

The Journey of Faith

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Date: 19 September 2021

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[0 : 00] Well, keep your Bibles open in front of you to that passage. We're going to work our way through it. There's also a sermon outline, as usual, on the order of service. Let's pray. Father, as we come to this passage, will you again humble us, recognizing that what we're reading are not just human words, but indeed it is your word, the word of God.

And so, Father, we trust that, as you say, the word of God is the word that can grow us, that has much to teach us, correct us, train us in righteousness. And so, help us to adopt that posture now as we come and listen to you.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, it must be pretty exciting to move into a new house, especially one that you can call your own. I've not yet had that experience. I don't own a house.

But I can imagine how exciting it must be to see that glowing exterior, the polished floorboards, the spotless kitchen, the built-in bookshelves. But inevitably, as you move in and live there, wear and tear will come.

The kitchen won't always be looking so spotless. The walls begin to look tired. The living room is in need of a spring clean. And without any preventative measures, the house will become worn down.

[1 : 20] Becoming a Christian can be a bit like moving into a new house. At the beginning of our Christian life, it's all very exciting. We're full of energy, ready to shine for Jesus, still basking in the afterglow of our salvation.

But over time, there's inevitable wear and tear. You experience that little disappointment. That thing didn't quite go the way you hoped.

You obeyed Jesus, but nothing came from it. Your friend didn't become more interested in Jesus as a result of your obedience. Or your stand for justice didn't actually bring about real justice.

And over the years, you've watched as one friend stopped being Christian. And the leader you looked up to slipped into moral failure. And you're worn down.

The glow has long since disappeared. Last week, I talked about extreme weather. And for a couple of us, that's what we're going through right now.

[2 : 22] But for many of us, during this pandemic, we aren't experiencing extreme weather. There is no huge crisis in our lives. But there is wear and tear as we journey on week after week in this pandemic.

We're worn down, wondering if it's worth bothering to be what Titus 2.11-14 urges us to be.

Whether it's worth bothering to be a people who say no to ungodliness and yes to godliness.

To be eager to do what is good. To be people of hope in Jesus. Because no fruit ever seems to come out from it. Writer Oswald Chambers once wrote, The greatest test of Christianity is the wear and tear of daily life.

Perhaps he's right. And so what do you do when wear and tear gets you down? What do you do when you've lived faithfully for Jesus? But nothing seems to change.

And you're worn down. Now this too is the question for Abraham in today's passage. Now at first glance, today's passage is nothing to shout about. After the high drama of last week, we come now to a short genealogy.

[3 : 40] And then some bargaining about real estate property. Not the most interesting stuff, is it? What is it doing in our Bibles anyway? Okay, I can see how for Abraham's family, immediate family, that could be important.

You know, it's probably helpful for Isaac to know about his mom's death and their legacy and all that. But for the rest of us, who cares? But don't write off this passage just yet.

Once we get it, this is actually a wonderful passage. For God kept this episode in for us because he knows all about our wear and tear.

And throughout this passage, he wants to protect us, preserve us, keep us going so that we'll get to the very end. And so let's first of all, get into this story to understand what's going on.

And when we get to the end, we'll draw out some implications. And so let's think about this story in three parts. Here's part one, the circumstances of Abraham.

[4 : 43] The circumstances of Abraham. The story begins with the same three words as last week, some time later. But while last week, the stage was set for one of the most radical requests in all of history.

This time, the stage is set for the telling of a family tree. Abraham is given some news of how his brother, Nehor, is doing. Now, we're not sure who told him the news.

Perhaps there was a visitor passing by from Ur, his hometown, who bumped into Abraham and said to him, Hey, have you heard the latest? And Abraham said, No, I haven't kept in touch.

And so we discover that Nehor has all these children, 12 sons in all, and at least one grandson and one granddaughter. Why are we being told this?

Well, a couple of commentators suggest that the author of Genesis wants to introduce Rebecca into the story because she's going to become a significant character later on. And so he's setting us up.

[5 : 46] After all, if you don't count Mama Milka, Rebecca's the only female name. Now, this is probably true, but I don't think that's the main reason why we're being told this.

