

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

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Isaac Calls on the Name of the Lord

Devotional Reading: Genesis 26:12-23

Background Scripture: Genesis 26:1-33

Today's Scripture: Genesis 26:24-33

I. Covenant Promises

Genesis 26:24-25

²⁴ That night the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham.”

²⁵ Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD. There he pitched his tent, and there his servants dug a well.

24. After facing conflicts over water rights, Isaac departed for Beersheba (Genesis 26:23), where Abraham and the previous Philistine king had made a covenant (21:27, 31). Beersheba is located roughly 75 miles southwest of modern-day Jerusalem, at the northern tip of the Negev Desert. In this stressful situation, *the Lord* intervened to comfort Isaac. The Lord identified himself as *the God of your father Abraham*, emphasizing Isaac's heritage.

God highlighted Isaac's unique role as he offered encouragement to Isaac. The expression *do not be afraid* sometimes appears in Scripture's accounts of angelic appearances (examples: Genesis 21:17; Luke 2:10). In this case, the admonition likely targeted Isaac's fear of his circumstances. Isaac did not need to fear;

God promised to remain with Isaac and bless him as God would *increase the number of his descendants*. These promises and the encouragement are similar to the ones God made to *Abraham* (Genesis 15:1, 4-5).

25. Both Abraham and Isaac built altars as places for sacrifice and prayer. Abraham built an altar to mark off the territory of Canaan for his family and to create memorials in the places where God had appeared (Genesis 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9).

An altar was more than a pile of rough stones; it was a holy spot, a marker of the connection between the divine and human space, and a place of access to God. People often used the same altar for generations, even centuries. At this *altar*, Isaac *called on the name of the Lord* for protection and guidance and made this location his home as *he pitched his tent* there.

Apparently, there was no easily accessible water source at this location. To address this shortcoming, Isaac's *servants dug a well*. The act of digging a well was a source of tension that had led Isaac to this location (see Genesis 26:17-22). Although Isaac was the recipient of covenantal promises, he continued to face practical challenges—water was hard to come by!

II. Promises Kept

Genesis 26:26-33

²⁶ Meanwhile, Abimelek had come

to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his personal adviser and Phicol the commander of his forces.²⁷ Isaac asked them, “Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?”

²⁸ They answered, “We saw clearly that the LORD was with you; so we said, ‘There ought to be a sworn agreement between us’—between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you²⁹ that you will do us no harm, just as we did not harm you but always treated you well and sent you away peacefully. And now you are blessed by the LORD.”

³⁰ Isaac then made a feast for them, and they ate and drank.³¹ Early the next morning the men swore an oath to each other. Then Isaac sent them on their way, and they went away peacefully.

³² That day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well they had dug. They said, “We’ve found water!”³³ He called it Shibah, and to this day the name of the town has been Beersheba.

26. Abimelek and the Gerarites opposed Isaac partly because of his deception regarding his wife, Rebekah. Their king had complained, “One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us” (Genesis 26:10). They presumed that the God of Isaac would have punished them if they violated his wife even accidentally.

The people from Gerar had proved to be fearsome defenders of “their” water resources. They had closed Abraham’s wells, a hostile act that risked destroying Isaac’s flocks, throwing him into poverty, or perhaps even killing him (Genesis 26:18). The narrative implies that Isaac had headed toward Beersheba to escape this conflict (26:22-23). How-

ever, the conflict seemed to be following Isaac.

27. Isaac’s question implied both surprise and fear upon seeing the unexpected visitor. The mistreatment Isaac had faced at the hands of Abimelek’s men had forced him to leave Gerar.

Although Abimelek had a positive relationship with Abraham, the Philistines treated Isaac with disdain and had pushed him out of their territory. Isaac was left wondering what reason Abimelek could have had for pursuing him to Beersheba.

28. But Abimelek and his advisors had not come to make trouble for Isaac. On the contrary, they were afraid of him and the power of the Lord. Isaac’s abundant harvest and the rapid growth of his wealth had convinced them that Isaac enjoyed divine favor. Their admission that the Lord was with Isaac does not mean that they had become followers of the one true God of Abraham and Isaac.

Many people of the ancient Near Eastern world believed that numerous gods existed, and a wise person would avoid offending the most powerful gods and the people under the protection of those gods. Isaac’s blessings were (rightly) perceived as evidence of God’s power and favor on Isaac. Rather than offend Isaac and earn the wrath of God, Abimelek and his people attempt to make peace with them both.

