

## 6. Now and Not Yet

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Genesis 23:1-20

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I want to start today by telling you about one of the longest marriages in American history...

Until just a few weeks ago the record belonged to Ralph and Dorothy Kohler (Indio, CA), married in 1935. Married 86 years! In an interview last year, Ralph, who was 104 years old, said the secret to a long marriage is simple: "Togetherness."

US Census Bureau [data](#) states that only six percent of Americans couples reach their 50th, or golden, anniversary - putting the Kohlers in a rare category.

Ralph credited their longevity in life and marriage to healthy habits. Neither of them had ever drunk alcohol or smoked. They were ballroom dancing champions and enjoyed duck hunting, which they made into a career.

Sadly Ralph passed away in January 2022, (aged 104) just over a month after Dorothy died last December (she was 102). Sad, but kind of wonderful...

If you're anything like me, we love a good love story! There is just something wholesome about a love story that lasts a lifetime.

Our Bible passage today is all about a love story that lasted a lifetime. The love story between Abraham and Sarah.

So I want to reflect on that today, and the lessons we can learn from them. But first, why don't we pray and ask God to teach us as we read from the Bible?

*Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the Bible, and for your words to us. Will you teach us about life and love and faith as we hear from you today? In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Well, we have been following the story of Abraham and the promises of God in our sermon series over the last 5 weeks or so. And even though it's a very old part of the Bible, we've seen that it still has much to teach us, even thousands of years later. It's the story that teaches us how God's Old Testament people came into being, how they came to live in the land that we now call Israel. And it's the story of how God makes promises to us, promises that he always keeps, even when it seems hard to see at the time.

And that's where today's story starts in Genesis 23.

We have been journeying with Abraham for over 60 years now. He was 75 years old when God called him out of the land of his father, and made three promises to him: (what are they?)

Land; Nation; Blessing.

God promised Abraham that he would bring him into a **land**, a countryside that would belong to his offspring. That tied into the second promise – God promised to make Abraham into a great **nation**, that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore, or stars in the sky. And lastly God promised to **bless** Abraham, and to use his family to bring **blessing** to the entire world.

Those were the promises God had made to Abraham when he was 75 years old, and his wife was 65. One of the things we've learned through this series is that God's promises don't always materialize overnight. Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years before their first son was born – Isaac – until Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. Neither of them ever expected to have the joy of children at such an advanced age. In fact they both laughed at the idea, so much that they called their son 'Laughter' – that's what Isaac means.

Not that their marriage had always been filled with laughter. Many years had been filled with the grief of childlessness. Their attempts to build a family through one of Sarah's slaves had brought unhappiness to the household. The marriage had been in jeopardy not once, but twice, as Abraham allowed Sarah to be taken as a wife by foreign kings. And as the ladies in my wife's Small Group observed this week, there definitely would have been "words" spoken when Sarah found out that Abraham almost sacrificed their only son...

But every relationship has its ups and downs, especially when it lasts more than 60 years. In fact, it's likely that Abraham and Sarah had been married closer to 100 years, if they married when she was quite young. Yet despite those difficulties, Sarah had been Abraham's soul-mate through all the years of following God's promises. She had chosen to go with Abraham as he left his family in Ur – no doubt she left behind all her family also. She had made the journey with Abraham to Canaan, and then to Egypt in the famine. She had stayed with him in all the pinnacle moments of Abraham's life. Sarah was Abraham's princess, as her name meant in their language.

## **The Death of A Loved One**

After so many years together, Genesis 23 opens with the tragic news of Sarah's death.

Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. <sup>2</sup> She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her. (Genesis 23:1-2)

Abraham mourns, and weeps for Sarah.

I know that some of you know what it feels like, to lose your soul mate. I don't pretend to imagine what it must be like. But in these two verses we get just a glimpse into Abraham's pain. Abraham goes to mourn for Sarah, and he weeps over her.

Commentator Kent Hughes says that this is a very brief description of grief for a very long marriage.

So how do you make sense of a loss like this? How do you process the death of a loved one?

I want to take you to some ancient wisdom from the book of Ecclesiastes that helps us think about death, perhaps in a way that we don't normally think of it. (BTW I'm hoping this is a little preview of a series I'd like to do from Ecclesiastes later in the year...) Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom, written by perhaps the wisest man ever: Solomon, son of the great King David. Ecclesiastes means 'Teacher'.

