

Faith in The Face of Death

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[0:00] Take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 23. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites.

He said, I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead. The Hittites replied to Abraham, 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. Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites.

He said to them, If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron, son of Zohar, on my behalf, so that he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field.

Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you. Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people, and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city.

[1:38] 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.

Again, Abraham bowed down before the people of the land, and he said to Ephron in their hearing, Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field.

Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there. Ephron answered, Abraham, Listen to me, my lord. The land is worth 400 shekels of silver.

But what is that between me and you? Bury your dead. Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, 400 shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.

So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre, both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field, was deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city.

[2:46] Afterward, Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre, which is at Hebron, in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

I don't recall a year like the past year or so has been for Grace Fellowship Church. Death has come knocking again and again.

We have lost. We have mourned. And we have hoped. We have hoped. If only in this life we have hope in Christ, then we will be pitied more than all men.

We should be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Yes, we've lost. Yes, we've mourned.

But at the same time, we have hoped, even as we have buried our loved ones in the Lord, we bury them in the hope that their best things are still ahead of them.

[3:55] And one day we will be with them. Faith in the face of death has been a reoccurring theme the last three chapters in Genesis. Can God give life out of Sarah's dead womb?

And the answer is yes. Can God raise Isaac from the dead after Abraham sacrifices him? Abraham thought so.

He was counting on it. And then tonight we ask, will you trust God in the face of your own death? The fact is that we will probably die without seeing all of God's promises fulfilled.

If Christ carries, then we will die with so many of his promises still left undone. Our whole Christian lives, we look forward to a new heavens, a new earth.

We look for an earth without the curse and the final and the last, lasting victory of righteousness. We long for those things and God tells us to live for those things.

[5:06] And yet, if we die, we are going to die without seeing them in our own lifetimes. And so we who live by faith are going to have to die by faith.

Will you trust God in the face of your own death? Will you trust him when so many of his promises are left unfulfilled still?

Will you live for heaven for God's great reward? That's what Genesis 23 is all about. And so we have three points on our agenda this evening. And they are, In faith we mourn for our dead.

In faith we bury our dead. And in faith we live. We live. And so let's first see, In faith we mourn our dead. Verse 1, Sarah lived to be 127 years old.

Every commentator, every preacher likes to point out to the fact that Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose age at her death is given. The only woman in the whole Bible.

[6:19] And that's no accident. If Abraham is the father of the faithful, then Sarah is the mother of the faithful. Never in the Bible does God tell us, or does anyone tell us, to look to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But two times in the Bible we are told to look to Sarah. Isaiah 51, Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord.

That's the people of God. Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn. Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah who gave you birth.

So why should the righteous look to Abraham and look to Sarah? Because out of death came life. You remember that is the point of Isaiah 51.

Out of death, out of the miserable condition of Israel, life is going to come. And so that's why you should look to Sarah, because she's an example of life coming out of death.

[7:17] Hebrews 11 says, By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive. Even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Sarah was a great woman of faith. Then Peter points Christian ladies to Sarah. Sarah was a beautiful woman.

She was beautiful on the outside. And she was beautiful on the inside. Peter says, Your beauty should be that of your inner self. The unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master.

You are her daughters if you do what is right. Do not give way to fear. Ladies, there's all kinds of people on TV, on the internet, on YouTube, telling you how to be beautiful, telling you what clothes to wear and how to put on your makeup and what workout to do.

[8:33] But in Genesis, an older woman, a holy woman, sets an example for you on how to be beautiful. She was beautiful on the outside and the inside.

If you look into her heart, you saw hope. You saw hope. She believes, even as she leaves her country and she follows her husband, not knowing the place that God was going to give them. So she sets off wandering with her husband and she doesn't complain about what Abraham does, about what Abraham's doing with her life. She submits.

She doesn't give way to fear. She believes. And God, her father, smiled upon his beautiful daughter. Sarah was a special woman and so it's no surprise then that Abraham weeps for her and mourns for her when she dies.

He mourns for her. And beloved, it's not a betrayal of the faith to mourn for our dead.

[9:45] Even for the godly who die. And sometimes we can get the wrong idea. We can kind of fall into this wrong idea that weeping and sadness is somehow us not believing in the resurrection.

And so we almost make excuses or say, yes, I still believe. We feel like we have to excuse our sadness, our weeping. Abraham weeps at Sarah's death.

And we saw in the last chapter, and we're going to see in this chapter, that Abraham believes in resurrection. He's not weeping because he doesn't believe. He's weeping because he does believe. And she has parted. She has gone away. Jesus himself wept over Lazarus. And no one believed in resurrection like Jesus believed in resurrection. So weeping is not a betrayal of faith.

It's not a lack of faith. Weeping is a confession of faith through our tears. With tears. With our tears, we say that what the Bible says is true.

