

The Patriarchs | The Gospel According to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

The Burial Plot

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Genesis 23; Hebrews 11.13

Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ² And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. ³ Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴ "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." ⁵ And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ⁶ "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." ⁷ So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. ⁸ And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, ⁹ that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site." ¹⁰ Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, ¹¹ "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." ¹² And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. ¹³ And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." ¹⁴ Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, ¹⁵ "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." ¹⁶ And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. ¹⁷ So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over ¹⁸ to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ So the field, and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.

Heb 11.13 All these died in faith, without receiving the things promised, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

We're looking at *The Book of Genesis, The First Book of Moses...*and SPECIFICALLY at the lives of the PATRIARCHS...Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

THIS reading has to do with *the matriarch* of the Israelites and of the Church in the Old and New Testaments...This is the death of Abraham's beloved wife, Sarah.

They'd been *married* a long time. She lived to be 127 years old. And that's a long, long, long marriage...a lot of time to get to know another person. I bet you REALLY *get used to having that other person around*...after maybe a century of marriage. AND like ANY couple married for a long time, THIS couple had been through a lot of ups and downs *in their marriage*...a lot of joys and sorrows...sickness and health...in plenty and in want.

How would it be to say goodbye to a spouse after 30...40...50 years? It reminds me of a song by Natalie Merchant, *Beloved Wife*: she puts herself in the place of a man at the funeral for his wife. After 50 years...he wonders how he can possibly go on:

My beloved wife
 My love is gone she suffered long
 In hours of pain
 My love is gone
 Now MY suffering begins
 My love is gone
 Would it be wrong if I should
 Surrender all the joy in my life
 Go with her tonight?

My love is gone
 Would it be wrong if I should
 Just turn my face away from the light
 Go with her tonight?

He's contemplating suicide (a state of despair). It's not a very...cheery song...BUT today's reading isn't cheery either...at least not at the start...and then it's just a secular account of a real estate transaction (no mention of God in the whole chapter!*) But by the chapter's end something happens that can actually disarm discouragement and sadness and despair. And if we get it ...and will *receive* it as it's offered...it actually has the power to surmount discouragement and despair and leave us not necessarily cheery...but filled with hope...and confident to move ahead.

Let's look at: 1) How a Sacred Truth Comes Out of a Secular Contract 2) How a Unique Approach to Life is Typified Here 3) How Getting This/Receiving It Changes How We Live (esp. re discouragement/despair/disappointment)

Sarah has died and Abraham went in to mourn and weep for her...my beloved wife.

But THEN the bulk of the chapter concerns NOT death and sadness...but the arrangements for the burial. He needs a burial plot and that's a problem because (v.4) he's an immigrant, an alien *and far from his homeland in Babylon*. And even though he's *well respected* and even *feared* by the local chieftains...he's not allowed to OWN land... "This land is OUR land...this land's NOT YOUR LAND!"... "In those day the Canaanite was in the land."(12.6) But Abraham wants them to bend the rules...wants his own family plot. ("site"/"possession" v.4)

So, because these Canaanites (Sons of Heth) *DO* respect Abraham and he's wealthy and they've heard that he can call down plagues on people who mess with his wife (ch.20) so, these Canaanites, they offer *their OWN family tombs to Abraham*. "You can place the body of Sarah in any one of OUR family crypts. We are happy to share our mausoleums with you...just take your pick!"

And Abraham is not ungrateful for that offer and he bows to them and says, "OK...let me talk to Ephron...I like the cave on his property...the cave of Machpelah and I'd like to buy it for a possession!"

So, this Ephron comes forward (and he knows the rules – immigrants can't own property here!) and Ephron says, "I'm happy to give you the land and the cave for this present need."

Once again, Abraham is NOT ungrateful; he bows...but... a gift can be taken back ("I meant it as a loan...until you could meet your need elsewhere.") So, THEN, Abraham announces, so everyone can hear: "LISTEN to me – I WILL GIVE YOU THE FULL PRICE of the field...let's make this official."