In Ecclesiastes 7 the Teacher teaches us this about death:

<sup>2</sup> It is better to go to a house of mourning  
than to go to a house of feasting,  
for death is the destiny of everyone;  
the living should take this to heart. (Ecclesiastes 7:2)

The Teacher turns upside down what most of us would think about death. If we had to choose between a party and a funeral, of course we would prefer to go to a party. A feast with our family. A memorable vacation. A weekend away with your best friends. A meal at a fantastic restaurant. Those are the life events that most of us look back on, those are the events that punctuate a happy life.

But the Teacher teaches us that we learn more from a funeral than we do from a party. When we go to the house of mourning, it reminds us that the eternal matters. There is more to life than these 80 or 90 years. It says it right there in v2: *Death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart...*

The death of a loved one reminds us that this life is not all there is. Eternity awaits. The blessing that God promised to Abraham, it awaits us, in the land that God promised. Not a land that can be invaded or ruined by pollution, but an everlasting city where God himself dwells amongst us. A place of happiness, and never again the interruption of death, or the loss of a loved one.

That's what the death of a loved one should remind us of, the Teacher teaches.

And all the wonderful experiences that we cherish in this lifetime, they're only a shadow of what's to come. It's almost like our real life hasn't even begun yet.

When the famous evangelist Billy Graham spoke about his death, he said this:

Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God. (Billy Graham)

*I shall be more alive than I am now.* Isn't that a great way to think about eternity? Jesus' promise is that he came to give us life, and life to the full (John 10:10). And our mortal death is the beginning of that life that never ends...

But there is a catch. *That* eternal life is only for those who align themselves with Jesus in *this* lifetime. Because the other reality of death is that one day we will stand before the throne of God and give an account for our life, and what we did with it.

That might sound intimidating, but I don't think it should be. What I love about the death of Sarah is the way she is remembered in the New Testament. Because she's not remembered for her mistakes. She's remembered for her faith.

In 1 Peter 3:6, Sarah is commended for trusting God as she followed Abraham through all of the ups and downs of their lifelong journey together. In Hebrews 11 Sarah is commended for trusting that God would give her a child, just as he promised he would. Sarah is remembered for her *faith*.

The death of Sarah reminds us that we are more than the sum total of our mistakes. By faith in Christ, God looks back on our lives and credits our faith as righteousness, just as he did with Abraham. Our mistakes are forgiven, and put behind us, when we give them to Jesus on the cross.

And if you look through Hebrews 11, this long list of the heroes of the Bible who were commended for their faith, you realize that none of them were perfect. None of them lived a mistake-free life, none of them lived a sin-free life. They were all like you and me. But God remembers their faith, not their mistakes.

Death is a terrible part of life this side of heaven. And the grief is real. But Jesus takes the sting out of death, by showing us that there is life beyond the grave. And Jesus takes the sting out of death by showing us that we are more than the sum total of our mistakes. God will remember our faith, on the day that we stand before him.

All of that means that we can appreciate death for what it teaches us.

Commentator David Gibson writes:

"Death dons a preacher's robe to teach us that life is finite and we must use it well."  
(David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*)

You and I are finite. One day this life will be over. So how are you using your life?

## Investing Your Life

The second part of the passage for today is the account of Abraham buying a burial plot for his wife.

It feels kind of strange that the negotiations for a piece of land take up most of the chapter, when so little is said about the death of Sarah. What is so important about this field that it warrants this level of intention? Our first clue is there in v4:

<sup>3</sup> Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, <sup>4</sup> “I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.” (Genesis 23:3-4)

Do you see the problem? Abraham is a foreigner and a stranger, even though he has been living in the land for something like 60 years. And BTW what land is it? It’s the promised land, the land that God had sworn to give to him and to his offspring. But for now, Abraham is still a foreigner. He has probably spent those 60 years grazing his flocks, moving between watering holes, living in tents as his ancestors did in the Middle East. And perhaps this is the first time a family member had died, which is amazing in itself. Over the course of some 60 years, this problem had never arisen.

But now, Abraham’s first wife lies dead. And he wants to give her a permanent place.

As a foreigner, however, he has no land. And so Abraham has to negotiate the purchase of a property.

