

Guest Preacher - Rev. Gordon Matheson

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Preacher: Rev. Gordon Matheson

[0 : 00] Please turn with me in your Bibles just now back to Genesis 23. If you've read, I'm sure many of you have, the story of a man called Abraham in the Old Testament, then you'll know it's quite a, at times quite an exciting story.

There are many thrilling and intriguing moments throughout it. There are times of great inspiration and times where Abraham receives promises from God and sets out with faith in that God, often stepping out into the unknown when he obeys the call to leave the land of his fathers and go to a place that the Lord will show him.

There's moments of doubt. Who will my heir be? asks Abraham. And there are moments of wonder where God takes him outside and says, Look at the stars of the heavens, so shall your descendants be, or as the sand of the seashore.

And it's quite astonishing to consider the wonder and the marvel of that. You come to the end of the life of Abraham and there are, there is rather a sad chapter where his wife of many years dies.

And I'm sure many of us have experienced that kind of loss where a close loved one has passed.

And I'm sure equally, when you read the biographies of famous people and you look at the stories of how they cope with loss, the questions, I suppose, are how were they feeling?

[1 : 53] What were they thinking? What was going through their minds? You might wonder, what did they value about the person who has been lost and taken from them and glean something of the value that they placed upon that person?

The story in the Bible of Abraham's loss of Sarah doesn't quite focus on that way. Instead, as with everything in the story of Abraham, the focus is not really Abraham himself at all.

The focus really is God. And you might think that's a bit of a strange one because God is barely mentioned in this chapter. The only place, in fact, that you see God mentioned directly is when Abraham is referred to as a prince of God among these, what are called Hittites, the sons of Heth. The question is, how does God shine through in this chapter? What's this all about and what's going on here? This all happens about 30 years after the promised child, after Isaac was born.

Sarah was an old woman when she bore that son. And as we're waiting to see kind of how things pan out, you're confronted instead of a deep and emotional story, and on the face of it, it doesn't even look like a story of faith.

[3 : 19] We're confronted with this record of a property transaction. And I wonder if you were to stop and reflect on your life, what would the record say of the way you've lived, if you're a Christian perhaps, to the glory of God?

How is your faith shown in your actions? Is God's faithfulness revealed in the things you have done?

Quite famously, apparently, when historians were trying to work out just quite how Wellington managed to win the Peninsular War in Portugal and Spain against the Napoleonic French.

One of the ways that historians were able to find some of the answers was to go to his checkbooks. And his own personal checkbook records showed the expenditure that he needed at various points to accomplish the victories that were so much a part of his success and Wellington's rise to fame himself as a general.

And it's that sense of his, you know, the practical things showed what was important to him and showed where his priorities lay.

[4 : 40] And it's the same here with this chapter. The practical things of this chapter tell us about Abraham and his priorities. You see it actually, the key verse, I think, in understanding everything that's going on in this chapter is verse 4, where Abraham is seeking to find a burial place for his wife, presumably for himself and his sons as well and his descendants.

And he says to the Hittites, I am a sojourner and foreigner among you. Therefore, I need to give me property among you for a burying place that I may bury my dead.

The key words in there are sojourner and foreigner. One of the key words in Hebrew is the word ger. Abraham was a ger. Our communities don't quite work the same way nowadays, but certainly in the past, if you were an incomer in our communities, you really stood out like a bit of a sore thumb.

It was very obvious if you were an incomer. There's more now, so it doesn't often quite come across as so obvious. But Abraham's making that point. I'm an incomer among you. I don't have a heritage here.

I'm not from here. I don't have people here. I certainly don't have land here. Abraham's basically been out wandering in the open spaces between the cities.

[6 : 04] Abraham's in pasture land, farming his flocks. But basically, he's saying, I don't have a place here among you. And that has to be set against a New Testament passage that helps us just to grasp the faith of Abraham in this chapter.

In Hebrews 11, we read these words, This includes Abraham. Not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were, here's these words again, strangers and exiles in the earth.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. So Abraham, if he'd wanted to bury Sarah, what the writer of Hebrews is saying is he could have gone back to Ur of the Chaldeans.

But it's crucial to note, Abraham doesn't see his future back in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abraham sees his future and his descendants' future here in the land that God has promised him, but a land where at this point he still has no inheritance, no possession.

Literally, he can pass on huge flocks. Enormous wealth will be passed on to Isaac. But there's no land to pass on. There's nothing tangible and firm to lay hold of and say, this is ours in the land that God has promised.

[7 : 39] And so Abraham could have gone back. 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 desired a better country. That is a heavenly one.

And therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. For he has prepared for them a city. Abraham's actions in this chapter, as I'll show you, demonstrate that he is worthy of everything that the writer of Hebrews says.

Because Abraham's focus, his attention, his gaze, is looking ahead to the fulfillment of God's promise. And all that God has said he will do.

And so there's two things simply that we want to note in this chapter. The first of these is just the theme of the chapter itself, which is that this is an expensive burial. But then that expensive burial speaks to us of an expectant faith.

So an expensive burial and an expectant faith. Stories are important for how they set us and ground us.

[8 : 51] Where do you come from? What are the stories of your family? Stories of my family, some of them are local.