You see, as Abraham was hearing this piece of family news, what would be the natural thing for him to do? Well, to compare, isn't it?

Perhaps the visitor relaying this information might even have asked him right after telling him about Nehor, Hey, hey, what about you, Abraham? How many children you got?

Got any chuchu? And Abraham will have to say, No. Only got one. No grandchildren yet. And that might have gotten Abraham comparing.

You see, it's significant that Nehor has 12 sons. In Genesis, Ishmael himself has 12 sons who will go on to become a nation. And similarly, Jacob, Abraham's descendant, will also have 12 sons.

[6 : 53] And they too become a nation in Egypt. And so it seems as if in Genesis, to have 12 sons is almost like giving birth to a nation.

And remember, that's exactly what God promised Abraham, that he would be a great nation. And yet, here at the end of Genesis 22, it's like Nehor is receiving what Abraham should have.

And God's promise looks absolutely fragile, doesn't it? By the end of Genesis 22, on the one hand, you have a massive clan. And on the other, an only son who almost died.

And my friends, don't forget, it's been more than half a century since Genesis 12. More than half a century since God told Abraham to leave his country and his family and set out on this journey of faith.

And after more than half a century, what does Abraham have? One son, who by the way, is still unmarried. And not a single piece of land.

[8 : 07] They have a well they acquired from Abimelech, you might remember. But that's it. 50, 60 years of walking with God and that's all they have.

No descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. No land from the north and the south. The east and the west. And you think, ah, maybe next week, maybe next month, God will give them what he said he would.

But then in 23 verse 2, we're told, Sarah dies. Now, Sarah lived a pretty good life. In 23 verse 1, we're told she lived 127 years.

Now that's pretty good, that's pretty long. And in fact, Sarah is the only female in all of Genesis whose age we are told when she dies. My friend, Carl Essary, who knows Genesis inside out, says that's because the Bible wants to honour Sarah.

By telling us her age and where she died, the narrator is paying homage to Sarah. But that doesn't change the fact that Sarah dies waiting.

[9 : 17] 127 years. She dies, never ever having seen a single square foot of the promised land come into their possession.

And Abraham is now left to pick up the pieces. Think about it. At this point, he's roughly about 137 years or so. And his beloved wife has died.

He has only one bachelor son. He lives in the promised land, but he's only a renter. Meanwhile, his brother's family is amazingly fertile, and the land is firmly in the grip of the locals.

This is a great recipe for disillusionment and despair, is it not? How difficult it is to walk by faith and not by sight, when all you see around you seems to scream that God is slow in keeping his promises.

How difficult it is when you live faithfully for Jesus, and now you're in your retirement years, and hang on, has God actually done anything?

[10:23] One of the most striking features in Genesis 23 is that God is not even mentioned once. Did you notice that? God, who has been front and center all throughout the Abraham story, mysteriously vanishes from view.

He's gone, missing. These are the circumstances Abraham finds himself in as he enters his twilight years. And these are the kind of circumstances you might find yourself experiencing as well.

Just what is God doing? Why does it seem like nothing is happening? Has God gone missing?

When I was involved in ministry in KL, I helped out at a church plant.

Now, this church plant had some of the most faithful people I know. These were people who, on top of their busy jobs, still took the time to try to meet students, to meet other working adults, to ferry them around in busy KL, to do one-to-one Bible studies with them, because they passionately wanted the people to know and grow in Jesus.

They prayed hard. They worked hard. But towards the end of my time in KL, the difficult decision was made for this church plant to close down.

[11:39] It had not seen any kind of sustainable growth, and the wisest thing to do was to concentrate resources elsewhere. But it was difficult for everyone.

After all, they had given their all and faithfully poured their everything into trying to get this plant off the ground. Why did no real fruit seem to come about?

Why did it not go according to plan? Oh, I think of my NextGen team. As many of you are aware, I chair a national conference called KBBC NextGen, and I'm blessed to have a great committee.

