

A Man, a Woman, and a Place

Genesis 23:1-20

About twenty years have passed between chapters 22 and 23. We know that Sarah was 137 years old when she died, and that Isaac was 37. We don't know exactly how old he was when he and his father went up to Mount Moriah for that ultimate test of faith, but we can presume it was about 20 years earlier. A full season of life, and now it is time for a funeral, Sarah's funeral, and burial. And the events described in this chapter give us great insight into the ongoing faith of this godly couple, and that faith is our main subject and focus this morning. With regard to faith, we will study a man, a woman, and a place. First the woman.

I. SARAH: A WOMAN WHO DIED IN FAITH.

I get that phrase from Hebrews 11, which describes Sarah along with several others by saying that,

Heb. 11:13 "These all died in faith."

And those words can really only mean one thing. To die in faith means that they were living by faith when they died. And that verse in Hebrews goes on,

Heb. 11:13 "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

The reality is that Sarah did not receive the promise, that is, her inheritance in the promised land. She died. And Sarah stands alone among women as the only woman in all Scripture whose age at the time of death was given, and that detail is to her honor. She is distinguished as one of the primary examples of godliness among women, perhaps the greatest example. Peter's reference to her in 1 Peter indicates that, as Abraham was considered father of those who believe, so Sarah was considered

mother of all believing women. Peter writes to other godly women, with specific reference to Sarah, giving her great honor, Peter writes to other godly women,

1 Peter 3:6. "...whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror."

But why a whole chapter devoted to Sarah's death? The great significance is that,

A. Even death did not keep Sarah from claiming God's promises.

The point of this chapter is that Sarah did claim God's promise. By faith. She died in faith! To read the whole paragraph in Hebrews 11,

Heb. 11:13 "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

Sarah claimed God's promise, from a distance. She, along with Abraham, was actually looking for a heavenly country. She knew that the promise of God did not refer merely to the earthly nation which would be called Israel. God's promise was the heavenly Jerusalem, "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

God's promise was not an earthly promise. It was a heavenly promise. Sarah died in faith, believing that promise was for her. And it was, for upon her death, she entered into that great city of

God and will remain in God's presence for all eternity.

What a terrible mistake we make when we reduce God's promises to earthly objectives. God's promise to us is not the promise of health, wealth and prosperity in this world. In fact, he says that we will have trouble in this world. His promise is an eternal home, one for which we are being prepared through the difficulties and troubles of this world.

Therefore, death should never keep us from claiming God's promises, for death ushers us into the pleasure of the fullness of God's promise. Like Sarah, we should aspire to die in faith, claiming God's promises in death. Those promises are well described in,

1Pet. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

Then, declaring the reality and certainty of troubles in this life, Peter continues,

1 Peter 1:6 "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls."

Sarah's death and burial did something else for the people of Israel. She was the first in the patriarchal family to die in the land

of Canaan, and she was not taken "home" to be buried. She was buried in Canaan.

v.2-4

And what a testimony. Even in death, even when her body was separated from her soul and placed into the ground, even then, her dead bones testified that Canaan was their home, for God had promised it to them.

B. Even death did not stop Sarah from testifying about God's faithfulness to keep his promises.

Abraham did not yet own any land himself, not even enough for a burial plot. So he had to purchase one. It is very important to realize that the only purchase of property that he ever made in the land of Canaan was for a grave. And it would become a family grave, the final earthly resting place for the bodies of both Sarah and Abraham, as well as Isaac, Rebekah and Leah, and lastly also Jacob.

God promised the land of Canaan to his people, and before that promise was finally fulfilled under Joshua's leadership, the dead bones of God's people which were buried in that land testified to the nation about God's faithfulness to keep his promise. Sarah was the first to give such testimony. She was a godly woman who died in faith.

That should be our goal as well, considering Sarah's godly example, even in death. We actually speak inaccurately when we speak of a grave or a tomb as a final resting place, for our final resting place is not in this world, but is in God's presence in heaven. Ultimately, our final resting place will be the new heaven and new earth which all of God's people shall inherit for all eternity, all to his own glory and praise.

Looking at Sarah, we learn that same promise is for all who who believe, who would die in faith. He has prepared a city for us.

Next, the man. While Sarah died in faith, here it is obvious that Abraham lived in faith.

II. ABRAHAM: A MAN WHO LIVED IN FAITH.

Again, we find no more of the temporary lapses which we've studied in previous chapters. No more compromises with the world, no more fear nor hesitation. Just faith in action.

The basic principle of faith in action is defined in verse 4, where it becomes obvious that,

A. Abraham understood that life on this earth is temporary.

v.3-4

Abraham understand the basic nature of life. "I am an foreigner and a visitor among you."

Two separate but related words, with similar meanings. A foreigner is an alien, one who possesses no property and has no fixed home, even though he would possess some degree of rights and recognition in the community. Yet as an alien, Abraham lived as a nomad, traveling from place to place, having left his home behind in obedience to God's command.

A visitor was a man with a permanent dwelling but no property in the form of land, and certainly, at times, Abraham settled down to a particularly location even though he owned no land himself. That is, of course, the reason why he had to buy this burial plot. The word is sometimes translated a stranger. He was an alien and a stranger.

