

Genesis 25:1-18

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[0:00] Well, why don't I pray as we start. Father, we thank you for the experience we've had together this morning of joining together.

! We pray that through our prayers, this preaching, the time spent with the youngsters around the corner, the conversations during tea and coffee afterwards,!

Lord, we thank you for the mothers who are thriving and for the mothers who are struggling.

Lord, we give you thanks for them. And Spirit, I pray that you would be with me just now. Would I only say that which is true? And would you help me to speak this truth with an attitude of love?

Amen. Well, this is going to be our last sermon in Genesis for a while. And given that this passage is fairly concentrated with lists and names and people dying, we're also going to spend some time this morning looking back on some of the key features of Abraham's life, which will hopefully serve to help us as we get into this particular passage as well.

[1:31] I've got two points this morning as we think about Abraham's life. One, that God is always fulfilling his promises, even when life doesn't always go the way that we want it.

And two, that receiving God's promises in faith will give us life's deepest satisfaction. So firstly, God is always fulfilling his promises, even when life doesn't always go the way that we want it.

This passage seems to leave us in no doubt that Abraham lived a good life. Dying at 175, the Bible says that not only did he die at a good old age, but he was also full of years.

And we can take that to mean that he was satisfied with the years of his life. He was full of years.

God had already said to Abraham in chapter 15, verse 15, when he made his first covenant with him, that he will go to his ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.

We see that God is sovereign over all of Abraham's life, from where he would be born to where he would die. Abraham's life was the length it was because God had decided it.

[2:58] Psalm 139, verse 16 says this, Friends, is that not quite reassuring to know that God has set the number of our days of life and that there is nothing that we can do to change them?

Ecclesiastes 7 shows us that one of the wisest things that we can do, particularly if we are young, is to number our days.

Teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom. We must know that our days may be shorter than we expect them to be.

God knew about every detail of Abraham's life before any of them came to pass. And he knows every detail about our lives as well. I'm sure we all knew people who were like Abraham, who lived a full and satisfied life to a good old age, maybe well into their 80s or 90s.

Reading this passage in preparation for this morning made me think of a man in my home church growing up. His name was Noel Agnew. I'm aware that some of you know him.

[4:24] He was a church minister on the Shankill Road in West Belfast. He never married. He moved to our church when he retired. And he would have been popular with everyone. He would have had groups of young guys like me round his flat for lunch every once in a while.

He would have taught wisdom to us. He would have told us about folk he had met. He would have taught us from the Bible. And he would have warned us of big mistakes that he sees young guys making. He was just that big old guy in your church who everyone loved.

He died in 2020. And his live stream funeral on YouTube has over 10,000 views. Five years later, it remains the most watched video on the church's YouTube page by a countryman.

Noah was a man who lived a satisfying life. Full of years. And he lived life to the full. I'm sure you can think of someone like Noah.

But you know, we're not prosperity gospel people here either. We know that things aren't always ordered the way that we expect them to be. And for as many great people we know who died in

their 80s or 90s after living a long, long life of committed faithfulness, we probably know some equally gifted and faithful folks who died very young.

[5:44] That makes me think of my aunt who died in her 40s, leaving her husband and two teenage sons. It also brings me back to September last year when I was sharing a dorm at a retreat with a 38-year-old Zambian church planter called Ernest Malenga.

A remarkable man, by the way. One night while we were there, Ernest just passed away in his sleep. I remember driving home the next day thinking, Lord, why did you take this guy at such an important stage of his life?

A growing gospel church and not least thousands of miles away from his wife and three young children. Isn't the Lord's providence sometimes very confusing and very unexpected?

Maybe you too can think of people in your own life who were taken very young. When you read a passage like this that speaks of long life, we just think, Lord, that's great for Abraham, but why have you not given this to everyone?

Or maybe brought back again to Ecclesiastes chapter 7. The day of death is better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.

[7:12] For death is the destiny of everyone. The living should take this to heart. Folks, we all find it perplexing and difficult why God would put such great suffering in the lives of some of the greatest people that we know.

And at the same time, let wicked succeed and prosper in all their wickedness for years on end.

Back last September, when I was trying to work out the death of Ernest, I found the words of William Cooper very reassuring.