But when I look at them, I realise how almost all of them have gone or are going through difficult circumstances. One of them, younger than me, just had major heart surgery a couple of months ago.

It's completely knocked her out of action. At least two of them have suffered major relational disappointments, and I do mean major, in their lives, through no fault of their own.

[12:47] One of them had to leave his job and give up the ministry he loves in order to stay faithful to his theological convictions and not compromise. All of them have faithfully served God, but sometimes it didn't seem to serve any good purpose.

You're not quite sure what fruit came about from that. And when I look at them, I can't help but think, well, God, maybe you could have encouraged them more. That's where Abraham is.

Does his journey of faith not mean anything? I mean, by the time we hit verse 3, we discover he doesn't even have a place to bury his own wife. And the temptation would be to pack it all in.

Give up on this promised land. Time to balik, back to earth. Find some security there. But let's watch Abraham. Remember, this is the guy who passed the test in Genesis 22.

This is a guy whose faith has matured. And so what does that faith look like? We move on to part 2, the commitment of Abraham. In verses 3 to 15, we have a fairly long section of real estate negotiations.

[14:03] And you might be wondering, you know, what does this have to do with anything? Well, let's read on. In verse 3, Abraham, having mourned his wife, doesn't mope in self-pity.

Instead, he approaches the Hittites, one of the local people groups. Now, verse 3, we're told that he's a foreigner and stranger among them. Abraham isn't a citizen.

He's an immigrant. He's vulnerable. He has no legal standing there. And as a non-citizen, he has no land in this place. You know, just like in most countries today, if you're a foreigner, you can't just waltz in and buy whatever property you like.

There are restrictions in place. There are rules to follow. But that's exactly what Abraham is after. Verse 4, Sell me some property for a burial site here.

And that's our big clue telling us why these negotiations are significant. You see, that word property is really important. That Hebrew word property actually means landed possession.

[15:15] And that's why in Genesis 36, verse 43, for example, I know on your outline, it says chapter 37. That's a typo. It's 36, verse 43. Well, that same word is translated settlements in the land.

So we're talking about pieces of land here. But even more significantly, when was the last time this word appeared in Genesis? Well, come with me to Genesis 17.

Now, this is the chapter where God speaks a lengthy word of promise to Abraham. And in verse 8, he says this, The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you.

And I will be their God. And that word possession in 17, verse 8, is the same word translated property in Genesis 23.

See, this is what God is promising. He's saying in Genesis 17, Abraham, I'm promising you this land. And you know, it's not just for you. This land is going to be passed down your line.

[16:23] This is the land you will get. This is the land you will hand down your generations. That's Genesis 17. And then, that possession word, that property word, well, it doesn't appear again until Genesis 23, verse 4.

Until Abraham says, Sell me property. Sell me this landed possession. You see, what is Abraham doing?

Well, on the surface, verse 4 tells us he wants to bury Sarah. But it's more than that. You see, where you bury your loved one reflects where your heart is.

It reflects where you think home is. And so Abraham is acting with faith. He's acting with foresight. He turns a moment of tragedy into an opportunity to secure this property.

He's declaring by his action, God, I still believe your promises. I believe you when you said that this land will be given to me. I believe this is my real home. And so I will act in line with your promises.

[17:36] I commit myself, even though it's difficult, even though I'm a non-citizen, to securing this piece of land. Because I know, if this land comes under me, it will become inheritable.

I get to pass it down to my descendants. And that's what we must know to understand the significance of all that follows.

As Abraham enters into three rounds of negotiations with the Hittites, this is his ultimate goal, to secure this landed property, to keep his eyes fixed on what was promised to him.

And the other thing to remember is that in these negotiations, think high-context culture, not low-context culture. Now, what's low-context culture?

Well, it's one where communication is quite direct, as in most Western cultures. You offer, I counter-offer in plain terms, and we come to an agreement.

[18:41] It's all pretty straightforward. But what is a high-context culture? Basically, it's most traditional Asian cultures. You know what Asian negotiations are like, right?

You know, there's a lot of emphasis on maintaining interpersonal harmony, trying to avoid direct conflict. You have to read between the lines to understand the hidden meanings behind the words that are said.