To that end, Abimelek suggested that they swear an *agreement* with one another. The word translated *treaty* is the same Hebrew word as “covenant.” The connection between sworn agreements and covenants lies in the mechanics of covenant-making: the two sides put a covenant into effect by swearing an oath.

29. This verse outlines the content of the oath Abimelek wishes them to take. He asks Isaac to *do us no harm*, which

could refer to taking military action against the people of Gerar. But after Abimelek’s assertions about Isaac’s divine favor, and also seeing that he called Isaac *blessed by the Lord*, Abimelek’s fear was more likely that Isaac would appeal to God for their destruction.

As a basis for this request, Abimelek claimed that he and his men had not harmed Isaac; instead, they had done only good to him and *sent him away peacefully*. Abimelek’s words appear one-sided, as Isaac had left Gerar after experiencing mistreatment by the people living there. There are two possible explanations for Abimelek’s claims. First, Abimelek might have referred to his immediate intentions: right then and there, he was not attacking Isaac or acting in any manner other than kindness toward him. Second, Abimelek could have been asking Isaac to dismiss the prior behavior of Abimelek’s people. In either case, the ruler of Gerar asked Isaac for peace between them. Thus, in a surprising display of divine providence, Isaac’s enemies suddenly became his friends.

30. Isaac turned to hospitality toward his new allies and friends. The *feast* cemented their new relationship. In most ancient cultures, feasting was a tool for building alliances—whether at marriages, funerals, major holidays, or the beginning of business partnerships.

Additionally, covenant ceremonies sometimes included a ritual meal. Exodus 24:11 notes that the leaders of Israel “ate and drank” in God’s presence after the ritual sacrifice and sprinkling with the blood of the covenant.

In the New Testament era, the practice of Communion instituted by Jesus combines a meal with a covenant, with its reference to Christ’s “blood of the [new] covenant” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20).

Therefore, by serving a meal, Isaac showed his guests the expected courtesy. The feast also completed the ritual that bound them together in peace.

31. The next day saw the final parts of their ceremony of alliance-making. The parties of the covenant swore their oaths *to each other*, asking God to hold them to account if they should break them. To go *away peacefully* means not just that they avoided immediate conflict, but they also anticipate a continuing positive relationship with one another.

The Hebrew word translated as “peacefully” is *shalom*, which has a wide array of meanings, including “wholeness,” “good health,” or even “success.” It is a favorite term that the prophets of Israel and Judah use to reflect a vision of restored order and community. Isaac *sent* Abimelek away with their conflict fully resolved.

32. *That day* sets the context as being immediately after Abimelek’s party left. The result is that Isaac would have the impression that finding *water* was a sign of God’s blessing and covenant fidelity. As if one blessing for the day was not enough, God also addressed the immediate need of Isaac and his family for survival.

33. The name *Shibah* sounds like the Hebrew word for “oath.” It is joined to the Hebrew word translated “well” to become a new name: *Beersheba*. This account explains the origins of a major Israelite town—one still occupied today—as the location of divine blessings.

The town became a reminder of the covenants that Isaac and his father, Abraham, had made that forged justice and peace between neighbors. The designation points to the hope of peace between enemies and stands as an image of God’s faithfulness to Abraham’s family.

Involvement Learning

Isaac Calls on the Name of the Lord

Into the Lesson

Consider the following statement:

The strength of a child's faith can be predicted by looking at the faith of that child's family of origin.

Do you agree or disagree? How do your life experiences influence your conclusion?

Genesis 12:7; 13:3-4; 26:2, 12

Key Verse

Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD. There he pitched his tent, and there his servants dug a well.
—Genesis 26:25

Into the Word

Read the following Scriptures and write down how certain events in the life of Abraham parallel those in Isaac's.

Genesis 12:10; 26:1

Genesis 12:13; 20:2; 26:7

Genesis 12:16; 13:6; 26:13

Genesis 13:7; 26:20-21

Genesis 21:22-34; 26:26-33

Genesis 13:14-17; 26:24

Into Life

Choose one of the following statements to complete:

1. *Because of my family history, I feel God's presence in my life through . . .*
 2. *Despite my family history, I feel God's presence in my life through . . .*
-
-

How has God used difficult or negative experiences to reveal his presence?

How will you express gratitude to God for his presence?

Thought to Remember

God keeps his covenant promises.