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A Living Faith, Even in Death Genesis 25:1-18

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Whose story is Genesis? I've said this quite a few times, but it bears repeating because we're prone to forgetting: Genesis is God's story. In fact, *all* of Holy Scripture is God's story. We need to remember that. It's easy start thinking of these last fourteen chapters we've been studying as "Abraham's Story" or the coming chapters as "Jacob's Story" and "Joseph's Story". In the New Testament, we're prone to doing the same thing, thinking of books like Acts or Revelation as the "Church's Story". Brothers and sisters, it's important we remember that all these stories are *first* and *foremost* "God's Story". They record how he works through men and women, through patriarchs and kings, through prophets and apostles, but they are all, above all else, God's revelation of himself to us. God desires that we know him, know his will and his ways, so that we will love and trust him and give him the glory he is due. And so, through the inspiration of his Spirit, he's caused the Scriptures to be recorded and in doing that God chose to reveal himself to us by giving us a record of his dealings with and through those patriarchs and kings and those prophets and apostles. We certainly learn something from reading about the lives of Abraham and David and Peter and Paul, but our focus should be on God's story—on his revelation of himself through his dealings with them.

The wonderful thing about God's choosing to reveal himself by giving us a record of his dealings with

human beings in the past is that in doing so, God gives us examples of what it looks like to walk in the faith to which he has called us. The saints of the past serve as examples to us as they respond to God's promises and covenants. In them God gives us valuable examples and models—of how we should live and, often, how not to live.

As we come to Genesis 25 we come to the end of Abraham's life. And yet the record of Abraham's death and burial is brief and it's sandwiched between two genealogical records. In fact, the focus actually seems to be more on his descendants than on him. It might seem a little odd. After fourteen chapters, we say goodbye to an old friend, someone we've come to know as we've read about him. And the more we've read about him, the more we realise just how important Abraham is in the story of redemption. And so it might seem odd that he isn't given greater honour here at his death. It might *seem* that way, that is, until we remember that this is God's story, not Abraham's. Consider the account we read two chapters back of Sarah's death. Again, the focus on Sarah was minimal. Her death takes up an entire chapter, but the focus of most of that chapter is on Abraham's negotiations to purchase a tomb for her and for his family. And we saw that the reason for the focus being on Abraham's purchase of the tomb, instead of being on Sarah's death, was because the *real* point of the story was the fulfilment of God's promise. God had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and to his descendants. Sarah's death became the opportunity for God to give to Abraham the first *real* down payment on that promise. In that tomb we see God at work, making good on his promises. And we see Abraham's faith in God's promise.

He wasn't willing to settle for the temporary gift of a burial place for Sarah. He knew that the land would one day belong to his descendants and so he insisted on a permanent tomb for his family.

Again, it's God's story—his revelation of himself. The story is about God making good on his promise and as he does so, we see the example of Abraham and the vindication of his faith in those promises. As we read the story we come to know God that much better: we learn more of his faithfulness. And in Abraham we see an example of what it looks like to trust in God's faithfulness. That's how Scripture works. We see more of this in Chapter 25. Look at verses 1 to 4:

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.

As we come to the end of Abraham's life, the writer of Genesis ties up some loose ends. In terms of genealogies, one of the patterns we've seen is that the storyteller usually gives information on the "dead end" lines before moving on to tell us the stories of the children through whom God works out his plan of redemption. We saw this as the storyteller told us about the line of Cain, which was a spiritual dead-end, before telling us about the righteous Seth, whose line led us to Noah. He told us about the spiritual dead-end lines of Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, before giving us the genealogy of righteous Shem, which took us to Abraham. And now, before telling us the story of Isaac,

the miraculous son of promise whom God gave to Abraham and Sarah, the writer first tells us about some more spiritual dead-ends.

In this case we're told that, "Abraham took another wife, whose name of Keturah." We're not sure exactly when Abraham took Keturah as his wife or when her six sons were born. We've seen already that not all the events and stories we read in Genesis have been recorded in chronological order. The author or the later editors were master storytellers and sometimes they tell us things out of order so that minor events like this don't intrude on the major events and stories. Genesis 24, for example, seems to imply that Abraham had died while his servant was on his journey to Padam-Aram to fetch a bride for Isaac, and yet it's not until the next chapter that we have the report of Abraham's death.

Bible scholars and interpreters have never agreed on where Keturah came into Abraham's life. St. Augustine argued that in miraculously bringing about the conception of Isaac in Abraham's old age, that God had left Abraham reinvigorated and so, feeling young again, Abraham remarried after the death of Sarah. But the Church Fathers tended to avoid any biblical interpretations that would tarnish the "plaster saint" image they had of the patriarchs. They didn't like the idea that Abraham, the father of the faithful, might have been a polygamist.