You have to understand that relationships are just as important as getting the deal done in record time. It's probably like that as well in your Kelabit or Bidayu kampongs. Maybe one or two of you can confirm that for me later on.

But anyway, as we look at these negotiations, think high-context culture. And so let's look at round one. In verses five and six, the Hittites seem to make a generous offer.

Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choices of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead.

[19:45] So first of all, notice they pay Abraham respect. Now, to be fair to them, this could be genuine, not just flattery. After all, Abraham, you've been among us long enough.

You're almost like one of us. You know, you're no outsider. And we sympathize with your bereavement. And so the Hittites say, here's our offer. We'll offer you our best funeral package. Wow. Sounds generous, right? But notice what is missing from their offer. You see, they're offering Abraham the right to bury Sarah on their land.

But what they are not offering Abraham is landed possession in itself. They are not offering any land at all. Just somewhere to bury Sarah on Hittite land.

And so verse 7, Abraham refuses. Now, he makes his deal to pay respect to the Hittites. He bows before them. That's quite a humble posture for someone who's just been described as a prince.

[20 : 46] But his reply is, thanks, but no thanks. And so we enter round 2, verse 8. If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron, son of Zohar, on my behalf, so that he will sell me the cave of Magbelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field.

Now, this time, Abraham gets more specific in his negotiations. He names a specific party, Ephron, and a specific property, a cave on this field.

And notice Abraham's skill. He knows that they can't lose face, so he names what he's after, giving less room for the Hittites to maneuver. But at the same time, he offers reassurance by stating his willingness to pay full price and by assuring them that this is not just some power play.

You know, this is a field at the edge, at the cave, at the edge of the field. Right? And it's just there to bury Sarah. And so he's also making sure that they don't lose face. But above all, what Abraham is doing is showing his commitment to the promises.

He will settle for nothing less than a piece of the land. Not even the pig of Hittite tombs can tempt him. And so this time, Ephron enters the negotiations directly.

[22 : 09] Verse 11. No, my lord, he said. Listen to me. I give you this field. And I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people.

Bury your dead. And you go, wow, now that really is generous. But let's read between the lines again. If Ephron gives this land, that means no sale has officially taken place.

That means, according to their rules, there might not be an actual legal transaction. In fact, a gift would actually place Abraham under obligation to the giver.

It's similar to what the king of Sodom tried to offer Abraham back in Genesis 14. And so the land still might not come under Abraham's ownership in a clear-cut way.

But Abraham is not compromising. He is wholeheartedly committed to following through on God's promises. Now, Ephron made his offer in public.

[23 : 19] Notice in verse 10 that it's in the hearing of all the Hittites at the city gate, which is where legal trade takes place. And so, verse 13, in their hearing, Abraham makes a final offer.

He will pay for the field, he will pay for the landed property, he won't receive it as an unrecorded gift. Do you see what a committed faith Abraham has?

He wants to bury his family in Canaan, but not on Hittite-owned land. Rather, he wants to bury Sarah on a piece of land that is his by divine promise.

And so, he continues to walk by faith, not by sight. And he's willing to be public about his commitment. And that takes us to part three, the cost to Abraham.

Ephron says in verse 15, okay, if you really want this, this is going to cost you 400 shekels of silver. But if you aren't sure, go ahead.

[24 : 33] Now, the scholars are a little bit split as to whether that's a reasonable or exorbitant price. Some say that based on this piece of evidence, this is crazy money, hugely expensive.

While others say that it's actually quite reasonable based on that piece of archaeological evidence. But I think the point is, reasonable or not, it is still costly.

But in verse 16, Abraham doesn't haggle over the price. He simply agrees. 400 shekels of silver was the price named in full hearing of everyone.

And so, 400 shekels of silver it is that is given over. All above board. And so, the deal is done.

Verses 17 and 20 focus on the location that you notice. Verse 17 goes into detail. Here's the field, here's the cave, here are even all the trees.

