



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Small Step of Big Faith

Genesis 23:1-20

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In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus sums up what it means us to live as Kingdom people. He tells us there:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Do you ever consider that what you spend your time and your resources building in this life is a reflection of what you value and where your faith lies? Jesus reminds us that nothing here on this earth is of lasting value unless it’s Kingdom oriented. Moth and rust destroy and thieves steal. In contrast, when by faith we invest in the things of God’s kingdom, we have no need to worry about destruction and loss. God is a guarantor and he promises to bless us for our faith, saying:

Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. (Matthew 6:38)

Do we have faith that he will do that? Do we have faith that he will build and establish his kingdom eternally? And are we willing to invest in it by faith? Or are we consumed with earthly cares and earthly treasures, putting our attention only on today and giving little thought to the kingdom and our place in it?

These are questions of faith and our text today from Genesis 23 gives us spiritual direction as we see Abraham’s example of trust in God. The story at this point

in Genesis is beginning to shift its attention from Abraham to Isaac. Abraham is getting old—well, *older*—and the story focuses on his preparations for the next generation and ensuring his son’s place and the place of future generations in God’s covenant. And so Chapter 23 begins with the death of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. Look at verses 1 to 2:

Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

Scripture honours Sarah here as the mother of God’s faithful covenant people; she’s the only woman in the Bible whose lifespan is recorded. So we’re reminded just how important she is in the story of redemption. The narrator tells us that Abraham went in to mourn for her. This might mean that when he got word of her death, he travelled from Beersheba to Hebron to mourn for her; Beersheba is the last place we saw him in the story. But in that culture, because mourning rites were done in the presence of the deceased person, it may simply refer to Abraham mourning in her tent. Whatever the case, he mourns his beloved. And yet the focus of the next eighteen verses is *not* Sarah. Chapter 23 is centred on Abraham’s purchase of a burial tomb. It’s full of details about his negotiations for and purchase of a tomb and it’s loaded with ancient Canaanite “legalese”. Why? Sarah’s death becomes an opportunity for Abraham to take a step of faith, to invest in God’s promises, and to secure a little bit more of his future hope.

The story continues in verse 3 and 4:

And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”

The heart of the story starts here. It begins by giving us a picture of Abraham rising—getting up—from his place of mourning at the side of his dead

wife. The closing bracket on the story uses the same word; the property deed “rises”, which is a Hebrew or Canaanite way describe it’s going from the previous owner’s hand to the new owner’s hand.

Anyhow, Abraham rise from his mourning and goes into the nearby town. He wants to purchase a tomb for Sarah’s burial. That might not seem like a big deal to us. Today we simply go down to the mortuary and purchase a funeral package and as part of the package a burial plot or a columbarium niche is purchased from the city. In ancient Palestine they didn’t have cemeteries. A family—especially well-to-do families like Abraham’s—would have a cave or a carved-out tomb somewhere on their property. There was usually a shelf inside of it and when a family member died, their body was put on the shelf along with various burial items. After the body decomposed or when the next family member died, the bones were either collected and put into an ossuary box and set aside or simply swept into a pile at the back of the tomb along with other previous remains. There were two important things about their burial practises: First, the tomb was a sort of “family plot”. It was on family property and that property stayed in the family from generation to generation. Second, this meant that the tomb was a real point of continuity for the family. People in those days didn’t have a conception of the afterlife as we do. For them, their greatest fear in the afterlife was simply losing continuity with their living family members and having no one to remember them, to carry one their name, to pray for them, or to provide for their physical needs after death.¹ Genesis doesn’t give us any reason to believe that Abraham’s understanding of life after death was any different at this point. The full-blown idea of final judgement and heaven and hell weren’t fully revealed by God in the Scriptures until the New Testament Era. So for Abraham, having a tomb—some place for burial that would belong to his family—was very important. The idea

¹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 324-329.

of putting Sarah in a hole in the ground and the moving on was completely antithetical to his way of thinking.

