

STUDY ELEVEN — GENESIS 23; 25:1-11
STILL LONGING

P R O M I S E

— G E N E S I S 1 2 - 2 5 —

GOD'S GRACIOUS INITIATIVE
IN THE LIFE & TIMES OF ABRAHAM

OVERVIEW

Genesis 23 – Along with Abraham, Sarah is remembered for her great faith (Isa 51:1-2; Heb 11:11). After over 100 years of marriage and 62 years of pilgrimage, Abraham is understandably grief-stricken at the loss of his life partner (v 2). This is a reminder that the hope of eternal life, though a powerful comfort (1 Thess 4:13-14), doesn't negate the grief of separation and the pain of suffering and death. After all, Jesus himself wept at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:35).

Abraham's subsequent move to secure a burial plot for Sarah is significant. Though a nomad, he was so sure of God's promise that he decides not to bury Sarah in her ancestral homeland, but in the place his descendants would dwell. Of the bargaining process with Ephron the Hittite, Duguid writes,

'Ephron's answer, although a model of ancient Near Eastern deference and respect, offered quite a different deal. He wanted Abraham to buy the entire field, not just the cave, and without ever quite mentioning a price, he asked for the vast sum of four hundred pieces of silver—more than a year's wages for a normal worker. Yet instead of haggling over the extortionate price, as would have been the usual custom, Abraham paid the full amount without demurral.' (p 152).

Abraham spared no expense that this parcel of land be recognised to be undisputedly his. Indeed, this small slice of real estate remained the sum total of the holdings of Abraham's family for many centuries until Joshua led God's people across the Jordan River. Machpelah in Hebron thus became a symbol or token of God's promised inheritance and an important burial place for the patriarchs.

Genesis 25:1-11 – After 100 long years of pilgrimage, Abraham too dies. God's promise of dying in peace at an old age is fulfilled (15:15). So too do the genealogies convey an *initial* fulfilment of the promise of descendants. Yet despite the fact that these children would go onto father nations, Abraham knew that the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises would come through Isaac. So like Ishmael, these sons of his new marriage are lovingly provided for, but sent away.

Hebrews 11:8-16 points out that Abraham's life reveals what is true of the experience of faith – we live in the gap between promise and reality. We await the fulfilment of God's promises in eternity and therefore live presently as foreigners and strangers until we too are gathered together with God's people, 'the living fellowship of the redeemed.' (Hughes, 326). Abraham anticipated that his descendants would dwell in the Promised Land, but ultimately he looked forward to an eternal city (Heb 11:16), may we live in similar expectation.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT DOWNPAYMENT

Centuries before the land of Canaan would come into the possession of his descendants, Abraham goes to extravagant lengths to secure a burial plot for Sarah and so secure something of a down payment on God's Promised Land. Duguid (p 153) thus aptly writes,

'To Abraham and his descendants Machpelah represented the firstfruits of the Promised Land. It was the downpayment by God, which represented an assurance that one day the whole land would be theirs.'

It was thus the place in which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were also buried. It was also potentially the place (located in Hebron) which emboldened the spies Caleb and Joshua to declare that God would enable Israel to take possession of the land (cf. Num 13:22; 30).

Heb 11:8-16 reminds us that in Christ, the city and land we ultimately long for and that was ultimately promised to Abraham is eternal. Thus, whilst Abraham had Machpelah as a token of future earthly realities, we have an even greater downpayment on our heavenly inheritance—Eph 1:13-14 says, *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession...*

May His presence embolden us as we await the fulfilment of the promise, just like Caleb and Joshua!

GETTING STARTED

1. In this study we begin by reading of Abraham's grief at Sarah's death. For those who feel comfortable sharing, what has been hardest in your experience of losing a loved one?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Genesis 23

2. How does faith inform our grief at the death of a loved one? Does it completely remove our grief? (cf. 1 Thess 4:13-14)
3. Why did this 'foreigner and stranger,' or wandering nomad, want to pay such a high price to secure a piece of property?
4. Why was Machpelah such a significant location for the ensuing generations of patriarchs? (cf. 49:31; 50:13)

Read Genesis 25:1-11

5. What promises of God had been fulfilled in Abraham's life at the point of his death?
6. What promises remained to be fulfilled?

Read Hebrews 11:8-16

7. What does the experience of Abraham and Sarah teach us about the life of faith?
8. Like Abraham & Sarah, we too are 'foreigners and strangers' here on earth (cf. 1 Pet 2:11). What does this mean and how should it impact the way we live?

TAKEAWAY

9. Take turns reading the verses below about our heavenly inheritance. What do you most anticipate about heaven?
10. In the expensive purchase of Sarah's tomb, Abraham's 'ultimate priorities impacted his earthly expenditures.'¹ How should we follow suit? How is Jesus' approach to earthly possessions instructive for us?

¹ Duguid, 153.

Some Scriptures on Heaven

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

1 Thessalonians 2:13-18

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Job 19:25-28

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

John 14:2-3

My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Psalms 16:11

You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.

In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