[10 : 56] That death is unnatural. Death is a terrible, the last terrible enemy. When someone dies, we're not standing on a rock in Africa singing the circle of life.

Abraham is our example. And so in faith, we mourn our loved ones who die. And then in faith, we bury our dead.

And this is the larger portion of this passage. From verse 3 to the end, it's all about Abraham negotiating for a tomb and then Sarah's burial.

And if we were writing Genesis, if you were writing Genesis, you would probably not have set things up this way. You would have probably talked about Sarah's death more and how Abraham felt about it, what Abraham said.

And then in a few sentences, you would sum up the burial arrangements. At least that's how I would do it. Now, Genesis 23, on the other hand, is like going to a funeral and the minister or the person doing the funeral stands up and gives a two-sentence obituary for the dead and then talks the next 20 minutes about the meeting with the funeral director.

[12 : 25] It's unexpected. And brothers and sisters, it's that way to make us think. There's something more important going on in this passage than Sarah's death and Abraham's mourning.

Well, what is it? Why this great length and talking about all this negotiation? Well, let's find out. Let's look at what it says. Abraham goes to the Hittites and he says, I'm an alien and a stranger here among you.

And I don't think he's just saying that because he's literally and physically an alien and stranger. That is true. He doesn't have a home there. Yet, that physical truth is a reflection of the deeper spiritual truth.

These exact words, alien and stranger, are picked up and they're applied in different places throughout the Bible. And it's not talking about people who are literal, physical aliens and strangers. I think at all, now, of all times, Abraham realizes that this world is not his home. I am not. I don't belong here.

[13 : 33] And Sarah's death makes that all the more clear. So Abraham says, I'm an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site. Abraham, you're a mighty prince among us.

You're a prince of God among us. You aren't an alien and a stranger. You're a prince of God. Do you want a tomb? You can borrow one of ours. Who are we to refuse you? A tomb. And Abraham rises and he bows down.

He does that several times. Rises and bows down and says, if you're willing to let me bury my dead, please speak to Ephron for me and ask him to sell me the cave of Machpelah, to sell it to me at the full price.

Abraham doesn't want to borrow one of their tombs. There's nothing wrong with a borrowed tomb. Our Lord had a borrowed tomb, didn't he?

But Abraham doesn't want to borrow a tomb because then it wouldn't be his. And it's important for us to realize that as Abraham buys this tomb, he's not only buying the place where Sarah will be buried, but he's also buying the place where he's going to be buried.

[14 : 47] Just like if you go through the graveyard today, you see husbands and wives so often buried together. And it was just the same then.

And so this is more than just Sarah's tomb. This is his tomb. And after he's dead, he doesn't want any doubt as to where he's going to be buried, where he should be buried. There's not going to be any legal doubts.

Abraham's main goal in this section is to get a tomb, to procure a tomb, legal, free and clear, above board, with everyone knowing that this is his.

Well, Ephron was there at the gate. And at the gate, that's where the legal matters were settled in the city. Legal matters were taken care of. Ephron says, no, my lord, I give you the field.

Bury your dead. That's not exactly what he says. No, my lord, I give you the field and I give you the cave that's in it. Bury your dead. Now, there's a couple things going on here. First of all, Ephron changes the offer a little bit.

[15 : 50] Did you notice that? Abraham asked for the cave. Ephron says, I give you the field and the cave. In other words, Abraham, if you want to buy the cave, you're going to have to buy the field

as well.

And then he offers it to him as a gift. Now, with our American ears, it's easy for us to think that this is a real, genuine offer.

But that would be reading it in our context and not the ancient Near Eastern context. In that culture and in that time and in other cultures in our own time, not ours, but in other cultures, if you admire something that belongs to someone else, it is polite then for that person to offer it to you.

With the idea that you're really not going to take it. Okay? But that's just what is polite. So, in our culture, if you come to my house and you say, oh, what a fabulous blender that is, and I say, oh, you can have it, and you take it, well, that would be surprising, but it's a genuine offer.

You take my blender, my wife smacks me upside the head later for giving away our blender. But in that culture, you were to come into my house and you said, oh, that's a beautiful blender, and I said, oh, here, you can have it.

[17:17] You would refuse. You would refuse. And my wife wouldn't smack me upside the head. One commentator explained it like this, the significant item is not the offer to give the land to Abraham, for this seems to have been a mere formality.

It was not an insincere offer, so much as one that no one would accept with honor. Ephron is only being polite.

But he does change the deal a little bit. If Abraham's going to buy the cave, he's going to have to buy the field along with it. So the deal is changed, but Abraham is undeterred.

He says, I will pay the price for the field. Accept it from me so that I can bury my dead there. If I have to buy the field along with the cave, fine. What is your price?