I remember listening to this hymn every day for about a week after. God moves in a mysterious way. His wonders to perform. Oftentimes, we mistakenly think that success and pleasure in this life is all that there is.

When actually, God has created us not primarily for this earthly dwelling, but is preparing us for an eternal one. He set us apart from before we were born.

Those whom he predestined, he called. Those he called, he also justified. And those he justified, he also glorified. In a passage which talks in detail about the end of Abraham's life, we may be thinking, what's the point of our lives?

[8:35] What can his life teach us about our life? Funerals often remind us of the brevity and sanctity and seriousness of life.

Abraham's life, though long, was certainly not an easy or straightforward one. What was it about Abraham's long life that made it so satisfying?

Well, I think that the answer to that may not be quite what we expect it to be. Because Abraham was not just remembered for all the great work he did, but he's remembered for the faith he had in all of the great works of God.

Let's rewind a bit to Genesis 12 when we first meet this man. Abraham is a Semite living in Ur of the Chaldeans. And we don't get the feeling that God chooses Abraham because of anything special he's done.

God promises that he will make Abraham into a great nation, make his name great, make him a blessing that will not only bless his own nation, but all peoples of the earth.

[9:46] We already see from the very start of his story that the course of Abraham's life is not programmed by him, but by the Lord. That doesn't mean that Abraham will never come up against trials.

It doesn't mean that Abraham will be free from the consequences of his sin. But it does mean that God will always be working out his plan in everything he's doing. Indeed, Abraham's destiny is based not primarily on what he's done, but on what God is doing with him.

The destiny of our lives are not based on the things we have done, but on what God has done in us. And let's be honest. Even though we know that Abraham is a man of faith, we know him well for his fear, don't we?

He fears Pharaoh more than he trusts in the Lord. He thinks that he needs to manipulate Pharaoh with his family situation so that he doesn't get himself killed.

But even in all that mess, we hear God still whisper to Abraham that his offspring will be like the dust of the earth. And he builds an altar to him there at the trees of Mamre, which is very nearby the cave of Machpelah, where his wife is buried, Sarah, and where he is buried here in Genesis 25.

[11:07] We've seen Abraham as a warrior, haven't we? Defeating the eastern kings with 318 men in the Battle of the Ten Kingdoms. And that priestly king, Melchizedek, came out.

We know that he makes clear in his speech, praise be, not to Abraham, but praise be to God, the Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.

We know that the real orchestrator of all this military victory is not Abraham, but it's God. But in all of this success, we notice that Abraham still has no child.

He still doesn't own much of the land that he's been promised. But he has built a reputation in this ancient land for being the man with the God to be feared.

Wasn't that what Abimelech thought of Abraham? Even after all the mess between him and Sarah, he still knew that Abraham was the man with the God to be feared. In chapter 16, we saw another blunder from Abraham and Sarah as they try and conceive a child from human effort rather than trusting in the Lord's promise.

[12:19] But yet God is gracious to the slave woman, Hagar. He sees her, and she gives birth to this son, Ishmael. He, as we see here from chapter 25, is still greatly blessed with many offspring.

By being a son of Abraham himself, he certainly does pretty well. The 12 sons promised in Genesis 17-20 are now named here in Genesis 25.

And even some land on the eastern border of Egypt falls into Ishmael's hands. You see, God shows common grace to Ishmael.

He makes the sun shine on both the righteous and the unrighteous. Abraham may have sent them away, but God's eyes are on Ishmael. And he blesses him with lots of offspring and land.

But, we know also that God knew Ishmael from before he was born. A wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, living in hostility toward all his brothers.

[13:26] It's no surprise then, in verse 18 of our passage this morning, that we see Ishmael's descendants are remembered for living in hostility toward all the tribes related to them.

Ishmael's funeral eulogy doesn't have quite the same ring to it as Abraham's does. We see a little bit of this prophecy working out later in the book of Genesis as well.

There sadly seems to only be a few good men among Abraham's sons. Some of his second wife Keturah's sons aren't great either.

It was the Midianites, the offspring of Midian, the sixth son of Abraham, who with the Ishmaelites bought Joseph from his brothers in Genesis 37.

And we know that the Ishmaelites have links to Egypt already. Hagar, Ishmael's mother, was Egyptian. Hagar and Ishmael fled towards Egypt after they were cast out. So we're not too surprised that after being bought by the Ishmaelites, Joseph ends up with Potiphar, the captain of the guard, working under Fer, king of Egypt.

