God for the promise that He is with us, but we long for those special moments when God’s people come together and with truth, their spirit engaged and their soul engaged, lift up the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and they want to do it! They don’t hold it at arm’s length or measure it off or misuse it but they embrace it. Then lo and behold there is another whole side of professing Christianity.

Three denominations in the last two weeks had violated the third commandment. They treated the Name of the Lord as if it was cultural metaphors, instead of the way God has revealed Himself. He is El Elam. He is my Father, and He has sent His Son and the Holy Spirit and the reason that we’re baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is this is how He has revealed Himself. His Name is sacred. Praise our Thrice Holy God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the priority of worship is because the presence of God that motivates us.

Ron Mells is a pastor and I have read his diary. He talked about the older lady in her 80s that had dementia and she was at her last days. She couldn't remember anything else but the Scripture memory she had done her whole life. Her favorite verse she would give every time someone would visit was II Timothy 1:12 which says [12] *For which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day* (KJV). As the weeks went along and her mind began to disappear, pieces of the verse began to disappear until it was finally "I have committed unto Him..." Then in the last few days she could only muster up "unto Him..." Ron says the last day he went in she was at a whisper and all the verse had left her memory except one word and that was "Him, Him, Him..." He says "I am with you till the end." Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Father, we are a people who want progress and that's okay, just keep us on the right road. If anyone reading this is on the wrong road and you've been making the progress unto eternal condemnation, would You this day grant that glorious gift of faith and repentance that they may turn from that road to Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Dear friend, I invite you to that Savior who will lovingly embrace you right where you are right now and He will be with you till the end and that's not the end. You will be with Him forever. He is on a way to prepare a place for you that you might be with Him. If you have never prayed that prayer of accepting Christ as your Savior, do that today! You can contact us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 and someone will pray with you. Father, would You allow me and my brothers and sisters to know that in Your providence the world's response will never be consistent to my witness, our witness, so we shouldn't expect it, but we desire to be consistent with the distinctive testimony that our God is with us, winsomely and faithfully. Father I implore You that we might rejoice in Your presence even to the point that wherever our feet trod we'll consecrate 'this is worship' and when we assemble together, this is worship and I will praise Your Name, I ask this Father, led by Your Spirit, in the Name above all names, Jesus Christ, Amen.

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