

# CCLEB SERMON NOTES



SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 14, 2025  
GENESIS 21:1-34

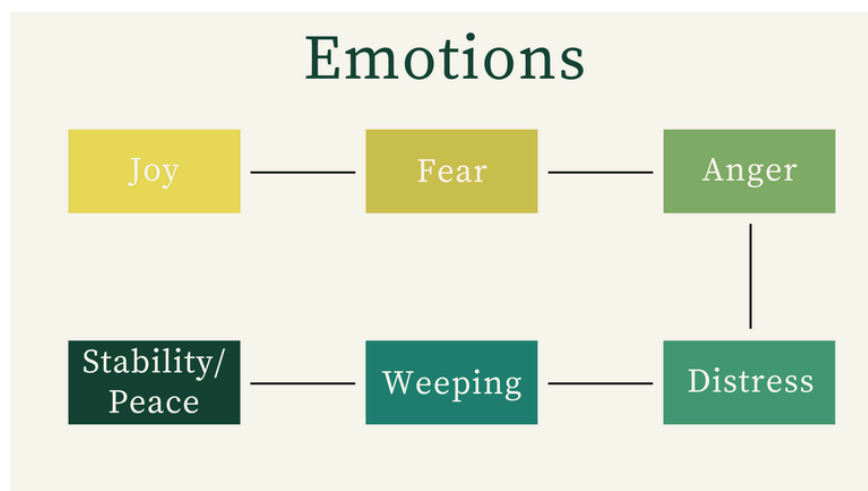
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## GOD IS FAITHFUL



Today we are in **Genesis 21**. This chapter is broken up into three scenes **verses 1-8, 9-20, 21-34**. We will read and study them one at a time.

Have you ever had an experience where there was a drastic swing in emotions? From joy to fear to anger, to distress, to weeping, and then stability/peace? When Sheri and I learned that she was pregnant with Daniel that was happy news – we felt joy. When Sheri's water broke at 19 weeks pregnant, that brought fear, distress and excitement. When Daniel was born with medical complications at 31 weeks that resulted in 10 years of life saving brain surgeries – that brought whole seasons of despair and weeping and anger. Then came the teen years – let's just say they were hard. Over the years, the medical side quieted down significantly and here we are today, 26 years later and Daniel is really stable, and mom and dad have peace. Joy to fear to anger to distress, to weeping, to stability and peace. Where was God in all that? With us every step of the way. God is faithful.



The story in **chapter 21** of Genesis follows a similar pattern of emotions. And like Daniel's story, when we get to the end of the story there is stability. How does that stability happen?

The first scene of **Genesis 21** focuses on the faithfulness of the LORD in his relationship with Abraham and Sarah. In **verse 1** – the name “LORD” is in all caps and means “YHWH – Jehovah”. This the LORD's covenantal name. It's the name that God defined himself by in **Exodus 34:6-7**.

The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out, “Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected— even children in the third and fourth generations.”

**EXODUS 34:6-7**

**LORD MEANS  
“YHWH –  
JEHOVAH”.  
THIS IS THE  
LORD'S  
COVENANTAL  
NAME.**

Now I point out the covenantal name of the LORD in **verse 1** because these beautiful eight verses are a joyful celebration of who the LORD is, his faithfulness. Let me show you.

In **verses 1-2** we see three affirmations of the LORD's faithfulness.

“The LORD kept his word”, “...(the LORD) did exactly as he promised.” “...happened at just the time God said it would”. That's the Lord being faithful. The author clearly wants us to see the LORD's faithfulness. The LORD keeps his word, the LORD does what he said he would, and the LORD does it when he said he would do it. Sounds like a pretty good code of conduct for the people of God that that have the Spirit of God in them, doesn't it?

**Three  
affirmations  
of the  
LORD's  
faithfulness**

— “The LORD kept his word”

— “...(the LORD) did exactly as he promised”

— “...happened at just the time God said it would”

And so God promised and delivered Isaac, the son of Abraham through Sarah, is born. And in **verse 4**, as the LORD was faithful in promising and delivering, now we see Abraham faithful in obeying the LORD by circumcising Isaac on the 8th day. In **Genesis 17:12** the LORD had told Abraham that all Ab's descendants should be circumcised on the 8th day.. that's exactly what Abraham does in **verse 4**. Note the relationship bw the Lord's faithfulness and obedience. Recognition of the LORD's faithfulness inspires trust and obedience.

