

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

By Steve Zeisler

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—a time to give birth, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. (Eccl. 3:1-4)

Life is filled with a tapestry of requirements—some wonderful and some frightening, some hard to bear and others desired. It will be instructive for us to consider how Abraham faced the daily affairs of life in his final years: birth, death, marriage, and the purchase of land. Since these are the circumstances that make up the human condition, we need to know how to deal with them.

In Genesis 22 we learned from Abraham, the great Old Testament saint, at the highest point of his life as he faced the supreme test of his faith. The most overwhelming and frightening thing he ever had to do was to carry out God's instruction that his son should die. But this was an incredible test and a highly unusual circumstance. We also need to learn about the more ordinary events, the things that every human being has to face—mourning and laughter, dancing and sorrow, birth and death, tearing down and building up, planting and harvesting. These are the things that adorn the ordinary landscape our lives will traverse.

We have recently been faced with an interesting juxtaposition of events in this community. Our young people have been surrounded by news of the death of their peers. One of the most gifted young men in Los Altos High School history was diagnosed with cancer and died suddenly. Grief and uncertainty have spread throughout the campus as the students have sought answers to their questions. The local press has commented at length about the suicide of another young man, and a third is on trial for murder. In the midst of these tragedies, we have prayed for babies born and about to be born among us. We recently rejoiced with a couple from our congregation at the dedication of their beautiful twin girls. This is also the season when many young men and women are preparing for graduation and June weddings as they launch themselves into new directions of life. Birth, death and marriage are all woven together in human experience—"a time for every purpose under heaven."

From Abraham's life, we can learn how ordinary Christians like us can face the same things people in every culture face, how we can trust the Lord to be God's people with his perspective.

The end of Genesis 22 gives us a birth announcement. You have probably received similar birth announcements, news from distant friends who have had a child. I recently received word that my sister is pregnant. For the first time in six years, there will be a new baby born into our clan. We are given this same type of news at the end of Gen.22:20-23:

Now it came about after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor; Uz his first-born and Buz his brother and Kemuel the father of Abram and Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph and Bethuel." And Bethuel became the father of Rebekah; these eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.

Rebekah is the key name and reason for the genealogy. She will become a major figure in the record of Scripture.

Immediately following the birth announcement is a death announcement. Look at the Gen.23:1-2:

Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in

to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

In the actual chronology, the birth of the family members in Haran took place over two generations. But the writer of this story chose to attach the two accounts—the announcement of people being born and the announcement of Sarah dying. How will a man like Abraham understand and trust the Lord in events like these—the milestones that occur in every family?

Abraham lived for many decades with Sarah. They had suffered together and had failed one another. And they were strengthened together. They had the extraordinary assignment of believing God for a miracle baby. Although belief was difficult, they were finally brought to the great place of faith and gift of God in the birth of their son Isaac. They had grown together like two trees planted next to one another whose branches intertwine. Perhaps, you have had this kind of marriage with decades of memories. If not, perhaps, you have known someone that has. Couples can grow more beautiful every year and gain increased esteem and respect. Thus had Abraham and Sarah grown together.

When his wife died, Abraham mourned and wept. There is nothing unChristian about the pain he experienced when he was parted from his wife. Some would say that Christians ought to rise above these feelings because they reflect a lack of faith. I think this is wrong! We are human. Even Jesus wept. He cried over Jerusalem, and he wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Death and its loss are painful to experience, and we as Christians will feel the pain when we encounter them. But we do have information that gives us a different perspective and allows us balance in the midst of sorrow. Sorrow is inescapable. The death of someone we love cannot be met with anything but a sense of loss and tears.

In fact, the end of chapter 24 continues this theme of mourning for Sarah's death. Genesis 24:61 opens with Isaac and Rebekah meeting one another after she was brought from her homeland. Listen carefully to what went on in Isaac's heart as he took her for his bride:

Then Rebekah arose with her maids, and they mounted the camels and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and departed. Now Isaac had come from going to Beer-lahai-roi; for he was living in the Negev. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. And she said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." Then she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

I am convinced this is one of the most beautiful vignettes in the Bible. The sky is filled with the dramatic clouds and glorious rays of the setting sun. While violins are playing, Isaac walks in the field meditating upon the Lord and wondering about his life. Upon the horizon, the caravan is seen, and this beautiful young woman alighting from her camel realizes that the man she sees is her prospective husband. She veils herself in modesty, and there is the tender description of their beginning married life together.

