

How to Die, How to Live

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[0 : 00] Amen. Thank you, Colin. So our text, of course, is what we've just read from Genesis 23 and from Genesis 25.

Now we're halfway through the first book of the Bible. There's 50 chapters in Genesis and we're in the 25th chapter. And out of those 25 chapters, half of that has been about one man, Abraham.

So for the last six weeks or so, we have been studying the life of Abraham and he's a massively important figure in the Bible. And I hope in the last weeks you've been able to see a little bit of why.

Abraham was larger than life. Now as you can tell, I'm not from here. So I'm not as familiar with Scotland's larger than life figures as you might be.

But names like Mary Stewart or Sir Walter Scott might come to mind to me. But in the States, we think of people like Abraham Lincoln. And Abraham Lincoln just walks tall across the history pages and then kind of the cultural imagination of Americans.

[1 : 03] He's this tall, quasi-mythical, top hat wearing poetry, pearl of wisdom, espousing legend. He is this massively larger than life figure.

And Abraham is something like that, but more. Abraham, life didn't happen to him. He happened to life, in a sense.

He kind of grabbed life by the reins. He's a massive figure. It's kind of the stuff of legend. If you think about it, you know, the beginning of his story, you meet this man who's off in Ur of the Caldees and he's kind of a nobody in the story of the Bible.

You don't know really anything about him other than his family line a little bit. And this strange God who he doesn't know calls him to leave everything, to set aside all of this social privilege and status and leave his family and everything familiar to him and go to this new land.

Now this new land is an occupied land, but it doesn't bother Abraham. Abraham is just convinced at the promise of this God that he's actually going to own all of this land.

[2 : 11] You know, when you think of the story like that, you kind of get that sense of larger than life-ness. He had a son when he was a hundred years old. He was a warrior. If you look at the story of how he rescued his nephew Lot, he was a warrior, kind of chieftain of people.

He grew wealthy, he grew powerful, he was respected, and he died at a very ripe old age. It's really quite a story. And you know, the ancient Hebrew way of telling stories is a lot different from our modern way of telling stories.

So the stories in our Old Testament, they're famously sparse. They lack a lot of detail. So for instance, we don't know what Abraham looked like, what he tended to wear, what his favorite color was, what he named his favorite camel and who his closest friend was.

It doesn't give the sort of detail that modern novels or history books or any kind of literature tend to give. So when the Old Testament does give a lot of detail, that's kind of our clue to listen up because what's coming is really important.

And Hebrew storytelling gives you just the right amount of information that you need to know. So if we're going to increase in our enjoyment of reading the Old Testament, because you can enjoy reading the Old Testament, if you're going to increase in the enjoyment, we have to think about its limitations.

[3 : 43] So what I mean by that is every form of art that we enjoy has certain limitations put around it, certain boundaries. I was talking with a friend recently who said, we were talking about film, and he said, think about what a movie can do to you in 90 minutes.

Within the limitation of time, just having about 90 minutes or so, a film can take you on a remarkable kind of emotional or mental roller coaster ride.

So as you begin to notice that about movies, you can begin to appreciate how movies are paced and how the story is told in those limits.

If you're a poetry aficionado, you're familiar with the haiku. The haiku is a very old style of poetry that is limited to just three lines with a set number of syllables in each line.

It's very short. And the pleasure of enjoying a haiku comes from saying something really profound in a really small space. The Old Testament's limitation is detail.

[4 : 50] So it gives you just what you need. When we come to a story like this in Genesis 23 and also in Genesis 25, the two bits that Colin read for us earlier, when you come to a story like that that zooms in on some really seemingly disconnected details, that's our clue as good readers of the Bible to stop and think and ponder what's going on here because this is where the storytelling actually, in a lot of ways, gets good.

So I mention all this about detail and limitations because understanding the limitations of a form of art helps you to enjoy that form of art. And like I said, you really can enjoy reading the Old Testament.

And maybe you do now, but we can all kind of take that next step in growing to appreciate the book that God has given us to know him through.

So the Old Testament is for our enjoyment, but it's also for our instruction. And I don't mean the sort of instruction of what to do next or what not to do primarily.

What I mean is that the Bible is for our instruction in the sense of three main things. One, who is God? and two, who are you? who are we? And three, who is God for us?