## Recognition of the LORD's faithfulness inspires trust and obedience.

The next verse, **21:5** serves as a “re-start” for Abraham. When Sarai and Abram couldn't have children, and they had conspired to short circuit God's plan of a child, you know, give God a little help by using a surrogate womb through Hagar – that story ended with **16:16**. Now we have Abraham 14 years later in **21:5**, and he is the father of the son the LORD wanted him to have all along – this is a restart.

A restart comes with an expectation that something will be different this time, and involves consequences if it's not. When runners in the Olympics jump the gun and prompt a “restart” there is an expectation that the undisciplined runners will all start on time. If they repeat jumping the gun, they are disqualified.

So what does Abraham's restart look like? Well, it has been a journey for Abraham of obedience, partial obedience and flat out disobedience. The LORD told Abraham to leave his home near modern day Iraq.. don't take family with you.. he takes his dad and nephew. Stops off at Haran for a while – his dad dies there. Eventually Abraham meanders on over to Canaan, the land of promise. Then meanders south towards the Negev leaving the place of his calling, the land of promise. Eventually Abraham ends up Egypt, lies about his wife, then heads back to Canaan. There God again shows his faithfulness and Abraham makes some good choices – then Sodom and Gomorrah destruction happen.. and we see Abraham headed south again. (pun intended) and there the story of Abraham lying about his wife repeats itself – that catches us up to our passage today. But now the son of promise is born, the son through which all the promises God gave Abraham are fulfilled, and despite Ab's unfaithfulness, the LORD is faithful, and at 100 years old, Abraham has a restart. Restart to do what? Trust in the LORD. **Proverbs 3:5-8**. Trust and obey.

Now Sarah in **21:6** responds to the birth of her son Isaac with a poem that has been referred to as “Sarah's post partum poem” In the Hebrew her poem is a play on words. Since “Isaac” means laughter, her poem would read like this: “God has brought me laughter (Isaac), all who hear about this will laugh (Isaac) with me”.

## Sarah's post partum poem

“God has brought me laughter (Isaac), all who hear about this will laugh (Isaac) with me”

The scholar Robert Alter says that this is a laughter of “triumphant joy”. The first time we saw Sarah laugh **18:11-12** she laughed in disbelief because she saw herself as a “worn out woman” well beyond menopause. And now in **21:7** Sarah again laughs – but this time in “joy” – and she is amazed that her worn out body is now nursing a baby. Imagine the awe and oy!

“Intense joy” often results in celebration. In 1986 when the Brazilian national soccer team beat Poland in the World Cup – round of 16 – I was in Brazil. Let me tell you, I saw celebration. As soon as the game was over, we headed somewhere and we witnessed highways closed of congestion, with 1000’s of joyous brazil fans dancing and celebrating. Samba, musics, firecrackers. That’s what “joy” can result in, and that is what we see in **verse 8**, where at the time Isaac was weaned, Abraham holds a great joyous celebration, a feast. Feasts in Jewish culture are community events where you invite others to come celebrate with you, food, music and group dancing. Abraham was well known! Locals and some guests from a distances would have been invited to this celebration. And given that Abraham was wealthy, they would have expected the celebration to be a good one! This celebration was a celebration of God’s faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah.

So in the first scene of **chapter 21, verses 1-8**, the emotion we encountered was joy and this joy is tied to the LORD’s faithfulness. In response to The LORD keeping his word, the LORD doing what he said he would do, and the LORD doing it when he said he would do it, there is “joy” – a celebration of the LORD’s faithfulness.

Now the next scene of **Chapter 21** is different. Pay attention to the emotions in the next story.

This scene does not leave me feeling all secure and hopeful like the first scene. However this scene, like the first is also about God’s faithfulness.

In this scene we have two brothers in the same camp. Picture a large encampment, maybe hundreds of tents, probably covering acres. Picture smoke rising from cooking fires, animals, herds surrounding the camp, people everywhere. Near the tent compound of Abraham there are two boys. The two boys are half-brothers, same father Abraham, different mothers. The older Ishmael, the son of Hagar the slave woman, is about 16 years old. The younger, Isaac through Sarah, is probably between 3-5 years old.

