

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

The Death of Abraham (Genesis 25:1-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 30, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ This summer we've been in a sermon series in the middle chapters of the book of Genesis, looking at the life of Abraham. And this morning, we're concluding our study with Genesis 25, which records an account of Abraham's death. For those who are not familiar with this biblical character, Abraham was introduced in Genesis 12. And he ends up as the forefather of the Israelites, the Old Testament people of God.
 - **In Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel, the sin of humanity resulted in the confusion of language and the fracturing of humanity into divided factions and families.** But immediately, in Genesis 12, the LORD God initiated a plan to redeem the mess we made by choosing one man and blessing his family that they might become a blessing to all the families of the earth. Bringing us together into one new humanity that is characterized by truth and not confusion, by unity and not division.
 - So we've seen, from Genesis 12 to 25, the LORD God carrying out his plan of redemption through Abraham and his wife Sarah. **There were plenty of ups and downs – high points and low points in their story. Moments when they demonstrated great faith in the LORD or tragic reliance on the self.** But by chapter 25, the LORD has proven himself faithful – in spite of their faithlessness – and provided for Abraham and Sarah a son of promise named Isaac, who now has a wife of his own and is starting his own family.

- ❖ So Abraham is finally living up to his name. **Abraham means “father of a multitude”, and I can imagine, for many years, that name was an embarrassment.** God gave him that name back in Genesis 17:5 when all he had was Ishmael, the son he bore with Hagar. He had gone through decades of marriage with Sarah, struggling with infertility. Then he relied on his own wisdom and ability to procure for himself a son in his old age. And God responds by changing his name to “*father of a multitude*”. It sounds like a cruel joke. It's like a cripple being nicknamed Speedy or a midget being called Goliath. It feels like an insult.
 - **But, by the time of his death, Abraham truly is a father of a multitude of nations.** That's highlighted in today's text. Notice how the account of his death in v7 is bookended by two genealogies. The first, in vv1-4, lists the children and grandchildren he had with a concubine named Keturah. The second genealogy, in vv12-16, lists the twelve grandsons Ishmael gave him. **So by the time of his death at a good old age, Abraham was literally an *abraham*.** There was nothing inconsistent or ironic about his name. He was literally a father of a multitude of nations.

- ❖ **And to this day, a multitude of people groups would trace their lineage back to Abraham.** Muslims, Jews, and Christians would all address him as Father Abraham. We would all consider him a patriarch – a father of our faith. Just as in today's text, many would trace their spiritual lineage back to him.
 - **But the point in our text is that – while Abraham has many children of natural descent (many children of the flesh) – he has only one child of supernatural descent (one child of the promise).** And the focus in Genesis 25 is squarely on Abraham's child of promise and his descendants.

- ❖ So when you read this passage with this conspicuous juxtaposition of these two lineages – **it raises an important question for each of us to ask, “To which lineage do I belong? Am I merely a child of the flesh or am I a child of the promise?”**
 - Yes, what I’m suggesting is that these primeval genealogies are not restricted to the annals of ancient history. That these lineages extend all the way into our day and into our lives. We are all of one or the other. **We are either mere humans of natural descent (people of the flesh) OR we are new creations of supernatural origin (people of the promise).** And I hope you come away from this message with clarity regarding which line of descendants you’re in. And I pray that you will receive God’s invitation to join his supernatural people of the promise.

- ❖ With that end in mind, I want to highlight three contrasts between these two lineages – contrasts between people of the flesh and people of the promise. Two of them are found in our passage and the third in Hebrews 11 which offers a uniquely Christian interpretation and summary of Abraham’s story, including his death.

God’s Gifts OR God’s Covenant Blessings

- ❖ Here is our first contrast between these two lineages. **While people of the flesh can enjoy God’s gifts, people of the promise are recipients of all his covenant blessings (vv5-6).** God is merciful and kind, giving good gifts that all peoples can enjoy, but only his chosen covenant people will enjoy the inheritance of heaven guaranteed by his covenant promises. **So while the people of the flesh can experience many good things in life, they pale in comparison to the blessings found in a covenant relationship with God.** Something you don’t want to miss out on.