[6 : 08] And that's actually the point of this text, that's the point of every text in the Bible. And so that's the point of the sermon as well, is who is God for us?

And how do we learn that out of this story? And then what difference does that make to us today? So to get there, four points. So the first point is this, faith is active.

So Abraham's life is marked by two great promises from God. Not just two promises, Abraham receives several promises from God, but the end of his life in this story deals with primarily two.

So the first promise from God to Abraham is that God would give him and his descendants this vast land, the land of Canaan. He would give it all to them as an everlasting possession.

The second promise that the text deals with here is that God promised Abraham that his offspring, the child of promise that he had with Sarah, would, as the apostle Paul says in Romans, he says, inherit the world.

[7 : 19] So this child, Isaac, would partake of God's eternal covenant and would have God's special blessing. So those are the two promises. Now Genesis 23 deals with the first promise of possessing the land of Canaan.

It's in conversation with that promise. So here, near the end of Abraham's life, he's still a sojourner and an alien. He says that to the Hittites in our text.

He says, I'm just a stranger here. I'm just kind of passing through in a sense. He doesn't own one meter of land that God had promised him.

Now Genesis 25, the first bit that Colin read for us, deals with the second promise that Isaac would inherit the world and have God's blessing. So in the midst of all these other children that we find out Abraham had, how can he be sure that God would give his special blessing to Isaac?

But in both cases, we see Abraham putting his faith into action. Both of these promises are anchored in Genesis 17.

[8 : 27] They're alluded to a lot, but they come together beautifully in Genesis 17. So let's read verses seven and eight now. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

And I will give to you until your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

So in Genesis 23, Abraham remembers God's promise about the land. And he goes and when his wife Sarah dies, he buys a piece of that land.

Now this is the first installment of God's promise. We should actually, as careful readers, we should stop here and go, whoa, this is monumental. Abraham finally owns just a piece of the land that God promised he would one day give him.

It's huge. So the text goes into a lot of detail about negotiations over this piece of land. And it's actually really important and I find it really fascinating as to why the text does that.

[9 : 43] We're just going to look at that real quick if you turn in your Bibles to Genesis 23. It might help you follow along. So you can break it up into three kind of movements of negotiations.

So Abraham goes, he rises up from before his dead and he goes to the Hittites kind of sitting in the gate, which is where legal proceedings would happen in any ancient city.

And he goes there and he says, you know, I want to bury my dead. And they say, sure, here, have this temporary tomb, no problem. But Abraham says, no, no, that won't do.

I don't want a temporary tomb. I want a burial ground that's mine. That's the first movement. The second movement, he says, you know, Abraham says, I want Ephron's cave.

And the, well, he doesn't say the field, but he wants Ephron's cave. And so Ephron comes. So in the second movement, Ephron says, yeah, sure, I'll give you, I'll give you this piece of land, you can have it for free.

[10 : 41] But Abraham says, no, that won't do. Because he's savvy and Abraham knows that as soon as he dies, that land would be contested again and would go right back to Ephron's estate.

So that won't do either. So in the third movement of negotiations, Abraham finally convinces Ephron to sell it to him. He buys the land in front of witnesses.

It's a legal transaction. Why? Because Abraham believed God. When God said, I'm going to give you this land, he didn't say for a minute, he said, for an everlasting possession, forever, in perpetuity.

So Abraham needed to purchase the land in such a way that he knew his descendants would have it. And sure enough, actually, pretty much all the forefathers of our faith were buried in this cave.

In Joseph, this is at the end of Genesis, when Joseph, the great-grandchild of Abraham, when they're in Egypt and Jacob dies, they bring Jacob back and bury him right here in this cave.

[11 : 49] It's a very significant place. So Abraham actually put his faith in God into action in the very way that he bought this piece of land.

He literally staked the claim on God and his faithfulness, on the promises of God. The promised land actually plays a significant role in the rest of the Bible.

And let me just go briefly over how that concept develops. So from this point, you might think, so Abraham bought the land and maybe bought more land and they multiplied and were fruitful and then they possessed the land.

But that's not how the story goes. Actually within just a couple generations, all of Abraham's descendants move, all of them move to Egypt out of the promised land.

And they go there on good terms and they're well provided for and they're happy, but within the next 400 years, they're slaves and they're stuck there. They've grown into this great nation, but they're enslaved in Egypt away from the promised land.