On the other side of the debate, John Calvin argued that Abraham took Keturah into his household at some point between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac. He speculated that Abraham may have taken a new concubine after Sarah forced him to divorce Hagar and to send Ishmael away. Verse 1 refers to Keturah as Abraham's "wife", but verse 6

seems to indicate that she was a "concubine". First Chronicles also refers to her as his "concubine", which certainly suggests that Abraham took her while Sarah was still alive. This is the view that I find most probable, but again, we can't be sure.

Bible scholars still disagree on the timeline. It's easier to answer the question of *why* this is recorded for us here. Whenever it was that Abraham fathered these six sons, *people knew about them*. In fact, while a couple of these names are mysteries to us, most of them are attested in historical and archaeological records. The sons of Keturah were the fathers of a number of tribes that later settled in places like Syria, the Arabian peninsula, and the Sinai wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. Some of them were associated with the spice trade and the Midianites, especially, were a people of five tribes with whom Moses and the Israelites would later interact during the Exodus from Egypt and their wanderings in the wilderness. *The account of Keturah and her sons reminded the Israelites that these tribes they encountered were children of Abraham too and their prosperity is a reminder that when God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants, he made good on his promise.* The specific promises of the covenant were to Isaac, the miraculous son of promise, but God ensured that even the *natural* sons of Abraham were blessed. Again, we see that God is faithful. In fact, he's even faithful when we are less than faithful.

This also addresses the problem of obstacles in the way of God's covenant promises. We've seen this theme played out over and over. God made promises to Abraham: that he would have a son and that through that son he would inherit

Canaan and be a blessing to the nations. But there have been obstacles to those promises. Abraham was a resident alien in the land of promise, which was not only controlled by others, but filled with them: the Canaanites filled the cities and the Perizzites the countryside (Genesis 13:7). Sarah was barren and her scheme to provide a son through her maid, Hagar, only created more problems and setup Ishmael as a rival to the true son of promise. Over and over we've seen obstacles in the way of God's promises, but over and over we've seen those obstacles removed.

Certainly if Ishmael, Abraham's natural son by Hagar, had been an obstacle to Isaac's inheritance, these sons of Keturah were obstacles too, so here the storyteller assures us that they've been dealt with:

Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country. (Genesis 25:5-6)

Abraham ensured that the miraculous son God had provided through his wife, Sarah, was his sole heir. He was generous with the sons of his concubines, Hagar and Keturah, but while he was still living he sent them away so that they would not be a threat to God's promises. This also supports the conclusion that Keturah was a concubine and not Abraham's wife. The sons of wives were owed an inheritance; the sons of concubines were not.¹

Skipping down to verses 12 to 18 we see more of this tying up of loose ends. Abraham's sons by Keturah

¹ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 159.

were generously blessed by God, because they were Abraham's sons. But when it came to Ishmael, God had made specific promises of blessing. Ishmael had been Abraham's beloved son. In fact, for more than a decade, Abraham had believed him to be the son God had promised. And so when God had told him that Sarah would supernaturally have a son in her old age—Isaac—Abraham's first thought was for Ishmael. What would happen to him? And in response to Abraham's concern, God had promised that, while Ishmael was not the inheritor of his original covenant promises, he would nevertheless greatly bless Ishmael. Like Isaac, Ishmael would become a great nation. Like Isaac's family, which would be ruled over by twelve tribal princes, so would Ishmael's.

And so, again, we're told that Abraham was generous with the sons of his concubines, including Ishmael, but that he also sent them away so that they wouldn't be a threat to Isaac as his heir. This genealogical record assures us that Ishmael is no longer an obstacle in the way of God's promises for Isaac, but what about the promises he had made to Abraham and to Hagar about Ishmael? Here in verses 12 to 18 we see God make good on them. He's not the child of promise, but God still blesses him as he said he would. And this is one of those places where the author of Genesis gives us the details about the spiritual dead-end just before he picks up the story of Isaac, through whom God will work out his plan.

These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's servant, bore to Abraham. These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the

firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes. (These are the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years. He breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.) They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria. He settled over against all his kinsmen.

As with Keturah's sons, many of the names of Ishmael's sons can be connected with various peoples, tribes, and places we know from history and archaeology. A few of them are still mysteries to us, but the ones we know were tribes of the Arabian peninsula and the region east of Canaan.