Then Ephron says, "Hey...what's a little piece of land between friends like us Abraham?...No BIGGIE!... Let's say...oh...I dunno...400 shekels of silver...since it IS for YOUR DEAD!"

Scholars say this is an inflated asking price – maybe ten times what it was really worth...Maybe the other chieftains were cracking up in laughter ("He'll NEVER go for that price...only a fool would pay that!")

And Abraham says, "SOLD!" and before anyone can object, he weighs out this HUGE amount of silver ("That's what ya, said...right? 400?" ... "Uh...yeah, but I didn't think you'd..." ... "Well, there it IS – commercial standard...every shekel...go ahead and count it!")... AND THE DEAL IS DONE!

Then, v. 17, a long, almost technical, legal description of the property...the name...the cave...the directions ...the trees. And the FACT that the deed was recorded...Abraham actually took possession – Sarah was actually laid to rest there. And there were plenty of eyewitnesses...when it was deeded to Abraham (and did I mention that there was a deed?)

And the sacred truth that comes OUT of this secular contract is that God had promised to Sarah and Abraham so many descendants that they couldn't possibly count them. And...yet... all they actually GOT was just one little child...Isaac! Like a down-payment...all the promise was contained in him. AND HERE, they were promised a homeland. They were promised a possession (17.8)... And...yet... all they actually GOT was just one little burial plot...a little field and a cave for burying their dead! Like a down-payment...all the promise was contained in that little piece of real estate.

But Abraham would have paid any price for it... because for him it was a guarantee. It was the first-fruits of the inheritance that was to be his possession and his children's forever.

Sarah and Abraham “died in faith, without receiving the things promised, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth”. They died, not actually having received what God had promised, but just a token, a guarantee, a down-payment, a pledge.

Abraham’s faith... would not become sight...I mean he would have to live and die TRUSTING GOD and these tokens would be markers, would be encouragements *to sustain and strengthen their faith*...but what they really craved, which was to see and touch the things promised ...*THIS* they would only taste. “They welcomed them from a distance...” AND THIS IS HOW THE LIFE OF FAITH WORKS.

This unique way of life that the Gospel enables is typified in Abraham and his life of faith. We too, as believers in Jesus Christ, we only get a taste of what’s promised. The New Testament we speak of the pledge of the Spirit. In some mysterious way, the Person of God comes into a human being and He, the Spirit of God...convinces us that it’s true. He moves us to keep believing that Jesus Christ is real and true and that what Jesus Christ accomplished can be trusted. The Spirit who convinces us is like a down-payment of a fuller, richer communion with God that we haven’t even really imagined.

And the resurrection of Jesus Christ is also called a first-fruits, a down-payment, a guarantee of our own resurrection. If Christ is not raised, says Paul then it’s all fake...there is no after-life, no heaven, no guarantee. And we...are of all people most to be pitied because we’re deluded.

BUT , say the NT writers...Jesus Christ IS risen from the dead...and we DO have God’s pledge and His guarantee. God did indeed give us a something to hold on to...it’s a little plot of land...a little possession that’s ours. It speaks to us that this land that is promised to us will be delivered. *Creation is good* but also fallen and it’s *all riddled with flaws* and disease and violence and sin and pollution... not the way it’s supposed to be.

But the resurrection of Jesus Christ is there to save us from despair. Abraham had a burial plot, a tomb to remind him that God would make good on His promise and we too...have a tomb...an empty tomb ...it’s a guarantee to us – God will unravel death. He will give us a land, not just a little strip on the East edge of the Mediterranean Sea... but the whole Earth will be made new...

Jesus Christ said, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the EARTH...” Abraham’s family plot was the initial deposit, it was a seed, and the Promised Land of Canaan was a sprout...*but the fulfillment will be a NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH*... where everything is put right.

As Abraham paid a price...and paid in full...so Jesus Christ has paid with His own life. He absorbed guilt for me...lived a righteous life in my place and died to pay for my faults and sins.