- ❖ Take a look at vv1-6. We learn in v1 that, besides Hagar, Abraham had another concubine named Keturah. I know it says he took her as a wife, but at the same time, in v6, she’s described as one of his concubines. **So Abraham did marry her, but, according to the ancient Near Eastern practice, she didn’t have the legal status of a wife like Sarah.**
 - Now we don’t know for sure if he took Keturah as a concubine while Sarah was still alive or only after her death. Some commentators suggest it was while Sarah was around and that these six sons were born to Abraham even before Isaac. Otherwise, you could argue that their births were just as (or even more) miraculous and supernatural than Isaac since Abraham would’ve been even more advanced in years.
 - **But regardless of when he took Keturah as a concubine, Abraham ended up having six sons with her.** And based on their names and the names of their grandchildren, we can extrapolate that these descendants – along with the twelve sons of Ishmael – would eventually become the people groups who occupy the entire Arabian peninsula, stretching all the way to Egypt. **So they eventually become all the various Gentile nations that surround Israel.**

- ❖ But even though future generations of these descendants would become some of Israel's most feared enemies, it's important to note how these sons of Abraham were still blessed with good gifts. Look at v6, "*But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts.*" He didn't neglect them nor treat them harshly. **He provided his children of the flesh with good gifts.**
 - But even so, Abraham made a point to reserve the blessings of the covenant for Isaac, his child of promise. It says in v5 that he, "*gave all he had to Isaac.*" **That means the inheritance went to Isaac alone.** All the promised blessings of land and offspring and the unique mission to bless all the families of the earth – all of that was going to Isaac and would be channeled through his line, the eventual people of Israel.
 - And it says in v6 that, while Abraham was still alive, he made a point of sending the sons of his concubines, "*away from his son, Isaac, eastward to the east country.*" **He did what he could to ensure that the Promised Land would be in the hands of Isaac and his descendants.**

- ❖ Now I know, at first glance, it seems rather harsh and unloving to treat his other sons this way. He gives all he has to Isaac – all the inheritance – and sends away his other sons with some gifts. I can see how that looks.
 - **But you have to evaluate that decision in light of the bigger narrative and the greater mission God has for the nation of Israel.** He chose Abraham. He chose Isaac. He sets apart their descendants from all the other nations of the earth – to serve as a royal priesthood, as a holy nation (Ex 19:6). Israel is to function as a lamp on a stand – Jerusalem is to be a city on a hill – and the nations of the earth, all peoples of the flesh, are to be drawn to their light. **So Isaac and his line need to be set apart and uniquely blessed, so that they can, one day, provide the requisite blessing that all the nations of the earth so desperately need.**
 - Here's how one commentator (Derek Kidner) put it. He said, "*In God's plan, these sons were sent away that there might be a true home, in the end, to return to.*" If these sons of the flesh weren't sent away now – so that God's redemptive plans could be carried out through the son of the promise – then there would be no Promised Land for them to return to in the future.

- ❖ This bigger, missional plan is on display in the prophetic book of Isaiah. **In Isaiah 60, the prophet points to a future day when the future descendants of these other sons of Abraham will come to the light of the LORD shining through the people of Israel.** Listen and you'll hear some of the same names found in our text – the other sons of Abraham.
 - In Isaiah 60:3, it begins by saying, "*³And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ⁴Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they are gathered together, they come to you; . . . ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah (25:4); all those from Sheba (25:3) shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. ⁷All the flocks of Kedar (25:13) shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth (25:13) shall minister to you.*"

- ❖ So we see five sons or grandsons of the flesh referenced in this prophecy. And all of their descendants gathering to Israel. Coming to the people of the promise. And bringing good news and praise; and good gifts of gold and frankincense. **And the mention of those gifts draws our mind immediately to the wise men from the East bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus – who, by the way, is the ultimate Son of the promise that Isaac merely prefigured.**
 - You see, if the other sons of Abraham weren't sent away – if Isaac and his line were not uniquely preserved and uniquely blessed – then there would not have been a Messiah in Israel. The Hope of the nations would not have been born. **God's plan, all along, was to choose one nation; enter into a covenant relationship with them; and extravagantly bless them.** So that one day a Messiah – an Anointed Son of the Promise – would fulfill that mission of blessing the nations. Of drawing confused and divided peoples to himself, from every nation of the earth, reversing the effects of Babel. Creating one new humanity in himself marked by truth and unity.

- ❖ **I know this idea of God choosing one child over another, whether it's Abel over Cain; Isaac over Ishmael; Jacob over Esau – it doesn't sit well with many.** Or how he chooses one nation over others and extravagantly blesses them – I get how that could be interpreted as exclusive and elitist. It seems to foster a sense of superiority.
 - But I'm arguing that we only come to that conclusion if we've misinterpreted God's purpose behind choosing. **Being chosen by God is not grounds for boasting. It's a call to missions.** The chosen ones are not being complimented because they're so great. They're being compelled to action – to be a great channel of God's blessing to the nations. Namely, by proclaiming the good news of how anyone in the world can join us in a covenant relationship with God by receiving his Son, Jesus our Messiah.
 - He died for our sins. He was raised for our redemption. **If you put your trust in Jesus, you can change your lineage.** You can experience a supernatural rebirth and convert from being a child of the flesh to a child of the promise. That's an open invitation to all.