But notice what the passage says. As a result of God giving this woman to Isaac, he was comforted regarding the sorrow over his mother's death. Isaac was probably 40 years old, and his mother had died some three years earlier. Yet, for three years he had lived with a deep sense of loss, not the tears that attend the first months of mourning but a wondering at God for what had happened. Isaac and Sarah probably had an unusually close relationship because Sarah had waited so long for this son to be born. And he still harbored loss and uncertainty in his heart after three years. Thus, God sent him this woman to love, and he was comforted by her in regards to some of the questions that he still had concerning his mother's death.

These people were real human beings. They experienced the tears and the suffering that occur when we lose people we love. The passage also describes the human comfort that another person can be. Maybe your wife or husband can be that source of comfort, or if you are not married maybe someone else can come alongside of you

when your heart is broken. It is good for God to make Christians able to experience all of these things. We are not different from the rest of the world in the way life hits us. But beyond the ability of human beings to comfort us, beyond the tears and the mourning, we do have a different understanding as Christians. We know that God has made promises and is taking action to support and encourage us in ways that transcend what people of the world can experience. We have other reasons for hope and other sources of supply. We have answers that are not merely human for these questions. Let us read on in chapter 23. Look at Gen.23:3-16:

Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site." Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard.

The story goes on to say that Abraham acquired a field and buried Sarah. But since there is a very important spiritual implication to this story, we are given much detail.

Let me begin with the observation that Abraham knew how to exist in the culture in which he lived. He had learned how to live among neighbors who did not know the Lord, and he understood the ways of their culture. He was able both to be wise and to leave behind a sense of worthiness and praise among the people, rather than treading on toes and getting in the way as so many Christians unfortunately do. Being wise enough to speak in the formal courtesies of the people, he approached the elders and said, "You speak to Ephron, the son of Zohar, for me." He created an environment in which Ephron, who certainly wanted the 400 shekels, was free to finally and elaborately bring up his price. Agreeing to pay his price, Abraham was making absolutely sure that he was not creating an entanglement with these people. In their culture, having received a favor, he would then owe a favor. He required ownership of the property for a reason I will mention in a moment, but he did it in a way that was very thoughtful. His actions bespoke a wise understanding of the world in which he lived.

To harken back to Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes, I think for Christians there is a time to build up and a time to tear down, a time to plant and a time to harvest. We need to learn how the culture in which we live works so that when we present our Lord we know how to be a blessing to other people. We need to know how to pay the full price, how to give honor to those who are leaders and how to do what God has called us to do in a way that sparks interest in God rather than antagonism. We see that in Abraham's interchange with the elders.

The key point of the story is his fierce determination to have the land. The more you read the Pentateuch, the more you will realize how fierce his determination was. All his life Abraham had been a sojourner and a wanderer. He had never owned anything even though he had been given the land of Canaan by God. Although he was the rightful owner, he never once actually controlled a piece of property until Sarah died.

God had said that the promised land would belong to his people. Even though he knew by prophetic utterance from heaven about the intervening 400 years of slavery, he also knew that the people of God would return to this

land. Thus, in buying property, he was making a statement about trusting the word of God. He was looking into the distant future and believing the promises of God that had not yet been fulfilled. He acted upon the fact that the Lord said that he would be a life-giver to Abraham and his family and that they would possess this land. Thus, he declared in the burial of Sarah, "I believe God."

This one parcel of land became not only Sarah's burial place but also his own. And it became the plot of the patriarchs that followed. Jacob, though he was in Egypt, insisted that his sons embalm him and carry his remains back to Canaan to bury him in the same spot. He along with Abraham said, "The Lord is going to give us this land, and we are telling the world that we believe him." Joseph did the same thing. He had himself embalmed so that his people hundreds of years later could take him back with them to bury him in the land of promise. All of these men were claiming that life comes from God. There is more exhibited here than just human interchange. The Lord had made a promise, and Abraham acted upon that promise.

Hebrews 11:10, 16 tells us what Abraham thought about his life. He was a sojourner, but "he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he has prepared a city for them." Abraham lived all his life looking forward to the day when God would give him a city, a place where he could put down his roots. He knew that a heavenly city whose architect is God would someday be provided for him. Thus in burying Sarah in the one piece of land in Canaan that he owned, he was announcing in strong terms that he was trusting God to do what he said he would. It is this ability to see the far horizon, to realize that God has a purpose for us and that death is not the end of everything, which gives us the strength to deal with times of mourning.

