



DYING SATISFIED

SERIES: *THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS*

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Genesis 25:7-11

18th Message

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The hour of death can be a very holy time. The things that are said and done as death approaches are extremely significant. And speaking with godly people as they approach the end of their lives can be a rewarding experience. What were the most important events that shaped their lives? Did they have exhortations to pass on to the next generation? As we come to the end of Abraham's life, our text this morning reads:

And these are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. (Gen 25:7-8, NASB)

Abraham lived one hundred years in the land of promise. When his life was over at last, the narrator says that he died at a "good old age," just as God had promised, full of years and satisfied. Abraham lived long and well. If he could be here among us this morning, what do you think he would say about his life? Suppose we could sit with him by the well at Beerlahai-roi and take a few moments of his time. Would he lay his hands on us and bless us? Before we continue with our studies in Genesis, I want to go back and reflect on the life of our forefather. If we view his life of faith as a paradigm for our own lives, four qualities stand out as being critical to the life of faith.

I. The life of faith is a journey

The first and most obvious characteristic is that the life of faith is a journey. Abraham was seventy-five years old when God called him to embark on a journey with him, one that would define his life from that moment on. It began with the vision of a new land and a new seed that would be the foundation of all subsequent human history.

The offer strikes a resonant chord in all of us. The secret to life is being called to play a role in what God is doing. And that, as we have seen, is creating a new world and a new humanity. It is not trying to create significance in a world of our own design, as the builders of the tower of Babel tried to do. Because his wife Sarah was barren, this promise spoke right into the heart of Abraham's pain and vulnerability.

If Abraham's journey would bring the promise of blessing, the early steps were wrought with pain, however. The first words that he hears are the crisp and haunting phrase, "*Lek leka*," which means, "go for yourself," or better, "by yourself." Before Abraham can enter into these promises he had to leave everything that was familiar, all that for the last seventy-five years had shaped and defined him.

This severe separation was absolutely necessary. Abraham could not enter the new world without first leaving the old. Jesus extends the same invitation to us. When he issued that first call to those fishermen to follow him, Mark records that "immediately they left the nets and followed," and "they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him" (Mark 1:18, 20). These early disciples left secure jobs and familiar homes, risking everything to follow the itinerant rabbi. If we would follow Jesus, we have to leave first.

Making the journey more difficult for Abraham was the fact that the itinerary was not spelled out in detail. The call was to go to a land which, God said, "I will show you." But the process of walking by faith was designed to keep his faith alive and dynamic. As he journeyed, Abraham discovered that his deepest longings arose in the context of alienation and vulnerability. And so it went all of his days. He found again and again that as he was willing to step out into the unknown by faith, the promises were reiterated, expanded and deepened.

But life never became more secure for Abraham. The journey kept him on the cutting edge of adventure, with new horizons expanding every step of the way (Heb 11:8-13). Faith is never reduced to manageable beliefs or facile doctrines. Faith kept launching Abraham over the cliffs of all that was comfortable, into that terrible world where he had absolutely no control. As he dined with angels, conquered kings, succumbed to famine, dreamed of visions, smelled the smoke of Sodom and lit a fire on Mt. Moriah, his world got bigger, not smaller. Right to the end, as he carried through the tough negotiations to secure a burial plot for Sarah, the promise of the land expanded his horizons to think beyond to the realm of resurrection.

Only at the end of Abraham's life can we begin to discern that his journey had a definite shape. This was no haphazard trip. He had a clear direction and goal as his faith developed through his most intimate relationships with God, his wife, his nephew, and his sons (see literary outline below). The same is true of our lives as well. As we look back over the years we can discern a shape and design to our walk. The essence of the life of faith is that it is a journey that keeps challenging our faith.

So the first question posed by Abraham's life is: Have we heard the call, and have we left all to follow God?

II. The life of faith is a battle

The second characteristic that dominated Abraham's life of faith was the battle. He was called not just to a journey, but also to a battle. Wherever he turned, he

was brought right to the center of some conflict, ranging from battling with international powers that had kidnapped his nephew, to being caught in war zone between two women, both of whom he loved. He had to battle a nephew whose prosperity threatened his existence, and face the rebuke of pagan kings for his inability to fight through his own fears of insecurity.