This is where Abraham's dilemma comes up. As he says to the locals, "that I may bury my dead out of my sight". The NLT might be better in simply paraphrasing this as "so I can give my wife a property burial." That's the point: proper burial according to his customs. But Abraham is a "stranger and sojourner". That's a Hebrew way of saying that he's a "resident alien". The natives of Canaan have been fine with Abraham grazing his flocks here and there and living a nomadic lifestyle—Abimelech even invited him to setup camp wherever he pleased within his territory—but actually *acquiring* land that would legally belong to him and to his sons was a different story. This is why Abraham goes to the city gate. That's where the town elders met and it was up to the elders to decide whether or not one of their own could sell his property to a resident alien like Abraham.

This desire to buy a tomb, not only to bury his wife, but to be a place of burial for his descendants to come is the focus of this story. Sarah's death becomes an occasion for us to see Abraham's faith in God's promise. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham, but so far he has very little. He has no title at all to any piece of land. When he and his men defeated Chedorlaomer Abraham won the right by conquest to claim all the lands and peoples that Chedorlaomer had defeated and subjugated, but Abraham refused that right. He knew God was going to give him the land, not some pagan kings. The most Abraham has so far is the right to use a well that his men dug near Beersheba. And yet Abraham has faith that God will make good on his promise of the land. He's ready to bury his wife in this new land. In a very real way, burying Sarah in Canaan symbolises his putting down roots.

The Hittites answered Abraham, "Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will

withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead." Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. And he said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place." (Genesis 23:5-9)

We get a glimpse into Abraham's humility here. He presents himself as a "sojourner and foreigner"—the lowest of the low—and they respond by addressing him as a mighty prince. Even the Hittites can see that while Abraham may be a landless nomad, he lives with God's blessings surrounding him—they can see that there's something different about him. Abraham is being the witness that God calls his people to be. And yet the Hittites aren't comfortable selling him a plot of land. To actually sell him a piece of land means that one of their people is permanently giving up land that would otherwise stay in their community and be passed to his sons. It also means giving this foreigner—no matter how much like him and are on good terms with him—it means giving Abraham a foothold and a claim in *their* territory.

He asks to *purchase* a burial place. They offer instead to let him use the finest of their tombs. But Abraham wants a permanent solution. They're only ready to offer him something temporary. Abraham might bury Sarah in a borrowed tomb, but a borrowed tomb gives him no claim on the land and no permanent place to anchor his family. So Abraham firmly persists and asks to purchase a cave owned by a man named Ephron. He even stresses: "It's at the end of Ephron's field, it's in an out-of-the-way spot, and I'm only interested in the cave, not the land around it." (If tradition is accurate, we can still go and visit this cave. It's still there, near near Hebron, at the site of the Haram El-Khalil mosque.) And Abraham offers to pay full price for this cave. This is

probably a legal way of insisting that he wants to make a cash purchase for a final and irrevocable sale. Abraham is doing his best to cover his bases. He isn't willing to settle for a temporary, borrowed tomb to which he has no claim. He also wants to make sure that the purchase is fully settled. He doesn't want Ephron's son showing up years later claiming that Abraham cheated his father out of the real value of the cave and disputing the ownership of it.

Ephron doesn't seem ready to make that kind of deal.

Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, "No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead." (Genesis 23:10-11)

Ephron seems to be fairly generous; he's even offering to give Abraham the field in addition to the cave. He's willing to "give" the tomb to Abraham and we can tell that he's really ready to do that because the text stresses that he made this offer in the presence of all the elders gathered at the city gate. But giving Abraham the tomb isn't what Abraham wants. In that culture, to receive a gift meant that he would then owe something to the person who gave the gift. Ephron may be using this to manipulate Abraham—a wealthy and powerful man. Abraham doesn't want that. Neither does he want Ephron's heirs contesting the gift and taking it back at some later time. This is not the way Abraham expects God to fulfil his promise and give him the land. And so Abraham responds:

Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." Ephron answered Abraham, "My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me?"