Along with birth and death, another of life's milestones in marriage is faced by Abraham in the next chapter of Genesis. Genesis 24 is the long and detailed account of the arrangement of Isaac's marriage to Rebekah. Look at Gen.24:1-9:

Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in every way. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you shall go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac." And the servant said to him, "Suppose the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?" Then Abraham said to him, "Beware lest you take my son back there! The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there." So the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter.

In the most solemn terms, Abraham spoke to his servant about acquiring Isaac's wife. The two requirements that Abraham laid upon his servant were that the woman could not be from the tribes of Canaan and that Isaac should not go back to the family that Abraham had left behind.

First, Abraham said, "Do not let my son marry someone who is not on the same road of faith, who has not taken the same dangerous journey of faith that we have." All of us need in our own personal existence and in the life of our church to be allied with people who trust God, who have taken the dangerous step of cutting the old ties and refusing new ones. We must ally ourselves with people who believe only God for life and who will continue down that road with us.

There are two ways the flesh can appeal to us. Tradition is one—the comfortable old ways we grew up with, the secure places in which we know exactly what to expect. Whenever I go to my parents' home, I am amazed at how easily I can revert to being 12 years old again. I often take up all the old patterns. Abraham realized that the old

country still had the old gods and the old approaches to life.

A second fleshly appeal is the lure of things that are the most current and up-to-date. This was the problem with the Canaanites. Abraham knew he lived in a culture that had its own standards for success. He knew that culture offered a pay-off for being on the cutting edge of life. He had to live in Canaan among the Canaanites, but he did not want his son married to someone who would be the source of allure for the contemporary world. Since we live in an age filled with self-interest and materialism, the last thing we should do is join our lives to people who are going to repeatedly offer us that kind of pay-off. Thus, Abraham said, "I don't want my son to be allied with someone who will offer him what this world has to offer, who will always be wanting to sell him on the latest and the most impressive. Neither do I want my son allied with someone who will insist on routine and the comfort of fleshly security."

The same temptations to wrongful alliances face churches as well as individuals. There are congregations that have traditions they will never question. They will never try anything new or take any new steps of faith. They will never trust God for an adventure because they cling to the fact that everything must remain the same. The flesh will seduce us to live based on maximum security, comfort, and rules. The same sermon is preached every Sunday; the same smiles are smiled. We can feel secure if we can return to where we know exactly what is expected: Abraham said, "Don't let my son go back there. God called us out of that setting to live an adventure of faith, to take risks, to have only him as a source of security. I don't want the flesh in its traditional appeal to control the life of my son."

Other churches long to be on the front page of the newspaper and can hardly wait for some expert to make a new pronouncement so they can jump on the bandwagon. They eagerly thrust themselves into every new issue this world says is important. Their only commitment is to novelty. Abraham recognized the danger of this kind of temptation as well.

In effect, Abraham was saying, "I want my son to have an ally and companion who will make the same journey of faith that we have, who will leave behind what is familiar for no other reason than trust in God. I want him to have someone who will make a dangerous journey to a new place simply because God called her and yet will be godly in the midst of that place as she continues to trust the Lord." If we marry or in any way commit ourselves to someone, it should be to people who have nothing else but confidence in the Lord by which to make their way through life, who do not rely on secure traditions or the love of the modern.

We need to learn from Abraham's ability to handle questions regarding the ordinary events that make up human experience. He mourned when his wife died, but he made a statement of faith in her burial. He was concerned that his son have a wife, but it would not be just any wife. All of his choices involved the thinking and wisdom of God. He took the ordinary affairs of life and applied Christian thinking and godly values to them. Because he would not sell out, he raised his point of view to a higher level than those around him. He saw God involved everywhere, and he trusted him.

After he mourned, Abraham stood up, squared his shoulders and found a way to bury Sarah that said he trusted God. When he produced a marriage for his son, he did it trusting the Lord. There is a time for every purpose under heaven. There are seasons for planting and reaping, tearing down and building up, mourning and dancing. You will not get all of one and none of the other. You get all of the experiences of life at sometime or another, but there are resources in Christ to face them all. We can have godly thinking and deep trust in the Lord for whatever we get assigned-births, marriages, or death.

Let me close by reading again the description of Abraham in Hebrews. Abraham never owned a plot of land except as a burial site, yet he was looking for a permanent home. "He was looking for a city which has foundations whose architect and builder is God they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

God has undertaken to meet our needs. Whatever it is we have to face in this life, there are answers to the needs of our hearts in the Scriptures. We can succeed in facing all that life has for us if we will learn of the Lord and trust

Him.

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