Perhaps the most intense conflicts Abraham faced were those that he had with God himself. Think of the emotions he experienced at the announcement that Sodom was going to be destroyed, and the fear he had to overcome to wrestle with God to show mercy to a nephew overrun by lust. Consider the dread he had to overcome within himself when he was forced to send Ishmael off to the desert, or the terror that gripped his soul as he made the silent journey with Isaac up Mt. Moriah. Consider that during the entire one hundred years of his sojourning the land remained the perpetual possession of the Canaanites. C. S. Lewis once said, "Enemy-occupied territory, that is what this world is." All Abraham would ever own was a mere acre. Acquiring even that for his wife's burial site demanded some of toughest negotiations of his life, and even then it cost him a small fortune.

Abraham would say that the life of faith is an intense battle that does not end until we die. There is no retirement and no passivity allowed. If you don't like conflict, then forget the life of faith. But Abraham's battle had its rewards: it kept him dependent on God and made him holy. Moses later affirmed this when, after he gave the Israelites strict instructions for battle with the Canaanites, he said,

"But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." (Deut 7:5-6)

Later, in the book of Judges, the narrator says that God had in fact left some of the Canaanites in the land for the very purpose that the new generation might "be taught war."

Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly). (Judg 3:1-2)

In like manner, the Christian too is called to a battle, though our battle is not against flesh and blood, nor is it fought with physical weapons. But it is just as intense, and it takes the full armor of God just to remain steady.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will

be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Eph 6:12-13)

But Abraham would say that no matter how long or intense the battle is, we can count on God to be faithful. God was faithful when Abraham needed strength to leave home. He was faithful to lead him to victory over an international army of ruthless kidnapers. He was faithful to intervene and care for his maid and his beloved son when he was forced to cast them out. He was faithful to take heed to his intercession to delay the judgment of an entire city until Lot was safely rescued. So intense was this battle that it required an angelic detail to engage a family that had no spiritual sensitivity, and extract them almost against their will before the doomed city collapsed in smoke and rubble. God was faithful, and Lot was spared. And when God gave Abraham that dreaded announcement, "take now your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac," God proved faithful to grant him supernatural courage to ascend Moriah and seize the knife. Yes, God was faithful to Abraham in every conflict that he faced.

But Abraham would go on to say, with tears in his eyes, that God was faithful even when he was faithless. When he succumbed to his fears and sacrificed his wife's honor, God was faithful to overrule, not just once but twice. Pagan kings came under the spell of the divine and became obedient tools of rebuke to Abraham to get him back to the heart of the journey. Rather than disqualifying him from the journey, repeated failure only led to greater grace. God graciously created a hedge around him to ensure it would never happen again -- and it never did. Sometimes our greatest enemy can be ourselves. But even that poses no threat to God. He will conform us to his will, at times even against our will.

So the life of faith is a journey to be led on and it is a battle to be fought.

Thirdly, the life of faith is a love affair in which God purifies our affections.

III. The life of faith is a love affair

As Abraham looked back over one hundred years he would say that the entire journey was designed to do one thing, and that was to shape his affections. God's original promise was spoken right into the heart of Abraham and Sarah's deepest pain, their barrenness. How they longed for a son! What they could not do, however, he promised to do beyond their wildest dreams. God made outrageous promises to this barren couple: "You will be the father of a multitude. Kings will be born from you. Look up at the stars. So shall your seed be."

But then, after God had spoken of the impossible, nothing happened. Abraham and Sarah had to wait and wait, and wait even more. Days turned into weeks, weeks to months, months to years, and years to decades. Through all the years of waiting, however, their affections did not dissipate. Rather, they intensified, perhaps to the breaking point.

At last, when the ache seemed unbearable, Sarah devised a plan to ease her pain. And it worked. Abraham had a son through her maid, Hagar. But God said this son was not the son of promise. They had to wait one more year. Sarah laughed. She couldn't believe it. Thus the child had to be called that ridiculous name, "Laughter," so that she (and we) might never forget. So we learn that the promises are not inherited by faith alone, but by faith and patience. Through the pain of waiting our affections are intensified.