What we see in those middle verses of the chapter is a very formal process, where the buyer and sellers go back and forth in polite tones. Underneath the formality, they are negotiating a property, and nobody gives away prime real estate for nothing.

Follow along with. Me from v4 (I’m going to paraphrase a bit). Abraham says:

“I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.”

The Hittites reply (v6)

<sup>6</sup> “Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead.”

Abraham bows down before them. BTW this is the only time Abraham bows before anyone, but it’s clearly part of the formalities, just as it was part of the formality for the Hittites to offer

Abraham his choice of tombs. It's kind of disingenuous, but that's how it often works in honor/shame cultures. The outward demeanor doesn't always reflect the inner attitude.

Abraham continues negotiating. He wants an introduction to Ephron, who has a cave (v9) at the end of one of his fields. Abraham offers to buy the cave for full price.

Ephron likes this game (v11):

<sup>11</sup> "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." (Genesis 23:11)

Three times Ephron says he will give the property to Abraham. Not just the cave, but also the field. And he says it in front of everybody. If you want to make yourself sound generous, that's the way to do it. Make yourself sound magnanimous in the presence of your friends.

Abraham bows again, and offers to pay for not just the cave, but the field also.

Ephron answers (v15):

<sup>15</sup> "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." (Genesis 23:15)

Turns out, 400 shekels was a lot for the field and cave. But Abraham is in no position to haggle, not without losing face. He weighs out the 5 pounds of silver in front of everyone "*according to the weight current among the merchants*," it says in v16, and everything is done by the book. The land now belongs to Abraham, and because he did the deal in front of the elders of the Hittites, nobody can dispute the transaction. Twice we are told that the land was deeded to Abraham.

Why such a big deal over a field?

After 60 years wandering through the land that God had promised Abraham, until this moment, none of it had belonged to him.

Now I don't know how it felt to Abraham, paying for land that God had said would be his. (After all, God said he would *give* it to Abraham, not that he would have to pay for it...) But I don't think that's the point of this passage. It's not like when Abraham tried to hurry up God's promise of a child by sleeping with his wife's servant.

Rather I think this is a moment of great faith by Abraham. A moment where he puts his trust in God's promises that one day his offspring would own every part of the land that he had been living in for so long as a stranger. A stranger who had to pay double for a plot of land to bury his wife. A stranger who they called a prince while taking his money as a sucker. A stranger who

probably had to pay to water his flocks and herds, a stranger and a foreigner and never someone who belonged.

Until this moment. When he buried his wife in that cave, trusting that one day he too would be buried there – him and his offspring...

And that faith was rewarded. As we read the rest of the Old Testament, the cave of Macpelah became the burial plot for all of Abraham's family. Abraham himself was buried there, and later his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob. The cave was so important that even Joseph, who died and was buried in Egypt, was carried up 430 years later by Moses, who gave his bones to Joshua, who eventually repatriated him in the cave of Macpelah in the Promised Land.

You see, Abraham wasn't a sucker. He was a believer. He believed that God would do what he said he would do. He believed that God would give this land to his sons and their sons, and so 400 shekels was really a small price to pay in the grand scheme of things. Abraham's modest investment earned him an incalculable return, as the word of God became reality.

One of the questions this passage asks us, then, is where are we investing in this lifetime?

If God has promised us this heavenly future where we are brought into his family, where we are given a home, where we experience the blessing of his presence, shouldn't that be the thing that we are investing in? Shouldn't we be investing in God's kingdom? Shouldn't it drive our priorities and our investment goals? Shouldn't the reality of the future of heaven help us shape our investments today?

I love that you're here this morning. Coming to church is *one* way of investing in God's kingdom. You're here, worshiping God and thanking Jesus for the gift that you trust will come in the future. Every time we stop to read our Bible, or pray, we are investing in God's Kingdom.

And many of you are investing in God's kingdom financially. Enabling pastors and missionaries like me to share the hope of Jesus, so that more and more people can share in that eternal life that we are looking forward to. That takes money. It takes money to build churches, to pay the utilities, to staff a kids' program, to put on concerts, to advertise in the newspapers. But it's all an investment in the kingdom of God.

Because we trust that God's kingdom is real. And we trust that one day *this* earthly kingdom will be no more, and that God's kingdom will be all there is. And on that day, our faith will be made sight. We'll finally see what our investment was going towards. And you won't regret it.

What are you investing in?