These two boys have prominence in the camp – they are both sons of the powerful and influential Abraham – the head of the clan – so as sons of the clan leader, they would have been treated differently, treated with a lot of respect. Culturally they would have been treated as “young masters”. And in this scene Sarah is watching Ishmael and Isaac interact – again 16 year old interacting with 3-5 year old. This is the first we see these brothers together. And here as they interact we start to see contrasts between the two brothers.

The older, Ishmael, his name means: “God hears”, or “God will hear”, Gen 16:11. Ishmael’s name is important, and we see the meaning of his name “God hears” come to life later in our story **verses 17**.

**ISHMAEL MEANS:  
“GOD HEARS”, OR  
“GOD WILL HEAR”**

**GENESIS 16:11**

Ishmael’s name reflects God’s faithfulness, God hears him and God is faithful, but in a completely different emotional context then the laughter and celebration we saw surrounding Isaac in **verses 1-8**, whose name means “laughter. God hears Ishmael after he was banished from the camp and family by his own father. In that moment of abandonment and distress – God hears him – God is faithful. God’ faithfulness is seen in both of the boy’s names, Isaac laughter – Ishmael God hears, but two very different emotional contexts.

Another contrast of the two brothers in this scene together; Ishmael is the son of the slave woman.. slavery meaning bondage. Isaac is the son of Sarah, the free woman, she has privilege - purpose, status. So in the middle of this camp, at the compound of Abraham, we have “slavery” and we have “freedom” represented in the two brothers.

One more contrast of the two brothers - there was a great celebration surrounding Isaac's birth and life.. there was no celebration for Ishmael. So with the two brothers we have representation of joy and celebration with Isaac, and with Ishmael we have nothing..., no celebration, no joy. After Isaac was born was Ishmael even noticed?

And in **verse 9**, the two boys are together, brothers, one family, and Sarah sees Ishmael “making fun of Isaac”. Some translations say Ishmael was “scoffing” or “mocking” Isaac. The Hebrew is telling here. The name “Isaac” comes from the Hebrew root word meaning to “scoff or mock”. Robert Alter translates **verse 9** as: Ishmael was “Isaacing” Isaac. And his scoffing or mocking Isaac was not just making fun of Isaac, but rather his scoffing at Isaac was “presuming himself to be the legitimate heir”.

Imagine being Sarah and watching that happen - 16 year old Ishmael scoffing at the 3 year old miraculous son of promise - Isaac - Isaac who is the true heir of all the promises God made to Abraham. Do you think mama bear came out in Sarah?

Now carrying Sarah's intensity into **verse 10** we see Sarah go to Abraham and demand him to..

Allow me to paint this as vividly as Sarah meant it. The word in Hebrew used for “get rid of” is the same word used in **Genesis 3:24 NASB** when God the father drove out - banished Adam and Eve, his own children, from the garden. That garden imagery of a father banishing his own children is what Sarah is demanding of Abraham to do to “the slave woman and her son”. And further, to highlight Sarah being really upset, note that she doesn't call Hagar and Ishmael by name, no respect of persons, rather she refers to them by what they are to her, just “slave woman and her son”.

Well, Abraham of course is very upset. He has a charging mama bear in his house demanding him to banish his son. I wonder if there was an “or else” behind Sarah's demand. Abraham probably doesn't want to find out.

So pause there, we have Ishmael making fun of or scoffing at 3 year old Isaac; we have furious Sarah charging at Abraham and demanding banishment; and we have Abraham very upset. There is a fifth party in this scene in **verse 12** - it is God- “Elohim”. Elohim's name emphasizes ultimate power and strength, the one who created the heaven's and the earth. **Genesis 1:1** and he's been watching this wild scene unfold, and God steps into the scene. Shockingly God tells Abraham to listen to his wife, and banish Hagar and the boy.

## God - “Elohim”

Elohim's name emphasizes ultimate power and strength, the one who created the heaven's and the earth.

Genesis 1:1

These words from God are hard for me to read and hear...how about you? The God of compassion and mercy, unfailing love and faithfulness tells Abraham to banish his own son? If you have or have had a 16 year old son or child, what would that feel like? If you are a 16 year old or ever were a 16 year old, what would that have felt like?