But that is not all the story teaches. God intensifies our affections through waiting, but he wounds, purifies and expands them through loss. As Abraham journeyed, every step forward by faith was accompanied by some loss or other. Upon his first call, he lost his father. When he first tasted the promise of "land" under his feet, he almost lost his wife to his own fears. And then, just as his ears were ringing with delight as God reconfirmed and expanded the promise, he lost his nephew to kidnapers. Just after he received the gift of fertility within his own loins he heard that his nephew's city had been earmarked for divine obliteration. Immediately after the long-awaited son of promise arrived, before joy could take root in his soul, he had to drive out his first son Ishmael along with his mother Hagar. Then, when his affections took fresh root in the son of promise, God told him to sacrifice Isaac. (This is the only time the Hebrew verb "love" [*'ahab*] is used of Abraham: "Take now you son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac," Gen 22:2.) And at last, when he finally secured a piece of property to call his own, it only served to remind him of the loss of his wife.

Throughout the journey, Abraham's affections were wounded, purified and expanded through loss, so that in the end he would find himself lost in the love of God alone. God uses the losses that wound at first to purify and expand our capacity to love him. This love affair makes the journey satisfying. That is what Jesus told his disciples. They would lose much in following him, but they would gain much, too.

"Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

The life of faith is a journey, a battle, and a love affair. And Abraham expressed his new affections by worshiping.

This brings us to the final point concerning the life of Abraham.

IV. The life of faith makes worship central

Abraham recovered man's chief end that was lost in the fall. What does it mean to be truly human? Abraham's answer rings as clear as a bell: it is when we worship God.

Tracing his century-long journey, we find that it was worship that defined Abraham. He worshiped everywhere in this land of promise. He built altars. He publicly called on the name of the LORD. He prayed prayers of intercession for kings. He ate with angels. He fell on his face both in silent awe and in laughter. He offered ten percent of his spoils in appreciation to God for his deliverance, and then refused the offer of riches in order to keep his worship pure. He planted a Tamarisk tree as a symbol that his seed would one day be rooted in the land. He negotiated with a righteous God to secure mercy, and with greedy men to secure a grave. And when life-long mate died, he worshiped through his tears.

But perhaps the holiest quality of Abraham's worship was the resolute obedience he consistently displayed to the call of God's voice. God spoke, and Abraham rose early in the morning (21:14; 22:3) to do what his Master asked. No protests, not even a murmur; he simply obeyed. Perhaps this is the height of worship: offering silent obedience to the One we love. And notice what that did for Abraham. In that darkest hour of silence as he ascended Moriah, his faith was finally catapulted over the edge of the horizon and he "saw" the resurrection. "Seeing" the resurrection, he was able to do what God would later do—sacrifice his son.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE CALLED." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type." (Heb 11:17-19)

We can discern how contagious Abraham's worship was when his servant imitated his master on the mission to secure a bride for Isaac. Yet no one could have imagined the legacy that the worship of this one would leave behind. Who would have thought that several insignificant piles of rocks would do more to shape world history than all the plans of the international superpowers of Abraham's day? These acts of worship sanctified the land. They became like well driven anchors in stone, giving shape to Jacob's return to the land, to its conquest under Joshua, and to Israel's exile and return. Who could have imagined that Moriah would become the center of mankind's atonement, when another Father had to resolutely take a spear to his Son's side?

There is no life like the life of faith. And our faith is evidenced supremely by our worship. That defines the legacy we leave behind. This is how we shall be remembered, because it is our worship that endures.

Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife. And it came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi. (Gen 25:9-11)

The Life of Abraham
A Literary Outline

Frame: Genealogical information = prologue (Abraham's father dies)	11:27-32
A First Call and Promise	12:1-9
a Promise of land, seed and blessing	12:1-3
b Abraham " <i>goes by himself</i> " by faith to a new land	12:4-9
B Sarah Endangered: Abraham in Egypt	12:10-13:1
C Lot Episodes – life saved by Abraham's intervention	13:2-14:24
D Covenant with Abraham	15:1-21
X Birth of Ishmael	16:1-16
D' Covenant with Abraham	17:1-27
C' Lot Episodes – life spared by Abraham's intercession	18:1-19:38
B' Sarah Endangered: Abraham in Gerar	20:1-18
A' First Fulfillment of the Promise	21:1-24:67
a Birth of Isaac, expulsion of Ishmael	21:1-21
b A permanent well and the planting of a tree in the land	21:22-34
X Abraham " <i>goes by himself</i> " to a new land to sacrifice son, and because of his obedience he is blessed beyond measure	22:1-19
b' Death of Sarah – first purchase of land	23:1-20
a' Securing a wife for Isaac	24:1-67
Frame: Genealogical information = epilogue	25:1-18
(Abraham dies , Isaac blessed)	