[14:43] God was at work through all of the mess between these two brothers. Many of us know that verse near the end of this book in chapter 50, verse 20, that what Joseph says, that what you meant for evil, God meant for good, to bring it about that a numerous people should be kept alive.

Abraham's descendants, that is. A numerous people, as numerous as the stars of the sky, are kept alive throughout the ongoing story. They multiply greatly even under slavery in Egypt under the oppressive hand of the Pharaoh.

God uses even the evil work of the offspring of Ishmael in buying and selling Joseph for money to bring about his plan in raising this lowly 11th brother, the great grandson of Abraham, to the right hand of the king of the biggest superpower in the ancient world.

Even just here, in chapter 25, 11, it's interesting that Isaac settles in Beer-Lehai-Roi, that well of the living one who sees me.

He moves into the place where God revealed to Hagar the name of her son Ishmael in chapter 16. We get the feeling that even as the Abraham narrative closes in this book, the living God sees that Isaac is going to be the better son, taking over that special place once connected to his older brother.

[16:18] Ishmael and Isaac have caused a lot of complications since they were born. Isaac's birth was a cause for joy and laughter, but we're also reminded of the darkness of Ishmael and Hagar being cast out.

You see, even faithful Abraham is having to deal with the consequences of his sin. Folks, as Christians, we are free from sin and its consequences in a spiritual and eternal sense, but for as long as we are physically alive here on earth, we will still sin and at times we will have to own up to

and live with the consequences of our sin.

But we know in all the ups and downs of faith, we can be sure that Abraham finishes his life with a clear demonstration of a very strong faith as he prepares to sacrifice as an offering his special son, Isaac.

We know that Abraham lays him on the altar and takes out the knife with the conviction that God would indeed raise him because he is a covenant keeping God. Isaac's life needs to be preserved no matter what Abraham does.

Abraham's actions would not break God's covenants of Genesis chapters 15 or 17. And at the very end, we know from our culture as well as Abraham's that most people are buried close to where they were born.

[17 : 46] But Abraham was buried in the cave of Machpelah here in verse 9 to show just how much God has been faithful to him. He is buried far away from his homeland in a land that he now owns.

God has been faithful to his promise of bringing him closer to this land. Abraham's life has definitely been one of ups and downs.

But he ended as one who had lived a full, satisfied life. Remembered and honoured by his sons. He was a man full of years. But he did not live an easy life.

Sarah found herself barren for most of her life. He is a man who often lived by fear and not faith. He was often characterised by impatience. Oftentimes he was a terrible example of husbandhood and fatherhood.

But none of that disqualified him from being numbered as one of the greats. in the faith hall of fame. So let me suggest something. Would it not have gone much better if Abraham had just trusted in God throughout this story?

[18 : 59] Because it's not like Abraham didn't know the covenant promises of God. It's not as if Abraham didn't know the kindness of God. He's so impacted by the Genesis 12 promise that he ups and leaves his home country.

And I mean he's unlikely to forget the promise of offspring and land when he undergoes the physical experience of circumcision. I highly doubt that being circumcised as an adult was an easily forgettable experience.

And I'm sure it would have been hard for us as readers to forget the covenant promise that has been the driving force throughout this whole story of Abraham's life. But even though Abraham knew the covenant what's obvious is that he didn't always rely on it as he should have done.

Knowing the promises of God is one thing. Relying on them is another thing. Knowing the Bible is one thing. Trusting in the Bible is a thing on top of that.

Knowing theology is something. Applying that theology to life is an additional thing. And I don't think God expects us to be great at this daily trust and reliance on his word either.

[20 : 19] Otherwise he wouldn't have held up Abraham as the first example of faith in the Bible. The operator behind all these characters in this story is God.

So would it not have gone much better if Abraham had just trusted in God throughout this story? Well maybe the backdrop of Abraham's failures and fears throughout this story are the launch pad for understanding what human faith really is.

So now I'm going to move on to my second point that receiving God's promises in faith will give us life's deepest satisfaction. Now I can hear it coming you're probably about to say Cameron would you stop being such a reformed Raymond and bringing up the Westminster confession of faith every time you're at the front.

