

Living and Dying by Faith ▪ Genesis 23

Ryan Perz ▪ April 28, 2024

It's good to be familiar with the lives of some of the well know missionaries. William Carey, Amy Carmichael, and Hudson Taylor to name a few.

A personal favorite for me is John G. Paton.

Paton was called to New Hebrides to bring the gospel to people who had absolutely no access. (Piper biography on him)

The people of that island were known for cannibalism. He even had a man protest that he should not go.

Paton had tremendous courage!

But what stands out most about Patton is what happened when he hit the ground.

Within 3 months of arrival, his wife died... and so did his infant son who was barely one month old. John G. Paton dug their graves and buried them with his own hands.

- › Can you imagine going to a foreign country to do what you believe God called you to and you lost the people closest to you?

But Patton persevered. He kept on.

Why...because it was a good experience?

No, because he had *faith* and a clear sense of God's call.

*In this passage we learn a few things we can imitate—how to live and die by faith.

—through severe loss,

—finding favor with outsiders

—trusting God who holds the future

Living by faith through severe loss (1-3)

- The setting of this story is Sarah’s death—at what the Bible calls a ripe old age (127 years).

People sometimes try to push the thought of death their own death or that of a loved one out of their minds.

Talking about death is taboo.

People are eager to talk about life—living well.

The Bible does not allow us to do that.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 ESV

It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind,
and the living will lay it to heart.

- Let me paraphrase: If you have to pick from attending a funeral or wedding, pick the funeral.

(NLT)

“Better to spend your time at funerals than parties.”

Why? It should cause you to reflect on how short life is, and how you are using it.

Psalms 90:10 ESV

The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

- But thinking about death can even go deeper than that bare fact.

Think of the “why” of death.

Why do people die? I’m not thinking of things like heart disease, cancer, or accidents.

Why is there this thing called death that we all have to deal with, and cannot avoid?

Sin. Adam. Death.

Romans 5:12 ESV

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

Or, we are getting our due:

Romans 6:23 ESV

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- But we are focusing on this text of how Abraham handled death.

It did not shatter him, neither was he merely stoic and unemotional.

He mourned.

He wept.

He kept his faith and trust in the LORD.

It's the same way the even Jesus faced the loss of his dear friend Lazarus.

John 11:33–35 ESV

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

We know it's not sin, or a lack of faith to mourn deeply.

- But there is *two* distinct types of mourning.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

*Two types of sorrow at death: Hope and without hope.

When I was pastoring my former church, I had a young man visiting for a little while.

He had moved to our town to live with his older brother. That's all I knew. I wanted to be hospitable, so I invited him out for coffee.

After chatting about the superficial things, I asked him about his family.

He said, "My dad lives in Oregon, and my mom is in heaven."

And right after he said heaven....he smiled.

*That's probably in my top 10 moments as a pastor.

Because he had hope.

I'm guessing he cried at night and thought about and missed his mom.

› *But he lived in hope, not despair!*

(Alan Ross) "In times of grief only a living faith in the eternal will keep one from despair".

Living by faith and having favor (3-16)

- The bulk of this story is the negotiations that Abraham tries to make for a burial site.

It can be seen as "polite bargaining".

Key details:

—He approaches the locals, and asked for some property to bury his dead wife.

—The local Hittites offer him the best of their tombs.

*Yet they were not really hearing Abraham: Abraham wants property...not just borrowed tomb.

It's one thing to need something from someone, and say; I need to borrow that.

It's another thing to say...I need that, *sell it to me.*

- Abraham refuses and has his sights set on a particular cave (Macpelah).
- Even though he is offered it for free, he insists to purchase.

Yet one thing is key in how all this went down:

Abraham had favor with the people; *He was living well among them; he had a good reputation.*

- Beginning at v4: Abraham in his mind stays in his lane: “sojourner and foreigner”.
- This means that he had no legal right to buy and own property.
- V5: The people recognized that something is *different* about Abraham.
- V6 adds another contributing factor: Abraham respects and honors the people —this is very ironic especially just after being called a prince.

A prince does not bow down.

Here is an old man—a very old man, but not cranky and agitated. He is honorable and respectable...dignified.

I’ve been meditating on what God requires of men as we age.

Titus 2:2 ESV

Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

That’s how young men should want to grow up. It seems like Abraham had it, by God’s grace!

We can’t lose sight of seeking to have a good reputation with the outside world.

The Bible is very clear this is how we are to try to live.

—It’s how Jesus lived.

Luke 2:52 ESV

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

—It’s an elder qualification.

1 Timothy 3:7 ESV

Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

—It’s for all Christians.

Colossians 4:5 ESV

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.

Growing up, I had the mentality of, “I don’t care what others think”.

That can be off; not by faith.

Living by faith means we know the value of living well before others for the purpose of God being glorified.

Living by faith in God who holds the future (17-20)

- Probably the most interesting, even puzzling part of this story: Why is Abraham so set on getting the cave?
- Well first, his actions really go against the grain of what was culturally normal.

In the ancient world, when someone died away from their native land—you took the effort to travel back and bury them in your homeland.

***This is the only piece of property he ever actually owns—and ironically, it’s a grave.*

This small patch of real estate stays with us the rest of Gen.

Genesis 50:13 ESV

for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place.

- › There almost seems to be a hint: the faith of God's people will be centered around what happens in a tomb.

- More immediately, Macpelah is a prophetic sign of the future: It speaks of Abraham living by faith—that one day this Land will be what God promised it to be.

- In a similar way, Jeremiah buys a field in Jer. 32 as a prophetic sign that God has future plans for his people and place.

This act of buying the cave really says: I really believe God has a plan for this place.

- Also, notice that when Abraham's wife died—he did not think that somehow that was a death to God's promises and that his purpose died.

It reminds me of Pastor Les. He was a friend of mine in Iowa who pastored small rural church. Les was my age and sadly lost his wife to some nasty cancer.

Pastor Les was in his 30's with a few young children. Single dad widower.

Shortly after she died, his church members asked what was next. He said "to keep pastoring this church".

They were surprised and figured he might move back to be near his family.

He told them: God did not call me to pastor this church only on the condition that I have my wife.

Friends, whether it's John Patton burying his dead wife and infant,

Or a teenage boy thinking about his mom in heaven,

Or a Pastor Les who stayed faithful to the call of God on his life,

Or...the key players in our story: Abraham & Sarah,

Or our own lives as we face the reality of death.

What matters?

Faith in Christ. Keeping your eyes on him and the heavenly reward.

Hebrews 11:13–16 (ESV)

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

If there is a main takeaway from a story about death and burial in a cave, it's this—by faith get much more.

This is not home, heaven is!

Conclusion:

Maybe all this talk of death has made you terribly uneasy.

Maybe you are scared to death of death.

Or maybe your mind is so simple and secular, you just push it away.

The Bible puts a laser-sharp focus on death—on what Jesus has done about the unescapable reality.

- › *He came to deal with death, defeat death, and destroy it's hold.*

Hebrews 2:14–15 (ESV)

that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Why is it better to go to a house of mourning?

Why choose the funeral?

Because it reminds us once again, of the power and freedom that Jesus Christ has won.