[12 : 56] So of course, this is the book of Exodus that you read this. Then the Exodus is God's great act of freeing his people from slavery and taking them from Egypt back to the promised land.

The promised land is the destination. It's the two next to Egypt's from, if that makes sense. So once they get to the promised land, this is Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, once they're in the promised land, they find it occupied.

And now in the books of Joshua and Judges, especially, you find they have to conquer the land. They have to go in and rid it of its enemy inhabitants and settle there.

But instead of conquering, they compromise and they begin to look more like the pagans who are living there than like the special family of God.

And over many centuries, God waits and God is patient and God leads and God sends a king, God sends David, God sends other good kings, only a couple. He sends prophets to warn them and they don't listen and they get worse and worse and they abuse and take advantage of God and the promised land that they're living in.

[14 : 06] And God says enough and he sends them into exile. You can read about that and especially the prophets. Ezekiel warned a lot about that, Jeremiah, the exile they're removed from the promised land.

I hope you can see what a major character in a sense, the promised land is in the entire story of the Bible. They went from Egypt under the hard, harsh labor and toil. They went to find rest.

That's what they were promised was of rest and they didn't find it because of their sin. God removed them in exile. Now 70 years later, God brought them back, but not all the way, not all of them.

Just some of them came back and they wept because it wasn't like it used to be and they didn't find their rest.

Now fast forward several more centuries to the New Testament. You meet Jesus and the promised land is a Roman occupied territory and the people of God are basically just renters on this land at this point.

[15 : 12] Now the book of Hebrews great contribution or one of its wonderful contributions to our Bible is that it follows this thread all the way through and it shows us that Jesus is the rest that we've been looking for.

And if we want the promised land, what we actually want is Jesus himself. The final rest, our eternal rest is in Christ.

Again the book of Hebrews is a great place to go if you want to read more about that. Okay, that's the promised land. Now Genesis 25 deals with the promise of blessing for Isaac.

So why does Genesis 25? Remember it starts by saying now Abraham had another wife whose name was Ketara and then it lists out all of their sons and their grandchildren.

Why all of that detail now? Why there? Why is that important for us to know? He goes into all this detail to focus our attention in on chapter 25 verse 5 which says Abraham gave all he had to Isaac.

[16 : 27] Abraham demonstrates faith in the promise of God regarding his son by, you know, in the face of all the other sons that could have had a claim to his inheritance. Remember back in Genesis 16 I think Abraham said to God, oh that Ishmael might live before you.

You know, oh that my son that I had in my way with Hagar instead of waiting on the Lord to have a son with Sarah. Oh that he might be the one of your special blessing.

Abraham doesn't do that now. He's faithful, he puts his faith into action and gives his inheritance to Isaac and God blesses that and God blesses Isaac in this chapter.

So Abraham is staking his future line, he's staking everything on God's promise and you know from the story about his death we have a lot to learn about how to live as people of faith.

So Abraham looked at the promise of God and he lived like God was real. That's what faith is.

[17 : 35] Faith is living like God is real. Now you know it wasn't easy for Abraham, it's easy to read this text and say, you know, it's a bit mundane and it kind of makes sense like someone dies, you want to bury them, you got to give an inheritance to somebody.

But remember, so when Abraham was given the land of promise, when he was promised this land, the first thing he did was famine struck and he ran off to Egypt.

He didn't stay in the land, he didn't go where God said, that's where I want you. He went to Egypt and said, I'll be provided for over there. He followed his fear, he put fear into action, not faith.

And when God promised the son through Sarah, Sarah and Abraham schemed for him to sleep with Hagar, Sarah's servant, and try to get an offspring and heir through their own way instead of God's way.

He put fear and doubt into action, not faith. So his gut reaction is fear, not faith to the promises of God.

[18 : 46] So at the end of his life, when he purchases the land instead of not, instead of just saying, well, God must have forgotten about that promise. When he stakes a claim on the promise of God, we see that his faith has matured.

And when he gives everything to Isaac, we see that Abraham's faith has grown. God was very patient with Abraham and God is very patient with us.

Our faith will grow and be tested and tried. And God will be patient. Look how, if you read the letter to the Romans that Paul wrote in the New Testament, he talks about Abraham and he said, Abraham never wavered in his faith.