I'm hearing it but you know folks my aim in using the confession in this particular case is because I think it's discussion of saving faith is actually very helpful. I'm aware that any creedal or confessional document written by men after the book of Revelation is subordinate to scripture.

It does not have the same authority of scripture so I don't mind if you disagree with part of the Westminster confession of faith but I'm sure we can hopefully all agree with this particular quotation because I'm sure that the Westminster assembly had Abraham in mind when they were writing this out in Westminster Abbey in the 1640s.

[21 : 46] Let me read the Westminster confession of faith chapter 14 article 3. This faith is different in the Greece. folks faith is different in degrees.

At times our faith is weak. At times it is strong. This is very evident from Abraham's life. It will often be attacked by the schemes of the evil one. We see a lot of that in Abraham's life don't we?

Our faith may go through ups and downs but saving faith never fully disappears. It's no surprise that Paul writes to the Colossians of his struggle for them that they would reach full assurance through knowledge and understanding of the mystery of God's word hidden for ages and generations. What was that mystery? It was Christ in you. The hope of glory. Here's another thing for us to notice. Jesus Christ, God himself, is the author and finisher of our faith.

He gave faith to us and is bringing it to completion in us. God is slowly sanctifying us throughout our lives until the day that we finally meet him.

[23 : 15] If the question is how are we going to run with endurance the long and strenuous race that is set before us of a long life of faithful devotion to God, Hebrews 12 is the answer.

That we're going to do that by looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. My friend, Noel Agnew, was still being shaped by the grace of Jesus and his faith in that grace in his 60s just as much as he was in his 20s.

Faith is a race set before us. It doesn't happen immediately overnight. It grows and grows and grows as life goes on. Faith was an idea which came about from God and it's something that is finished and perfected in us by God.

So what is a satisfying life of faith going to look like as one of God's people? Well, in a way, it's probably going to look similar to Abraham's life.

It's definitely not going to be a life free from suffering and discomfort and it probably is going to look like a life which is at times distracted and brought down by sin.

[24 : 31] Friends, Abraham's life was full of mistakes. We all know that. I once heard Joe Barnard say at the Cross Training Men's Conference last year, the greatest old men I knew did not have lives characterized by perfect obedience but by divine repentance.

The greatest old men I knew did not have lives characterized by perfect obedience but by divine repentance. Brothers and sisters, we cannot spend the rest of our lives wallowing in the mistakes of the past.

There comes a point where we have to get back up on our feet and start putting one foot out in front of the other because we are not defined by our mistakes if we are in Christ but by the God who saves us for a life of enjoying his covenant faithfulness to us.

Because if there's anything that we've learned from the past 13 chapters of Genesis, we know that we've got a God who always keeps his promises to his faithful people even when his people are not faithful to him.

If there's one thing our new lives as Christians is going to be about, it's definitely going to be about having a growing faith in God.

[25 : 48] And what we have faith in is not something unclear or uncertain. It's firm faith in the unchanging God who speaks clearly to us in his word.

Abraham was required to have faith in the words that God had spoken to him and so we are required to have faith in the many more words that God has spoken to us and here are just a few of those words.

He is a God who is worth turning to in times of need and times of regret. He is a God who is near to us when we are downcast. He will never leave us nor forsake us in all of our evangelism with our friends and family.

So keep going with that. He is a God who we could easily fear and be shaken by but instead tells us to fear not for I am with you. Even when the mountains fall into the heart of the sea and the oceans roar, he is still the God who is an ever-present help in times of trouble.

His unfailing love and covenant peace will not be removed even though the mountains and hills may be shaken. He is the one who is able to do immeasurably more than anything we could ask or imagine. He upholds and gives strength to the weary.

[26 : 57] He goes with us wherever we go. He knows everything that we think but he is still faithful to forgive whenever we slip and fall into sin. If we have faith in Christ, we are of Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

If we have faith in Christ, we are blessed to be a blessing. We are part of that great number of stars in the sky that he saw. We are part of the great nation that lives under the reign of King Jesus who is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

God. You know, I ask some people in our church about what promises that they find themselves coming back to in life. Katie said that she takes comfort in knowing that no matter how many

promises God has made, they are yes in Christ.

And so through Christ the amen is spoken by us to the glory of God. That's 2 Corinthians 1.20. Ben said that he's found rest for his soul in the one who is gentle and lowly in heart, who has given us his easy yoke and light burden.