[25 : 35] And now, it's all Abrahams. Verses 17 and 18 make known the outcome. This property is legally made over or deeded, notice the phrasing, to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites.

He owns the land title. There can be no dispute. Verse 20 repeats this in case you're not sure.

Finally, after more than half a century, Abraham finally owns a tiny piece of the promised land.

Not just a well. And in verse 19, Sarah is buried in her new home, the land of Canaan, the land of promise, the land which Abraham now owns, well, at least this burial site.

All because Abraham remained resolutely committed to living by faith, even at great loss to him.

You see, this is a man with a great amount of wear and tear on him.

This is a man who has been worn down over the years. And so, this is a man who could have thrown in the towel and said, let's go home to Ur, to be with my brother Nahor.

[26 : 59] After all, 40 years have passed since God promised me this landed property in Genesis 17. But what does this man with a mature faith do?

He keeps living for the promise. He keeps living for that day of fulfillment, even though he's not sure he will ever see it while he's still living.

His wife certainly didn't. And he maintains his identity as one of God's people in the meantime. I am a foreigner and stranger among you, he says to the Hittites.

I am not one of you. I am among you, but I am not you. My friends, what do you do when you live faithfully for Jesus, but you don't see much fruit, and nothing much seems to change?

Well, here's your answer. You keep living for Jesus. You forget self-pity. You see your adversity as opportunity.

[28 : 02] Why? Because you're not living for the now. You're not living for today. You're not living for the present. You're not living by sight. You're living in the age of anticipation, not the age of gratification.

That's how Abraham lived. And you know what? That's how his descendants lived too. They lived for the promise.

They lived for the future. Decades later, Abraham's descendant, Jacob, also ended up living in a foreign land in Egypt, away from the promised land.

And what was his dying wish? Well, turn with me to Genesis 49, verse 29 to 30 on the screen. I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of, notice, Ephron the Hittite.

The cave in the field of Makpela, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite.

[29 : 14] Jacob is saying, I want you to know where I take my true home lies, and it isn't Egypt. And that's exactly the same for Jacob's son, Joseph, as well.

Just flip over a chapter to Genesis 50, verse 24 to 25. Joseph said to his brothers, I'm about to die, but God will surely come to your aid and take you out of this land, that's Egypt, to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And Joseph made the Israelites swear on oath and said, God will surely come to your aid and then you must carry my bones from this place. And so Joseph's wish is also to be buried in the promised land because he believes that Israel is not destined to stay in Egypt.

He believes that God will keep his promise and bring his people to that land. You see, my friends, Genesis 23 teaches us something very important about the nature of God's promises and our faith. It teaches us what the New Testament also teaches and it's this. We live in the already and not yet.

[30 : 41] My friend Carl Eserville helpfully shows this. Abraham, you see, is receiving the first fruits of the promise. God has already given him the cave.

And that's like a down payment, a deposit guaranteeing the rest of the promises. But Abraham has not received the land in its entirety. In fact, he's probably received like 0.1% of it.

And in his lifetime, he weren't. In just a couple of chapters, we're going to read of Abraham's death too.

And you know what? Neither will Isaac. Isaac will inherit this landed property from Abraham, but he's not going to see the land in its entirety given to him either.

He's living also in the already and not yet. And my friends, so are we. This is crucial to understanding the Christian life.

[31 : 41] We are living in the already and not yet. We are living in the already. Jesus has already come. Jesus has already died.

Jesus has already risen again. And so we already have an inheritance. We already are God's children. We already are as. This is all absolutely true, right?

Now we live in the already. But we are also living in the not yet. Jesus has not yet come back.

Jesus has not yet given us the fullness of life where there are no more disappointments, no more heartbreaks, no more sorrows.

Jesus has not yet given us bodies that never decay. Jesus has not yet completely stopped Satan from causing all sorts of destruction. And so we're living in the already and not yet.

We rejoice in what we already have. But we are still waiting for so many of God's promises to be fulfilled. And there's so much more to look forward to. But those promises will surely be fulfilled.

[32 : 54] You know that? Because we have a down payment, a guarantee. What's that down payment? It's called the resurrection.