- ❖ **Friends, if your experience of Christianity feels exclusive and elitist, Christians and our poor behavior are to blame for that.** Christianity itself is not to blame. God's sovereign plan to send away the other sons of Abraham; to extravagantly bless Isaac and his line; so that the True Child of the Promise would arrive and perform his redemptive work; turning the people of the promise into a channel of blessing to all peoples of the earth – that's not harsh and unloving. That's the good news of the gospel.

Die After a Good Long Life OR Live Again After Death

- ❖ That's the first contrast I want us to consider. The people of the flesh can enjoy good gifts, but it's the people of the promise who are set apart to both receive covenant blessings and to channel them to the world. That's a stark difference in life, but there's also a big difference in death. Here's our second contrast: **While people of the flesh can hope to die after a good long life, people of the promise can hope to live again after death** (vv7-8).

- ❖ **In other words, if you are merely a natural person (of the flesh), then the most you can hope for in life is limited to this life.** So your best hope is for death to be delayed – to not come calling until you are well along in the advanced years of your life. **But, as we’ll see from Abraham’s experience, death after a good long life – while a blessing in itself – pales in comparison to the experience of new life after death.** Look at vv7-8. *“⁷These are the days of the years of Abraham’s life, 175 years. ⁸Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.”*
- ❖ **Now that’s what I think all of us would want written in our obituary when it’s our time to go. That we died in a good old age.** As an old man or old woman. Full of years. So far in our study of Genesis, we’ve come across a number of deaths, but no one’s death, to this point, has been described like this. This paints a picture of completeness and satisfaction. No regrets. He had lived a good long life and was ready to go.
- ❖ **Just think about how long Abraham lived and all he experienced.** It says he died at the age of 175. If you recall, he was one hundred when he had Isaac. And his twin grandsons, Jacob and Esau, were fifteen years old when he died (cf. 25:26). And not to mention his other children and grandchildren. **So by the time of his death, Abraham had been blessed to see his children grow up and to see them have children of their own.** That’s something I’m sure we all want. We all hope to be so blessed to live long enough to see the same thing.
 - And that’s because it is a blessing. **Scripture considers it a blessing to die at a good old age.** Now that’s not to say there aren’t challenges that come with aging. There is reason to fear the effects of dementia. To be worried about the loss of your memory or your mental faculties. Those of you who have taken care of aging parents who face such challenges – you might have a more pessimistic view at the thought of living to a good old age. I don’t want to minimize those fears or concerns of yours.
- ❖ **But I’m fairly certain we all consider dying young to be a tragedy and would prefer that death comes to us at an older age.** Dementia aside, the thought of dying in a good old age as an old man, full of years sounds really good to me. I assume that sounds good to you too.
 - **But my whole point is that, for the natural person, that final outcome is as good as it gets. But what if there’s more?** What if there’s something better than to die after a good long life? What if you can live again after that inevitable death?
- ❖ Friends, that’s the very hope of the supernatural people of the promise. It’s alluded to at the end of v8, *“and [he] was gathered to his people.”* It didn’t say that Abraham was gathered to his tomb, to his grave. No, it says to his people.
 - Now we’re told later in v10 that he was buried in the same cave he purchased to bury his wife Sarah. So we know that Abraham wasn’t buried in an ancestral tomb. So when Scripture says that he was gathered to his people – **what else could that be referring to but to a sweet reunion, in new life after death, with those who have also died trusting in the LORD?** For him, that would’ve included Sarah and any others in his household who died in faith.

- ❖ That's what the people of the promise have to look forward to. **Our story doesn't end in a tomb.** From the eyes of faith, death has been transformed. It doesn't lead to a lonely resting place in the dirt. But to a gathering of those who have died in faith and share in a living hope of resurrection. When we die, we will be gathered to our people – to the people of God.
 - That's the best hope. **Because even if you don't end up dying in a good old age – even if your loved ones don't reach an old age full of years – you can still hope in life after death and a sweet reunion with the fellowship of the faithful in Christ.** If that's what awaits us in death, then we don't need to fear it or obsess in delaying it. Finding the fountain of youth or seeking immortality would be vain pursuits.