There was a reason why God called Abraham to live with such uncertainty, and that is to demonstrated through Abraham's own experiences that life is temporary. Again, back to the inspired explanation of all this in,

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

He lived in tents! An alien and a stranger, without a home. Then, as I've already read,

Heb. 11:14 "For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

This has to be personal. This has to define your own life as a Christian today. This cannot be a mere history lesson, or even a mere biblical lesson. We have to fully grasp this idea. Life on this earth is temporary. We are aliens and strangers. Everything in this earth will be destroyed in the final judgment. And as we go about accumulating the things of this world, we must remember that. As Jesus said so plainly,

Jesus speaks to us so plainly in this regard.

Luke 12:22 Then He said to His disciples, "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. 23 Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens, for they

neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? 25 And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? 26 If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest?”

Jesus continues,

Luke 12:27 “Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 28 If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? 29 “And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. 30 For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. 31 But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.”

And then his conclusion,

Luke 12:32 “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In Matthew’s gospel we read this,

Matt. 6:19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

So where is your treasure? Those sorts of penetrating questions are always helpful. What is your treasure? What is most important to you? The things of earth or the things of heaven?

Abraham understood that life on this earth is temporary, therefore he lived in faith as an alien and a stranger. This earth was not his home. He was just passing through.

Then we read a lengthy description of the actual transaction of buying the land, which is quite fascinating reading,
v.5-11

In one sense, this was just a very typical business transaction, with lots of illustrations of how business was carried on in that culture. But the significance of the account is far greater than that of learning about the Hittite culture. The point is emphasized that Abraham would pay for the land, and pay quite a fair price. It wasn’t cheap, by any means, four hundred shekels of silver.

He would pay, for Abraham would not receive a gift from a heathen man that which had been promised to him by God. He would not allow Ephron to give him such a blessing, for God is the author of all blessings.

B. Abraham understood that God’s promise is the source of all true blessing.

In a spiritual sense, by faith, Abraham had already received the gift of the land, all the land. It was already his, claimed by faith. And to receive from man what had been given by God would have called into question whether’s God’s gift was true and valid.

So God would give Abraham the land, not the Hittite leader

Ephron. Thus Abraham paid him the fair market value for this gravesite. He insisted.

v.12-16

Abraham was a man who lived by faith, understanding the temporary nature of life on this earth and the graciousness of God to provide abundant blessings.

Finally, let's look briefly at the place. The land he bought. It was a very significant place. There are a lot of names used for it.

v.2

Hebron was about 25 miles SSW of Jerusalem, a city still in existence. It was also called Kirjath Arba. It was clearly in the land of Canaan. It's also called Mamre, and the specific field was in Machpelah.

v.17-19

We've encountered this place before, and we'll see it again. It was the place where Abraham settled and lived for a time, a place where he built an altar to worship the Lord his God.

Gen. 13:18 "Then Abram moved his tent, and went and dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built an altar there to the LORD."

Thus

III. MAMRE: A PLACE WHICH REPRESENTS FAITH.

It was the place of worship, presumably the place where God instructed Abraham to worship. And so,

A. Mamre represented the faith of God's people to worship him obediently.

Mamre purchased this field from Ephron, along with the cave in it and all the trees. Sarah would be buried at the place where

they had worshiped, a testimony of their faith. And,

B. Mamre would continue to represent the faith of God's people for generations to come.

The land was deeded to him in permanent ownership. And God's faithful people would continue to be buried in that same tomb, as I mentioned earlier.

Abraham was buried there.

Gen. 25:7 "This is the sum of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: one hundred and seventy-five years. 8 Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. 9 And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, 10 the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth. There Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife."

And Isaac.

Gen. 35:27 "Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt. 28 Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. 29 So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him."

Also Rebekah and Leah.

Gen. 49:29 "Then he charged them and said to them: "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place. 31 There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and

there I buried Leah. 32 The field and the cave that is there were purchased from the sons of Heth [the Hittites].”

And finally Jacob. Jacob actually had to be brought back to Canaan from Egypt, and was buried according to his specific request.

Gen. 50:12 “So his sons did for him just as he had commanded them. 13 For his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as property for a burial place. 14 And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who went up with him to bury his father.”

For generations to come, Mamre would represent the faith of God’s covenant people, a faith exemplified by the lives of the patriarchs. And this great land, originally purchased by Abraham, would be given by God as an inheritance to one of the two faithful spies from the generation which would actually take possession of Canaan. The city of Hebron would go to Caleb. In Caleb’s own words,

Josh. 14:7 I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land, and I brought back word to him as it was in my heart. 8 Nevertheless my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt, but I wholly followed the LORD my God. 9 So Moses swore on that day, saying, Surely the land where your foot has trodden shall be your inheritance and your children’s forever, because you have wholly followed the LORD my God.”

Josh. 14:13 “And Joshua blessed him, and gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as an inheritance. 14 Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the LORD

God of Israel. 15 And the name of Hebron formerly was Kirjath Arba (Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim). Then the land had rest from war.”

So the land of Mamre is a place which represents faith, the faith of God’s people to believe his promises. It is a place where faith is exercised in all the daily affairs of life. Abraham and Sarah lived by faith, and they died by faith, in Mamre. And all of that history is for the encouragement of our souls, even today. It is not just a family history or even a national history. It is a history that expresses the very essence of what it means to live by faith, and therein is the challenge and the encouragement for us today.

I’ve read a lot from Hebrews 11 this morning. Let me read how that chapter begins,

Heb. 11:1 “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.”

Let that good testimony be of great encouragement to you, as you live by faith. For this we also read in,

Heb. 11:6 “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

The chapter ends with these words,

Hebr. 11:39 “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, 40 God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.”

The personal application comes immediately, in the first verses of Hebrews 12,

Hebr. 12:1 “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so

great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

This morning, “look unto Jesus, fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and the finisher of your faith.”