That's how patient God is with us. That's how much even small faith is strong because of the steadiness of its object.

So God is patient with us, but it's important for us to put our faith into action and not our fear into action.

[19 : 55] Now faith always has an object. It's like, it's a verb that needs an object in a sense. And on this side of the cross, we understand that the object of Abraham's faith was Jesus.

Of course, Abraham didn't know Jesus' name and he didn't know all of the details. But what he did know, he put all of his weight down on and he leaned on it. So when Abraham believed in the promised land, he was looking forward ultimately to the rest that we have in Jesus.

And when Abraham believed God's promise about his son, he was looking forward ultimately to the Son of God, the Savior of the world, who would bless the world and deal with the sin that caused all this mess in the first place.

All of the promises of God find their yes in Jesus. So Abraham's faith was ultimately in Christ.

And when we look back at the cross, you know, he's looking forward to what God will do in the future. We have the advantage of looking back to what God has done in history, time and space, with his feet in the dusty Middle Eastern soil.

[21 : 08] Jesus lived and died for you. That's something that you can put your feet down on. We don't have just the shadow, we have the reality, we have the substance in Christ.

So by looking at Jesus, the certainty we have of his death and resurrection, we can actually put our faith into action. In fact, I'll say that the other way around, you cannot put your faith into action without looking to Jesus.

So that's the first point. It's the longest point, don't worry. Point number two, faith is living like Jesus is real, even when it feels like he's not.

So let's think back to our chapters for a moment. In Genesis 23, you might have noticed that God is not mentioned. He's not in the story.

He's not really a character that we're aware of. It's kind of like the book of Esther. That seems absent, and that's weird because in the story of Abraham, God keeps showing up very literally.

[22 : 11] He shows up at Abraham's tent one day with a couple of angels and he sits down and has a meal. He shows up in dreams and visions. He's talking to Abraham. He's revealing things to Abraham.

God is all over this story, but here, at the end, he's absent. Now notice something else. Again, it's easy when this is about something that happened thousands of years ago, but Abraham's wife just died.

Now it's never easy to bury someone you love, and I imagine it's particularly difficult to bury a spouse, let alone how do you move on with your life after you bury the person you love who you've been married to for a hundred years?

This must have been a really dark time, a really difficult time for Abraham. Right now, honestly, it might feel like your world is falling apart in that way.

Maybe you're losing loved ones or have lost loved ones, or just everything being turned upside down and inside out is making you feel kind of just defeated and alone and isolated, and maybe God just doesn't feel like he's there.

[23 : 27] Well, maybe not. If you haven't had that experience, you probably will.

Faith is living like Jesus is real, even when it seems like he doesn't. How?

How do you do that? An old hymn, I love this line, it says, when darkness veils thy lovely face, I rest on thy unchanging grace.

That's how. So that's our third point. Faith is rational. Let me explain. Hebrews 11 talks a lot about faith and a lot about Abraham.

It gives the largest portion of Hebrews 11 is dealt in talking about Abraham, and it says something really important. It says Abraham considered.

[24 : 29] It's a really deeply rational word. Abraham sat down and thought about it, and he connected the dots, and maybe he made a prose and consulist with two columns.

Abraham's faith was a considering, thinking, rational faith. For instance, Isaac in chapter 22, God says, sacrifice your son.

Abraham says to the servants, they go up to the mountain where the sacrifice is supposed to take place, and he says, you wait here, the boy and I will come back. He doesn't just say, I'll come back alone.

He says, the boy and I will come back. Hebrews 11 explains and says, Abraham reckoned he rationalized and said, well, God will bring him back from the dead.

Faith is actually deeply rational. It's not unthinking. It's not blind. I don't like the word blind faith. That's not how we move about this world. That's not the faith that Christ gives us.

[25 : 31] But of course, our tendency when life gets really hard is actually to feel our way through life, to let our emotions take the lead. We say, I'll put my faith into action when I feel it, when it can kind of come from the heart.

We all do this. I do this a lot. But the Bible actually confronts us gently telling us, actually, your brain should take the lead.

Is that surprising? So when we are wearied and our faith is worn down by anxieties, what does Jesus say? Think about lilies.

Consider the birds. Think about how God takes care of them. How much more are you valued by God than they are?