Let me, I'll pay it. Abraham is still saying, what's the price? He's a motivated buyer. He wants this over with. He wants to get this taken care of. Ephron sees that and says, oh, listen, my lord, the land is worth 400 shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me?

[18:31] Bury your dead. God. Now, again, it sounds like he's saying, price is no object. Here you can have it. Take it for free. But again, that's listening with our American ears and not the Near Eastern ears.

This is the language of polite bartering. Now, yes, he's offering it to him for free, but really, he's politely giving the first, the opening offer.

Opening the bartering at 400 shekels of silver. Now, most people think that this is an outrageously high price, right next to extortion.

There's really no way to tell. We don't have, we don't know what silver was worth. We don't know how big this field was or anything like that. In all probability, it's a really, it's probably a really high price.

It is, it's meant to be a starting price. A starting, the first offer. But surprisingly, Abraham says, fine, fine, I'll take it. Ephron's in the bartering mood.

[19:40] Abraham is not. Ephron sort of has Abraham bent over the barrel. And for Abraham, price is really, money is not a concern. He wants this over with.

He wants this to be a clear and legal purchase. And so in verse 17, it says, you get the summary of the purchase. You get what is purchased. And this is, if you've taken out a mortgage, you know on your first page of your mortgage note or somewhere near there, they have a description of the property that you bought.

And it's a very detailed, legal description. It gives the exact size and the plot number and the address and all this, that sort of thing. Very detailed description of the property that you're buying.

And so that's what verse 17 is.

It reads like a very technical description of the property. It's Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre, both the field and the cave in it and all the trees within the border of the field.

So even the trees are stained, which is good because trees are hard to move. Everything, everything in the whole field is deeded to Abraham.

[20:51] Everything is included as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. Do you see again and again, it's the legal language.

It was deeded. It was at the gate. It was in presence of the witnesses. You have the detailed description of the property. You have the notes of the negotiation.

Are you seeing the thrust of the passage? This was legal. It was above board. Completely paid for. There can be no disputing that Abraham has a piece of the land.

Now, what's the point? I mean, it's somewhat interesting. But what is the point? Why is this here? Well, before I answer that question, let me give you two more details.

In the beginning and the end of this chapter of this account, it tells us where this land is. Verse 2 and verse 19, it's in the land of Canaan.

[21:57] He had wandered a long time throughout the land, but now he has a piece of property, he has a possession, in the land of Canaan. The second thing I want to point out to you is that the cave and the land attached to it is called a possession.

The word gets dropped out of the NIV translation, which is a sad loss because it does give us a really big clue as to what, how to interpret this text.

In verses 4 and 9 and then in 20, Moses uses the word possession. It's translated in verse 4 as property and then in the other two verses it's lumped together under this term burial site.

So what you see here in Genesis 23 is Abraham gaining in a very small piece possession of the land.

And remember in Genesis 17, 8, God promised the whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien, I will give you as an everlasting possession.

[23:07] That's the word that's used three times in Genesis 23. I'm going to give you this as an everlasting possession to you and to your descendants after you. So what is the point of Genesis 23?

It's just this, in the face of Sarah's death, in the knowledge that he too is going to probably die without receiving the land in the face of his own death, he stakes a claim to the promised land.

By faith, he buys this cave with the field. God, I believe your promises. This land will be mine even though I die.

My death, my wife's death can't stop you from doing what you said you would do. So even in the face of death, Abraham looks to the promises of God and he believes them.

He looks ahead. He's counting on God keeping his promises even though he dies. And so what a rebuke this is to us.

[24:18] Abraham was heavenly minded. He was thinking of that place. And his death, Sarah's death, wasn't going to stop God from keeping his promises.

How often are you looking ahead? How often are you just thinking of here and now? But the question might be, how does this make any sense?

how can he think that God will keep his promises to give him land even though he's going to die if he's dead?

Now there's only one way that this makes sense and it's that he had his eye on a better country, a heavenly one, one that Canaan pictured.

So this cave, this land, the promised land, it was more than just real estate in Palestine to Abraham. It was a symbol of a heavenly country.

[25:30] And so when he buys this cave, when he stakes his claim in Canaan, he's saying God will give me an eternal possession. He will give me an eternal possession and death won't stop him from keeping his promises.

And so brothers and sisters, that's how we bury our dead who die in the Lord. We commit their bodies to the ground, their souls to the Lord, but we do it in hope of resurrection.

We do it in hope that God still is going to keep his promises. So Sarah's tomb, it was a place of sadness, but at the same time, it was a place of hope.

It was a place of expectation. Death will not have the final answer. God's promises will. After that, after he buried Sarah there, Abraham was later buried there in chapter 25.

We'll see that in a few weeks. And then that cave became a symbol of faith for Abraham's descendants. Isaac was buried there, Rebecca was buried there, Jacob and Leah too.

[26:46] And Hebrews says all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.