- ❖ **In Tolkien's Middle-earth, the elves are the race which possess immortality.** They never grow old. Even if they're killed in battle, they don't leave Middle-earth. They're restored and transported to Valinor – a glorious land but a land still bound within Middle-earth.
 - **It's only the race of men that actually die in the normal sense.** After death, they face final judgment and depart beyond this mortal existence – to the unknown realm of the afterlife. **Even in a world where immortal creatures exist, it's the race of man that are said to be blessed with “the gift of Ilúvatar”** – the Creator God in Tolkien's mythology. That gift is mortal death. The elves may live forever, but they never get to see what's on the other side.
 - But in the stories of Middle-earth, the humans were often jealous of the elves' immortality, and they despised Ilúvatar's gift. They wanted to live forever. And it's that attitude that often brought ruin to the human race. Tolkien was obviously on to something. **He recognized that it would be vain folly for any of us to seek to live for endless years in this life – when the hope of eternal bliss in a heavenly abode can await us after death.**

- ❖ **For the Christian – for a child of the promise – death no longer needs to be feared as an enemy. Death can be received as a gift.** Now I hope that makes you wonder, “What's my attitude towards death? And what does that reveal of my true belief about what will become of me after death? Do I face death with the crippling fear and denial that characterizes the people of the flesh? Or do I approach it with the reverent fear and gratitude that characterizes the people of the promise?” **Friends, you can make a choice this day to change your lineage and align yourself with the people of the promise.**

Peace Dependent on Hopes Met OR Peace Even With Unrealized Hopes

- ❖ So our second contrast between the two lineages relates to death and your attitude towards it. Well, the third contrast also has to do with death. It goes like this. **While people of the flesh can only die in peace if their hopes are met in this earthly life, people of the promise can die in peace knowing their unrealized hopes await a better country** (Heb 11:13-16).
 - In other words, if you only live once – if this earthly life is all you get – then you will only die in peace and without regrets if you can manage to meet all your hopes, and achieve all your dreams, in this life.

- ❖ But Abraham and his descendants demonstrate that you can die in peace and without regrets even if your hope and dreams have to wait for an ultimate fulfillment in the afterlife. That's what this third contrast reveals.
- ❖ Let's go back to v7 and consider that age when he died, 175 years old. Back in Genesis 12, we were told that Abraham was seventy-five when he left Ur of the Chaldeans. **So that means the last one hundred years of his life was spent as a pilgrim and sojourner in a land that was promised to him by God – but a land that he technically did not own.** By the end of his life, the only portion of the Promised Land under his name – that he actually owned – was that cave that he and Sarah were buried in.
 - **So by the time of his death, Abraham was under no illusion that the Promised Land was to be his final hope and resting place.** If he did think that way, then he wouldn't have been described as dying in a good old age, full of years. More like full of regret. Full of frustration. But that's not how he was described in death.
 - He's described as dying fulfilled. As ending his years on this earth contented. **That only makes sense when you realize that his eyes were actually fixed on another land – on a better country.** That's what we're told in a New Testament text that comments on Abraham's death.
- ❖ Hebrews 11 is commonly known as the Hall of Faith. The author of Hebrews puts forth a number of OT saints as encouraging examples of faith. And many verses are dedicated to Abraham and Sarah. **Now starting in Hebrews 11:13, we get commentary on Abraham's attitude towards death and his hope of a better country, a heavenly one.**
 - *“¹³These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”*
- ❖ **Abraham died having received very little of things God promised.** I think many people in his shoes would've been disappointed and resentful towards the end of their life. **“LORD, you called me to leave my homeland;** to leave behind my family; to journey to a strange new land occupied by warring tribes and factions. **You promised all this land to me as far as my eyes could see** – and yet for the rest of my days, for a hundred years, I lived as a pilgrim and sojourner; never able to settle down; never able to own anything except for a burial cave. **You promised me children as numerous as the stars** – and yet you only gave me one legitimate son to be my heir; and he only gave me two grandsons. That's it. **LORD, you've certainly promised me a lot.** You've certainly raised my hopes. But here I am on my deathbed and I see very little fulfilled.”

- ❖ I can imagine that kind of response at the end of that kind of life – where so many hopes are unrealized and so many dreams unfulfilled. **But Hebrews 11:13 says that Abraham died – not in frustration – but in faith.** Not having received the things promised. But that's okay. He was still able to die in peace, at a good old age, full of years – **because he knew the things God promised him would find their ultimate fulfillment in a better country; in a future city that comes down from heaven onto a new earth.**

- ❖ Friends, I want you to be able to face death with the same kind of faith. **But if all your hopes are pinned on this earthly life – if they have to be fulfilled in the here and now – then I fear that you will be ill prepared for death.** You won't go in peace. You'll go kicking and screaming. Because you will inevitably have hopes and dreams go unfulfilled in this life.
 - **But that's why Jesus lived and died and rose again – to make a way for you and I to live beyond death.** To settle in a better country. Where there are no regrets. Where every tear is gone. Because, in that heavenly land, all of God's promises will come true and all of our hopes will be realized in Christ.

- ❖ If you want to face death with that kind of faith, with that kind of hope – then only one lineage is going to give you that. **What you need to receive is a supernatural rebirth to become a child of the promise.** And here's the good news: John 1:12 says that to all who receive Jesus, who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God.