Jesus wants us to use our brains in relation to our faith. The psalms often say, in Psalms of lament, when times are hard and they're under great distress, there's usually a turn in the lament psalm.

[26 : 38] There's a moment when something pivots and changes and they look to God. It says something like, but consider the mighty works of God from of old.

And sometimes the psalmist just loses sight of his worries because of the glorious sight he's seen of God. So if our faith is to be a living faith, an active faith, then it has to be a thinking faith.

I know a dad who was playing with his two-year-old son and dropped him on his head and he's fine.

But he got a concussion. And what do you think happened to that boy after his dad dropped him? He became afraid of heights for a couple years.

Kind of makes sense. You know, he had good reason to be because you're supposed to be able to totally trust your dad. And when you're playing with your dad as a little kid, he's the one who's supposed to be keeping you safe.

[27 : 39] And his dad dropped him. Our father has never dropped us, not once. So when we're afraid of the tall staircase or of climbing the tree or of the class elevator, we need to think back on what our father is like.

And remember, we have never been let down by him. That's what I mean by a rational faith. We think back to what we know of God and who God is for us.

And that gives us comfort and that actually turns our anxieties into worship, which is a wonderful place to be. And that's how faith can be fearless. It's how to put your faith into action, not your fear into action.

So my last point, number four, stop looking at your faith. Now what I mean by that is you can only have a living faith like that if you take your eyes off of yourself and look to Jesus.

You have to take your eyes off of your circumstances, off of your feelings, all of that, off of your actions, off of the size of your faith and look to the object of your faith.

[28 : 54] I don't know who, but someone once said, and I loved it, that faith is like a windshield. If you're driving along and you look at your windshield, you will crash. But if you look through your windshield, that's what it's for.

So if you want a vibrant faith like Abraham's, the answer isn't try really hard or do better next time. The answer isn't to pay more attention to yourself and your actions.

It's to pay more attention to Jesus. He is the object of your faith. And faith is only as steady and strong as its object is.

So this is not a shape up and do better sermon. It's a look at Jesus sermon. God willing, all of our sermons here are look at Jesus sermons.

And you know, our faith is actually strengthened when we look at Jesus and our faith is weakened when we look away from Jesus. Think about the story of Peter, the apostle Peter walking on the water toward Jesus and his eyes are locked onto him.

[30 : 01] And when Peter looks down at the waves, he starts to sink. The same is true of us.

In Lord of the Rings, I have to bring it in. It's been too long since I've had a good Lord of the Rings quote. I think it's in the books. I think it's in the third book, Return of the King. Sam Gamgee has seen Gandalf die, his dear friend, his guide.

And Gandalf is restored back to life and he comes and Sam sees him and says, but I thought you were dead. Are all the sad things coming untrue?

We look at Jesus back from the dead. And yeah, all the sad things are coming untrue. His death and resurrection, it's the anchor of our faith.

And more than that, it gives us hope and joy and power for the Christian life. So it's one thing to know that Abraham trusted God, but it's another thing to put your trust in God.

[31 : 10] And it's one thing to know who God was for Abraham, but it's another thing to know who is God for you? Who is God for me? And when you want to know who God is for you, you look at the cross.

Jesus, the Son of God, endured agony for you joyfully. Jesus was so committed to blessing you, so committed to doing good to you that he took the curse for you and gave you his blessing.

Jesus didn't just make it possible to have a good life or to obey really well or maybe one day obtain the blessing of God, he purchased it for you. He secured it for you.

He secured God's smile for you. So if you believe on Jesus, you have in him the substance, the very thing that was promised to Abraham in full.

You have God himself. You have Jesus. So the story of Abraham from start to finish, it's a story of God's commitment to bless you and do good to you through Jesus, the better Abraham, the King of eternal rest, the Savior of the world, the suffering Son.

[32 : 36] So let's just take the next step of faith with him. Why not? Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, what a sure and steady place we have to put our feet on.

And we admit we are fragile and tossed about by life. We are often self-occupied and we're not often enough occupied with you, but we thank you for times like this that turn our hearts to you, that help us to cry out to you.

We thank you for speaking to us and revealing who you are through your word, that our hearts may warm to you and begin to just crack open a little bit more.

Bless us and be near to us, Lord, and help us to just keep our eyes fixed on you in all of your glory. Amen. Amen.