When Jesus rose, he guaranteed our futures. And that's why Jesus is called the first fruit in 1 Corinthians 15. And so that means faith is all about being forward looking, not navel gazing. Look at Hebrews 11 9-10. By faith, Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And so Hebrews tells us via the example of Abraham what true faith is.

It's about looking forward to a city that will never be shaken. It's about looking forward to the new Jerusalem, that is the new creation.

[34 : 10] And as Hebrews 11 verse 1 reminds us, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we did not see. And so in other words, faith is believing, it's having confidence that God will keep these particular promises.

And that can be costly. It's hard, isn't it, in the face of suffering to keep going. It's hard in the face of personal sin to keep battling.

It's hard in the face of systemic injustice to keep fighting. It costs Abraham. It will cost you and me. But it's worth it because we know the rest of the story. We know that Joseph's bones did come back and get buried in the land of Canaan.

We know that by the time of Solomon, King Solomon has a possession of a land far greater than Abraham, filled with riches. and then by the time we get to Jesus, we see that he says, you know what, actually, it's never been ultimately about the physical land.

[35 : 28] The land of promise is even better than that. It's actually about a new Eden. That's where the Abrahamic promises are going.

Remember what Jesus says in Matthew 5, blessed are the meek, for they will inherit not the land, but the earth. Blessed are those who choose to live for the kingdom of God, for they will gain it all. That is the end of the story. And that is the end we must keep in mind because God does have a story for us, but we must participate in it.

Otherwise, we risk getting stuck in the middle, outside of God's story. We risk languishing forever without the God of this story.

But, if we know that we're in the middle of God's story, then we know it has God's ending, the ending that God himself has written.

[36 : 33] It ends with the fulfillment of all of God's promises. And so, we can live for that promise. You see, without that promise, you probably can't make sense of why you live the way you do.

Why would you bother inviting people to Christianity Explored and taking the pain to run it over Zoom? Why would you pour your lives into the teenagers in your youth group when nothing much seems to happen?

Why would you sacrifice a good portion of your salary to support that overseas missionary, even though the fruit is often invisible? Why would you come back from a comfortable life overseas to serve Christ in Kuching, even though Kuching isn't a place of worldly opportunity?

Why would you choose to be extra patient with that person whom everyone has given up on when they don't change? Why live for God when God seems to be missing? And the answer, my friends, is because you live for the promise.

You know he's not missing, but in action. He might be silent, but he's never absent. His promises are always in motion.

[37 : 45] And when you exercise Genesis 23 faith, you discover that he's actually still been working in small and mysterious ways in your journey.

That small beginnings of a cave in Genesis 23 will eventually lead to a tomb in Matthew 28 where world history was changed.

So in the already and not yet, keep the faith. Journey on. And over time, you might come to see, looking back, that God has always been working, even when you're feeling worn down.

As the Christian poet, Jenny Roberry, herself the sufferer of a rare genetic disorder, beautifully puts it on the screen. Pin here, too exhausted to wrestle anymore.

In the stillness I see, I'm in an embrace, not a headlock. So journey with faith, and one day you'll discover that headlock was really his embrace.

[39 : 02] let's pray. Father, you know where many of us are at, and it would be utterly unsurprising to find that many of us are probably experiencing some wear and tear now, feeling a bit worn down.

certainly, Lord, that's a place that I myself have been. And so Father, we just thank you for this passage.

And we just ask, Lord, that you would help us to have a Genesis 23 kind of faith. Help us to keep journeying on, recognizing that we live in the already and not yet, that we already have the promises, we already have the inheritance, and yet, we are still waiting.

But Father, we know that we're in the middle of the story, not the end, and we know that we will eventually get to the end of the story, so please help us to persevere until then. Help us indeed to be a people who continually say no to ungodliness, yes to godliness, yes to self-control, yes to upright lives, yes to being eager to do what is good, yes to beating all our hope in Jesus, and yes to living out that hope in Christ.

And so I just commit all of us into your hands, please Lord, hold us in your hands, help us to keep going. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.