And to boot, it appears that in **verse 12**, God tells Abraham to “not be upset”. Ok, now it just feels like God is being cold. I don’t like people telling me how to feel, do you? And now we have God telling Abraham to banish his son, and telling him not to be upset about it? C’mon! This cold picture of God seems like a contradiction to the God of **Exodus 34:6-7** compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, lavish unfailing love and faithfulness.

Let me offer a brief explanation. A much more common directive from God about our feelings are the phrases God says, “Do not be afraid”, or “fear not”. We saw God use that phrase with Abraham in **Genesis 15:1** (do not be afraid). And those phrases appear over 100x in the Old Testament. Again, God seemingly telling people how to feel or not feel. That doesn’t sit well. God created emotions, emotions have beautiful purpose as per God’s design. Fear is a tool that keeps us alive and keeps us humble. Feelings are a defining quality of humanity. So why would God tell Abraham to turn off his feelings re banishing his own son?

I don’t think God telling Abraham or us how to feel is the intended meaning. I think God is teaching Abraham with all these stories how to manage his emotions so that the result is trust and obedience.

Here is how I reconcile this. In Hebrew nouns and verbs are hinged together, there are no verbs that are not also nouns, there are no nouns that are not also verbs. So when God says to Abraham or to me “fear not”, its God saying, “don’t let fear become you”, “don’t let fear define you”, “don’t let fear guide or control you”. Yes, respect fear for the God intended tool that it is, but keep fear in its lane.

Now specifically in relationship to God, God is saying, “don’t become fear leading to not trusting and obeying me”. See Abraham’s journey all along is about learning to trust and obey God, despite insecurity, or uncertainty, or being upset, or fear. This is about trusting a faithful God that we saw in **verses 1-8** – and was celebrated with joy.

So let’s apply that same interpretation to God telling Abraham not to be upset about banishing his 16 year old son. So what I believe God is saying to Abraham when he says “do not be upset” is “don’t let your being upset define you, don’t let your being upset become you, and keep you from trusting and obeying me.” See it’s about the relationship. God wants Abraham to trust him above Abraham’s feelings, above his distress, above his fear. This is preparing Abraham for next weeks test in **chapter 22** where Abraham is told by God to sacrifice Isaac. Banish one son, in this story, sacrifice the other.

So back in our story, in **verse 13**, after telling Abraham to banish his son, God reminds Abraham of his promise to make Ishmael into a nation as well. This is a promise that Ishmael his son will make it. And second more importantly, this is a reminder to Abraham that what God said he will do for Ishmael, he will do – God is faithful.

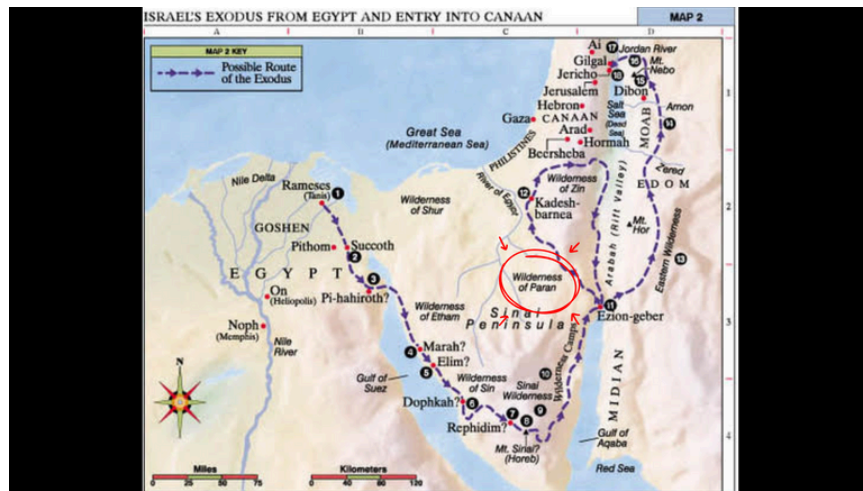
So Abraham in **verse 14** rises above his emotions of being upset or distressed, Abraham doesn’t let those emotions control him, and trusts and obeys God. He does exactly what his wife said to do and God affirmed, he sends Hagar and Ishmael away.