What stands out as remarkable about God's blessing on both Ishmael's and Keturah's sons is just how faithful God is, even when we are less than faithful. Ishmael was the result of Abraham and Sarah trying to force God's hand to bring about his promise in their own way and by adulterous means. Keturah was probably a concubine and part of a polygamous relationship. Granted that God's will for marriage wouldn't be revealed until centuries later when the Scriptures began to be written. Abraham wouldn't have known that polygamy was wrong, but it's remarkable that God was willing to bless these sons and grandsons. As time goes by we'll even see God incorporate them into his plans for Israel, using them first to help his people during their flight from Egypt and later to chasten his people when they walk in disobedience.

But, most importantly here, is the account of Abraham's death. Look at verses 7 to 11:

These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife. After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.

God had called Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his religion and to follow him. In return he had promised him an inheritance far better than that which he was giving up. He promised that he would die at a good old age and we see that here. Abraham lived a total of 100 years in the land of promise and in the hope of the fulfilment of that promise, he was laid to rest in the tomb he had purchased for Sarah. Even in death Abraham "lived" by faith, having his sons lay him to rest in that little parcel of land that represented God's down payment to him on the land of Canaan.

I appreciate the way in which John Calvin sums up Abraham's life of faith:

"The first thing to be noticed concerning his age is the number of years during which he lived as a pilgrim; for he deserves the praise of wonderful and incomparable patience, for having wandered through the space of a hundred years, while God led him about in various directions, *contented, both in*

*life and death, with the bare promise of God.*²

Consider that. Abraham knew hardly anything of God. He had no Bible. His ancestors had no faith in the Lord to pass on to him. He knew nothing more than that God had called him and made a promise to him. And for a century he walked in faith, trusting this virtually unknown God. In time God miraculously provided the son he had promised, but even after a century, Abraham had nothing more of the promised land than a burial tomb and a field. And still, even in death, he walked in faith. The “bare promise of God” was enough.

Abraham walked in faith for a century with little more than a promise. How often do we struggle to walk in faith for much shorter periods of time? Abraham had no Bible and knew little more of God than that he was faithful to those whom he calls. We have the Scriptures and we have all the examples they give us of God’s faithfulness throughout the generations. And we have the witness passed down to us: the witness of Abraham’s physical descendants who, for more than a thousand years, saw the fulfilment of God’s promises in their lives and the witness of two thousand years of our fellow Christians—that great cloud of witnesses—who show us God at work to bring his kingdom to pass. Abraham walked in faith, but consider how much more reason we have to walk in faith! Calvin goes on:

“Although [Abraham] fought a hard and severe battle, yet his consolation was neither light nor small; because he knew that, amidst so many

sufferings, his life was the object of Divine care. But if this sole looking unto God sustained him through his whole life, amidst the most boisterous waves, amidst many bitter griefs, amidst tormenting cares, and in short an accumulated mass of evils; let us also learn—that we may not become weary in our course—to rely on this support, that the Lord has promised us a happy issue of life, and one truly far more glorious than that of our father Abraham.”³

Think of that. Brothers and sisters, you and I live with the fulfilled promises of God *behind* us. We live in the full glory of the Gospel and of the light of Christ. Abraham trusted in a *future* hope and promise. He had no idea how God would work it out. His hope had no name. We live with that promise fulfilled. We live as people of the cross and of the resurrection and we know the name of the Lord Jesus Christ who offered himself on that cross as a sacrifice for our sins and rose again, all in fulfilment of the promises given to the people of the Old Covenant. We live our lives united to the Son of Abraham through his own Holy Spirit. If Abraham could walk in faith knowing only the promise, imagine how much greater our faith ought to be as we live the fulfilment and consummation of that promise in our own lives. Like Abraham, we are strangers and sojourners in a country not our own, but *unlike* him, you and I have first hand knowledge of the kingdom of heaven in which we live; we know the true Son of promise personally—the Messiah; we live with God’s revelation of himself—the Holy Scriptures—in our hands that we might know everything he’s chosen to reveal. Think on these things when you’re tempted to be discouraged, when you’re tempted to doubt, when

you’re tempted to live by sight instead of by faith. If Abraham could walk in such strong faith having only a bare promise, how much more ought we to be walking in faith having experienced its fulfilment?

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you for your promises and thank you that we see them fulfilled, not only in the Scriptures you have caused to be written, but in our own lives and the lives of our brothers and sisters. Thank you that even in the “boring” genealogies of these ancient spiritual dead-ends, we see your faithfulness to what you have promised. Help us to remember these evidences of your faithfulness as we struggle to walk by faith in our daily lives and give us grace and strength for the journey you have called each of us to walk. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), vol. 2, p. 36.

³ *Ibid.*