That's Jesus Christ the son of God and that's taken out of Matthew 11.29. Emily said that she is encouraged by Isaiah 46.4 when God says to Israel, even to your old age and grey hairs, I am he who will sustain you.

[28 : 12] I have made you and I will carry you. I will sustain you and I will rescue you. Isn't that a particularly timely promise for today as we think of how God sustained Abraham throughout those 175 years?

Friends, it's not like Abraham didn't know God's promises. His problem was that he wasn't very good at standing on them in all the difficulties of life.

So what promises of God keep you going on each day? How are you going to rely on them even when things get really hard? Is God's word in your head or is it in your heart?

I don't say this as somebody who's perfect at this. We all go through times when we keep making big mistakes, when we say things we wish we hadn't, when our self assurance is knocked and our emotions just get in the way of us saying things the way they really are.

And that's okay because we know that faith is like a graph that may be a bit up and down but its trajectory is always up. And even if we feel like we're in the depths just now, its trajectory is always up if we really have faith in Christ.

[29 : 24] If Father Abraham forgot God's promise, we should expect to as well at times. But wouldn't it be fair to say that our ongoing satisfaction in life, however long it may be, is not going to come from our own cares and worries?

A satisfying life is perhaps more than anything based on how ready we are to receive God's promises with faith. You see, biblical promises are a close and tender friend.

They're not just theological. We've probably misunderstood covenant theology if we think it's just for theology professors. That's not who these covenants were first for.

The covenant promise guided Abraham in faith. It helped him to have faith. And as we look back on all the fulfillment of God's promises, particularly how they have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we should be even more assured than Abraham was that God really is a promise keeping God.

Because we know that blessed offspring, we know that the author and perfecter of our faith is the true and better Isaac. A couple of weeks ago when we were in Genesis 22, we saw that Isaac's sacrifice was really a foreshadow of the sacrifice, the offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ himself, who fulfilled all the covenants.

[30 : 50] He was the offspring through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed to be a blessing. He was the offspring who would lead us not toward Canaan but toward our new heavenly home.

He was the offspring who himself would be the big covenant who lifted up the cup and broke the bread and said this is the new covenant in my blood.

We are now united to Christ and his death and resurrection. And so our lives of serving him will be sustained by the broken bread and the shed blood on the cross.

And if God is a God who always keeps his covenant promises, then that should fill us with great assurance. Does it not fill us with hope every time in the New Testament when we hear those words so that the words of the prophets might be fulfilled?

The gospel writer Matthew loved that phrase. He used it nine times in his gospel. He wants the good news of Jesus to be about a scripture fulfilling, covenant keeping son of God.

[32 : 01] Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is a man who is 100% committed to fulfilling God's words. Even the ones that are not yet fulfilled which we will look at in Revelation which is our next book that we'll be doing in our sermon series.

So as I wrap us up, I want to ask, when you reach the end of your years, however long that will be, what type of man or woman do you want to be remembered as?

If you were to take a long hard look at yourself, how similar are you to Abraham? We may not all die full of years, but will we be satisfied with the years that we had?

Are you the sort of person whose life has been characterized so far with a growing sense of assurance that God's salvation really is the only thing that I need to put my faith in?

Are you enjoying knowing the faithfulness of God even in our own faithlessness? When you wake up tomorrow morning, are you going to be the sort of person who's going to believe the lie of perfect obedience?

[33:12] Or are you going to take up the long but victorious fight of everyday divine repentance? Brothers and sisters, even if we have little money, few friends and poor health, a satisfying life is one where God's promises are received in faith because if there's anything we can take away from Abraham's story, it's that God will always fulfill his promises to his faithful people.

I can't change his plan, you can't change his plan, so trust and rely on what he's doing. Knowing that his plan is not just going to bring faith into our own little hearts, but to bring his whole blessing throughout the whole world.

Let me pray as we finish. Father, we pray that these promises which we have thought about today would not just be photocopied into our head, but engraved onto our hearts.

Lord, we pray that you would shape our hearts by faith for a life of love and service toward you, however long you have set for us here on the earth. Lord, we praise you that you have revealed yourself to us as a faithful God who is to be trusted.

And may you help us all by your spirit to take encouragement from these words this morning. Amen.