This next part is also disturbing. Wealthy Abraham, with herds and camels and much provision, sends Hagar and Ishmael away with bread and water. I don’t know what to make of that – it feels awful. However there is one positive here. When Abraham sent Hagar away, Abraham was giving Hagar her legal freedom, no longer a slave. Free woman. Free to make her choices, free to go where she chooses. Free. That’s a big deal!

In the next verses we see God’s faithfulness again in taking care of Hagar and Ishmael. In the end of **verse 14** Hagar and Ishmael “wander aimlessly” in the wilderness of Paran - they are lost, they have gone astray. And what is God good at? Finding lost people – like me. This is the second time Hagar is in the wilderness and is upset. The first time she fled from Sarai who was mistreating her, and God found her there. The second time Hagar is also in the wilderness and she and Ishmael are at their end. Their water has run out, Hagar thinks they are going to die, she has Ishmael lying under a bush.



She can't watch him die from close up so she goes a ways away and is crying out in anguish. Imagine the pain! At this point it seems that her feelings have overcome her, are controlling her...grief, despair, hopelessness, fear. It has her paralyzed.



In **verse 17** Ishmael's name, that means "God hears" is fulfilled. God heard! This is God being faithful! But note God hears Ishmael crying not Hagar. God tells Hagar to get up... obedience is action.. don't be paralyzed by your fear, take your boy by his hand and then God reminds her of his promise from the last time he spoke to her in the wilderness. As soon she is reminded of God's promise, her eyes are opened to see water - water meaning life - life -sustaining water.

**Verses 20-21** summarizes the rest of Ishmael's life.. and it starts with the beautiful words describing God's faithfulness "and God was with the boy". The story of Hagar and Ishmael ends with them "stable" - they made it. Why did they make it and become stable, against all odds? God was with them. Hold onto that phrase, God was with them, we see it again in the next scene.

What a crazy range of emotions though. The first scene in **verses 1-8** is of God's faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah in the miraculous birth of Isaac -laughter, joy, celebration. And then we also see God's faithfulness in second scene in **verses 9-21** in God hearing Ishmael when he was banished, lost in the wilderness, literally dying of thirst, and crying in desperation. In the first scene one son was celebrated the second scene the other son is banished in the wilderness. In the first scene is Abraham the father celebrating a birth of a son, and the second scene is Abraham the father mourning the loss of a son. But was God faithful in both scenes? Drawing a conclusion from this, One could say that the faithfulness of God is the constant despite how the landscape of life changes.

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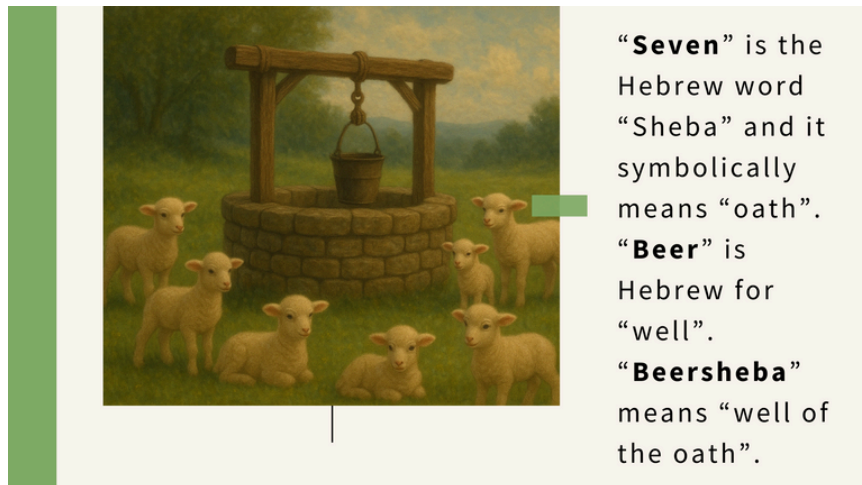
Now there is one more scene in this chapter. The story of Hagar and Ishmael ended in God's faithfulness bringing stability for them, so does the last scene of this chapter end with God's faithfulness bringing stability to Abraham? We left Abraham in **verse 11**, really upset that God wanted him to banish his son, yet despite being really upset, distraught, Abraham trusted and obeyed God and banished Hagar and Ishmael.