Bury your dead.” Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. (Genesis 23:12-16)

Again, Abraham offers to purchase the land. Ephron offered to give him the field and Abraham now reiterates his desire for a final sale by offering to pay the full price again, but this time for the cave *and* the field. Ephron responds by making an offer. According to their traditions, once the price was stated, it gave Abraham the option of purchasing it. Ephron states 400 shekels as a sale price. We really can’t say for certain whether that was a fair price or not. We know from some bills of sale that exist from that time that other pieces of land were sold for 400 shekels, but this is one field and a cave. Although it happened centuries later, David paid only 50 shekels for the site on which the temple was built. Ephron’s price does *seem* high. And yet he still tells Abraham: “400 Shekels is nothing between us. Just take it.” He’s made the offer to sell, but he’d still rather not. Abraham won’t take “no” for an answer and weighs out the silver right there.

And so having purchased the field and the tomb, the narrator concludes the story in verses 17 to 20:

So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

Again, the way the story is told draws out attention to the narrator’s *real* purpose. To us it’s just a story about the

death of Sarah Abraham buying a tomb for her. But the story is told in ancient contract language. The language stresses the specific location of the field and the cave—much as a modern plot plan or geographic survey would specify the exact place and dimensions of a piece of property we might buy today. The narrator even stresses the inclusion of the trees. In that time and place the trees were considered appurtenances and so legally they had to be included in the deed.

The Hebrew literally says that the deed “rose” and went over to Abraham. This is the bracket that neatly ends the story. Abraham first rose to buy the tomb and now the deed for the tomb rises from Ephron and is given to Abraham. And again the narrator stresses that all this took place in the presence of the elders of the town. Abraham has an ironclad legal claim on this land.

The story ends with Abraham burying Sarah in the tomb. He does what he sets out to do: to give his wife a fitting burial according to his custom. But more important than the custom is the fact that all of this is an act of faith on Abraham’s part. Thirty-eight years later, Abraham will be placed in that same tomb, and as time goes on Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah will all express their faith by being buried there too. None of them had any more claim on the land than Abraham did. They were all sojourners and foreigners there, but they all believed God’s promise that in time their children would inherit it. And that’s the point and the real focus of this chapter of Genesis. This is why the story is so full of ancient “legalese” and the details of Abraham’s negotiations to purchase the tomb and the field. Abraham’s purchase of this property and his burial of Sarah there was an act of faith. God had promised him the land and here he takes the opportunity to put down a root for his family in the full expectation that, given time, God will fulfil his promise.

Abraham’s example should encourage us to walk in faith, trusting in God’s promises even when we can’t see how they’re going to come about. He was a

sojourner and a foreigner in a strange land and yet God had promised that one day it would belong to his children, and so he acted in faith and made an investment in the land God had promised.

Abraham is a type of every Christian. We too are strangers and sojourners in a land that is not truly our own. This is where we have to make a bit of a leap. Abraham’s faith was in God’s promise of an earth kingdom and so he made an earthy investment. You and I have put our faith in God’s promise of a spiritual kingdom, and this is why Jesus calls us to lay up treasures in heaven instead of laying up treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break in and steal. Trusting God is often a challenge for many of us. We’d rather play it safe and keep one foot in the world “just in case”. But if we do that, we’re not really trusting God. Brothers and sisters, Abraham should encourage us to walk by faith. The Old Testament is a witness to God making good on his plans of the earth inheritance that he promised to Abraham. And consider that the New Testament is a witness to the fulfilment of the even better spiritual inheritance that had been promised. We truly are surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses”, as the writer of Hebrews tells us. Abraham is there along with all the other saints who have trusted in the promises of the Father and found them fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Let us trust God too; let us live with both our feet firmly planted in the kingdom of heaven; let us live in joyful expectation of the fulfilment of God’s promises of provision, of restoration, and of new life.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks for the witness of Abraham. Even though he lived in the land of promise as a stranger and sojourner, he trusted your promise that the land would one day be his. As we look back at his faith and at the fulfilment of your promises to him, give us grace to trust you to fulfil your promises to us. Help us to let go of the world, to let go of “things”, to let go of any trust we have in ourselves, and to trust you fully. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.