They were all commended for their faith, and yet none of them received what had been promised.

They died in faith, and one day we with them, we with them, brothers and sisters, only together with us, he says, we'll walk into a glorious new world.

We'll walk into a new heavens and a new earth. We see it from afar, but then we will see it up close.

Then we will have it under our feet and in our hands, and together we will take possession of the new promised land, a better country, a heavenly one.

And so we mourn by faith, but then we also bury our dead by faith, those who die in the Lord. And then third, if these things are true, then we should live.

We should live by faith. If that is coming, that is coming. New heavens, new earth, it's coming. The home of the righteous.

[28:07] That's coming. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, oh, death is your victory. Where, oh, death is your sting. Therefore, my dear brother, stand firm, let nothing move you, always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

So, if that is our future, brothers and sisters, if that is what we are looking for, if that is what we believe in, then what should we do? Stand firm.

We should stand firm. That's ahead. Let nothing move you. Not death, not cancer, not pain, not false teachers, not the devil himself, not the world.

Let nothing move you. What do people who believe in God's promises do? How do they live? They don't move from that expectation.

[29:14] They don't move from that hope. They don't fall away. And so, don't fall away. Don't lose hope. God has promised us a heavenly country, and it has been deeded to us.

And that deed has been sealed with the blood of Jesus Christ with his own life and death. And because he died, brothers and sisters, we will have that country. It is ours.

So stay the course, win the prize. Jesus Christ died to give you that new heavens and that new earth. Now, if that is our future, then how should we then live?

Paul goes on in that passage, always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. If all of our rewards for serving God came in this life, well, that would be some pretty sorry motivation, wouldn't it?

In reality. But God holds out heaven. He has all of eternity. He has forever and ever to reward you. That's what Paul is saying.

[30:25] So moms, keep serving your families. Keep serving your children. Keep loving them. Keep doing that good work of being a mom. Your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

You may die without seeing much of the reward. But you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Don't lose heart.

Don't lose heart. This life is not the whole answer. God has heaven. Just as people store up wrath, people also can store up reward.

So your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Men, keep teaching. Keep leading your families. Sometimes it can be so frustrating. Sometimes it can be so hard. Sometimes it doesn't seem like anyone appreciates you, but you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

God has forever to reward you. And brothers and sisters, then what about our work for the church? church of loving, of serving, of caring, of going, of giving.

[31:31] Many times no one will see any of it. Any of your work. Many times, often, no one will thank you, but your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

We live by faith. God has promised us a new heavens and a new earth, so live for that world. Don't live for this world, because pretty soon this world is going to be wrapped up and it's going to be over, and probably sooner than that you're going to die.

And then no one will know your name after a while, and no one will remember you. But in keeping with this promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

So as we close, let me ask you, will your grave be a place of hope, like Sarah's, like Abraham's, or will your grave be a place of utter and absolute hope?

If you die trusting in Jesus, then you can know that as you die, your best things are in front of you. All of God's promises are yes and amen and Christ Jesus.

[32:49] If you are in Christ, then this promise is yours. If you die trusting in Jesus, you can know that your best things are ahead. But if you die without trusting Him, then you will die with your best things behind you.

You'll be like that rich man who died and was buried. and being in hell where he was in torment, he looked up and he saw Abraham far away with Lazarus beside.

And so he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire.

But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your life you received your good things.

If you die without trusting in Jesus, you die having received your good things. And all the worst things will be ahead of you.

[34:00] And what makes it so bad is that it will never change. there will never be another chance. You'll be there forever and ever with only the memories of what used to be and what will never be again.

So don't let that happen to you. Jesus stands ready to save you. So will your grave be a place of hope or a place of despair?

What will it be for you? let's pray. Heavenly Father, I do pray that the seriousness of life and death of heaven and of hell will wake us up and will remind us that there is hell to escape and there is a heaven to win.

We can store up wrath for the day of wrath or we could live by faith and have treasure in heaven.

I pray that we would live for that heavenly treasure. Thank you that we have this example of Abraham who in the face of death believed your promises and knew that you would do all that you said that you would do.

[35:31] I pray that you would give us that kind of faith that faith of our father Abraham that we would be always looking ahead to heaven, the new heavens, the new earth.

Thank you that in time you will keep all of your promises. promises. We have thousands of years to look back on and we see your faithfulness.

Thank you that you do not change and I pray that you would give us faith then to believe and then for those who are lost, open their eyes, show them their danger, give them wisdom, give them spiritual insight to see the glory of Jesus Christ that they need him they desperately need him to save them from the wrath to come.

Pray that you would open their eyes, open their hearts, and deliver them from their sin. And do it for Jesus' sake that he would have glory in their lives.

And it's in his name I pray. Amen. Please take your hymnals and turn to 609. Not long and we will be there.

[36:51] Hymn 609. Let's stand as we sing.