And yet...for now...we hold on to OUR deposit... OUR Tomb...*the empty tomb*... It's our foothold and a guarantee that this is not all there is. AND, for a time, as pilgrims and immigrants...we have no country... we're passing through...but before long God will reclaim it all and give it to the meek, to everyone who admits his neediness and dependency on the One Righteous human being, Jesus Christ.

See Abraham gives the people of God a picture: this is what it means to live by faith... and what it means to die in faith. It's uncomfortable. We want to see and touch and hold and control...but all we get is God's guarantee...AND YET for Abraham and Sarah...and for all the meek...God's guarantee is enough.

Now the way this affects our daily lives is not so much that we walk around cheery all the time. Abraham wept...Jesus wept. But that there's an undertone of hope in our lives. When we look at that better deposit, that little cave where they laid the Body of Jesus and see it EMPTY we get assured, "Ah! This cancer is not all there is...this life-disappointment is not the end...this death of a loved one or a dream...or an ability... it hurts for now...but while weeping may endure for a night joy comes in the morning (Ps.30.5). *God is going to bring GOOD out of this even if I never see it in my lifetime...I have a deposit.*"

We have to remind ourselves that faith isn't a comfortable way to live. We would be much happier holding, touching, controlling, proving, seeing... but that's not the way of faith. That's not the way God has set it up... *And when we get those things they DO seem to make us happy in some way... but also self-sufficient...and...deluded...and far from God.*

Mostly, we wake up in the morning and at some point (*hopefully pretty quickly*) the Christian remembers that he's a Christian. And when we do...maybe brushing you're teeth or jogging or whatever you do (maybe praying and reading) but you realize, "I am not going to be able to please God today...not able to live a significant life without Jesus Christ today." You *remember* that He said, "Apart from ME you can do nothing" (Jn 15.5) So you begin to pray, "Father, please give me Jesus Christ today..."

And then it may come into your head, "I heard a guy at work talking about some scholars that have disproven the veracity of the Bible by literary deconstructionism – I'm not even sure what that is...but what if they're right?"... or maybe, "if there's a God why is that stuff in Syria going on and all those people dying...tortured...?" OR "*If God loves me and forgives me how come I seem powerless to forgive this person who hurt me?*"...OR "Why did that missionary to Haiti get killed in a car wreck? That doesn't make any sense...maybe there is no God."

And these and a million other...objections and doubts and nagging questions...and uncertainties begin to suggest themselves... What do you do? Turn off your mind? Put on blinders?

Maybe we should just look at the down-payments. That as the Bible says, we live in a world, a universe that adheres and that is basically orderly *and it's a much bigger leap to believe in*

chance than to believe in a Creator (Romans 1.20). Is that a proof of God?...Well, at least it's a pretty big token...a deposit.

And that Jesus Christ was foretold in the whole OT and that the national life of this people the Israelites is much more than a coincidence.

And that if Jesus Christ was not raised...then what really happened there? *If the disciples stole the body as a hoax ...if they were trying to get rich or famous or had some motive for fabricating a lie...WELL, HOW COME THEY DIDN'T RETRACT THEIR STORIES WHEN THEY GOT ARRESTED?...And why didn't ANY of them recant?...even when it cost them their families and freedom and their lives?*

And why did this faith...change the world the way it has...something happened between BC and AD... the world has been forever changed...

In other words: preach to yourself. Talk yourself off the ledge. Persuade yourself.

But, T.J., isn't that irrational?

No... I'm not suggesting that you think of a round square...nor am I suggesting a simple equation that's foolproof and airtight...I'm commending the life of faith. Go back to the Tomb...see it as God's pledge, His down-payment, His guarantee and then begin to thank Him... and SEE... if it might turn into a song of praise and rest...a harbor from despair.

Thank You, Lord, that Your Beloved, known to You from eternity...perfectly One with You, the One You couldn't live without...He was put to despair so I could have hope...was laid in a tomb so I could come out of the tomb...Thank You that His empty tomb saves me from doubt and despair. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

* The Heb for v.6 "mighty prince" is actually "elohim" a name of God also meaning great or powerful.