Let's see what God's faithfulness does in **verses 22-34**.

**Verse 22.** So reminder – Ab is in the territory of the philistines – there is a king there, Abimelech, and his commander. Abraham is mighty and wealthy and his clan is large, and God is obviously with him. So Abimelech and his commander Phicol come looking for an assurance of no more deceptions for them or their descendants. After all Abraham had already deceived Abimelech re Sarah being his sister, and it cost Abimelech dearly. Abimelech doesn't want to repeat that so he goes to Abraham wanting legal assurance that it won't happen again. And note here what Abimelech says to Abraham. "God is with you in all you do." Same phrase as "God was with the boy..". What does God's presence do for Abraham?

**Verses 23-27.** So Ab, who has God with him, agrees to no more deception. What is implied in **verse 27** re: Ab giving Abimelech sheep and oxen is that in accordance with covenant ceremonies, covenant in Hebrew means "to cut", these animals would be cut in half, the halves laid opposite of each other, the blood would run to the middle, and the two parties of the covenant would walk thru the trail of blood signifying that breaking the covenant results in death, blood shed. So the assurance of "will never deceive me" that Abimelech wanted is ratified through a legal blood binding covenant.

But the covenant didn't settle the seized well issue. Abimelech wanted assurance of no deception, the covenant gave that. Abraham wanted no more seized wells. **Verses 28-32.** "Seven" is the Hebrew word "Sheba" and it symbolically means "oath". Hence the seven ewe lambs. "Beer" is Hebrew for "well". So the well being named "Beersheba" means "well of the oath".



The Oath gave Abraham the assurance of no more seized wells. Beersheba is a place that can be visited today. Apparently the quality of the waters is known to be like the well in Samaria – the woman at the well that had "flowing or living water".



To commemorate what happened here, Abraham in **verse 33** plants a tree and there he "worshipped the LORD, the eternal God". Abraham worships – gives credit to, exalts, the God that was always, always faithful.



God's faithfulness was the constant in Abraham's life despite the changing landscape of his life.

So with this covenant and oath in place with his neighbors, and with the LORD, the eternal God by his side – Abraham and his clan are at a place of “stability” – “peace”. When you get to the place of “stability or peace” is it the ending place? Is God finished with you? Or is it bringing you full cycle in preparation for the next adventure with God?

**Thoughts for your meditation and application:**

In all three scenes in this chapter God is faithful. The LORD keeps his word, the LORD does what he said he would do, and the LORD does it when he said he would do it.

Whatever the landscape of life was, the constant is the faithfulness of God.

And for all the parties, God's faithfulness brought them to a place of stability.

God's expectation of us in return is to rise above our emotions, fear, insecurities, upset, and trust and obey him.

God is faithful!

For homework read and meditate on **Psalm 23** see how it parallels this chapter.

# SUPPLEMENTAL

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## NOTES:

1. **Where was Isaac born?** Isaac is born while near Gerar, the land of the philistines. This means then that Isaac the Son of promise, is born outside of the land of promise.
2. **Why did Abraham wait for Isaac to be weaned before celebrating?** Many historians believe that if a child survived till they were weaned that they had a good chance of living to a normal age. Weaning happened between 3-5 years of age, most support 3 years.
3. **Why use “Boy” and not “Ishmael”?** From the time Isaac is born thru the rest of the story of Abraham the name “Ishmael” is not used, only “son”, “boy” or “lad”. This seems to be a very intentional elevation of the son of promise, Isaac, and very intentional lowering of “Ishmael” to “boy”.
4. **Isaac and Ishmael together.** The only other time we see Isaac and Ishmael together is the burial of Abraham in **Genesis 25:9**.
5. **The name “Abimelech”.** “Abimelech” is probably a title used by Philistines for their king, like the title “Pharaoh” used by Egyptians. “Abimelech” means “my father is King” – so it’s a title that demands allegiance. “Philco” also is probably a title for “commander”, and it probably means the “voice of all” – meaning whatever “Philco – the voice of all” says – goes.
6. **21:34 Who were the Philistines?** These were not the Philistines of Saul and David’s time. Those philistines from Cyprus arrived in what we know as Gaza four generations later after being told by Egypt that they could not settle there.