You know, my youth growing up in Shawbust. Going back there a couple of generations. Three quarters of my family are islanders, lochies. Don't hold that against us. But another part of my family is from Sancor and the Borders, or Neyrshire.

And I've got lots of cousins down that direction as well. And there's stories from that part of my family. My granny's maiden name was Broadfoot. There's connections perhaps to some famous Scottish footballers.

And there's connections to Broadfoots and Crosbys over in the United States as well. So when we've traced our family tree up the way, and then you trace some of the lineages back down the way again, you find people in all sorts of interesting places.

And these stories are part of us. Part of our story as a family. It gives you a sense of where you come from. A sense of identity. And part of what's going on in this chapter, and the detail that gets into this chapter, is working like that.

[10 : 07] So what I want you to think about is this chapter from the perspective, not of Abraham, but of the Hittites. The residents of the area around Hebron, the sons of Heth, who Abraham is

dwelling among at this time.

And from their perspective, there's something quite curious in this chapter that will have stood out for them probably for a few generations.

It would have entered into the cultural memory of the Hittites and the residents of the area. In fact, so much so that when the Israelites come out of exile in Egypt 400 years later, when they come out of that sojourn in Egypt, and they return, there's an acknowledgement that the cave of Machpelah is still theirs.

It was Abraham's place to bury his dead. So the Israelites are expecting to go there with their ancestors and bury them. But equally, the natives, the residents of the land, expect them to come. This is their burial place. And part of the reason for that is because of this, what is in fact a fairly absurd story of a stupid ger, a stupid foreigner, a strange outsider, who went into this ridiculous agreement with this man, Ephron, the Hittite.

[11:35] Because they're sitting there at the gate of the city. So they're at the gate of the city. They're having a negotiation. And the gate of the city was the place for negotiation. That's where the marketplace was. The marketplace wasn't in the center of a city.

The center of a city was well fortified. The open place in a city was always around the gates. Because that's where you would gather for battle to defend your city. And so the open space around the gates of the city was the marketplace.

It was the place where the elders of the city would sit and chew the fat over whatever was happening that day. And that's where deals and transactions are taking place as well. You see the same thing happens in the story of Boaz when he redeems Ruth.

It's to the gate of the city in Bethlehem that he goes. And so it's that place of the gate of the city that they're having this interaction. And Abraham arrives and says, I need somewhere to bury my dead. And the Hittites collectively say, Abraham, we know you.

We care about you. We're really sorry for the death of your wife. You can have the finest of tombs that we can provide for you. And Abraham basically says, No, that's not what I want. I want a place of my own.

[12:33] I want a place that I can see is mine, where my wife, presumably myself in the future, and my descendants will be buried in the land. We need a place of our own.

And the Hittites recognize his problem. They clearly respect him. They call him a prince of God among them. They've seen his might. Abraham is a hugely successful businessman.

You could almost say he's the Elon Musk of his day. Abraham really just needs to say a word and things happen. That's the kind of influence he has. He's become very powerful. He's very rich. And that rich brings that wealth. It brings power and influence and ability. And so that's reflected in what the Hittites are saying. Just ask for a cave. We'll give it to you. It's yours.

For everything you've done for us already, you've rescued some of our natives and our relatives from invaders. You've supported us. You've helped us. You've been a blessing to us. So let us bless you by giving you a cave.

[13:32] And Abraham says, no. I want to buy a place. And Ephron, who owns the field, takes this kind of...

You can almost see it. Ephron's almost like saying, well, if you really want to get into a negotiation, Abraham, I'll begin with an absurd price. All of these hundreds of shekels of silver.

You'll have it. But it's going to cost you. And what's really happening is this is supposed to be the opening bid in a negotiation. And so Ephron expects that Abraham's going to come in with a negotiating price much, much lower and say, oh, no, that land, it's only worth like 20 shekels.

Let's come to... They work through it. They have a negotiation. And everything about this chapter points us in that direction. It says, this is going to be a negotiation. But Abraham says, no, that's fine.

I'll pay the obviously inflated and absurd price for this field. And the Hittites are like, okay. But it enters into the cultural memory.

[14:46] Everyone remembers the story of Abraham the Ger who arrived at the gate of Hebron and negotiated with Ephron and negotiated with Ephron an absurd price for a field that's full of trees and a dirty cave at the back of it where he's going to bury his dead.

So that for centuries to come the Hittites in that area still remember the story of the day Abraham came to the gate of the city and negotiated with Ephron and agreed Ephron's opening price.

And everyone says, that stupid Ger how much he paid for that cave. But the effect of that is that for generations to come everyone knows it's Abraham's cave.

Everyone knows full well that the cave belongs to Abraham. He bought it for a purpose. It's there that he's buried. It's there his wife is buried. It's there that his descendants are going to be buried as well.

And everyone knows this. And what's really going on there is Abraham's faith. Because Abraham believed the promise of God.

[16:05] The significance to Abraham is God promised this land to me therefore this is where I'm going to stay. This is where my wife is going to be buried in a testimony to my belief that God will one day give me the land.

this is a place of promise. This is a place of expectation. This is a place where Abraham expects that one day God's promise is going to be made to him.

An heir who will come. Going all the way back to the promise given to Adam and to Eve as they exited the garden that one day an heir would come who would crush the head of the serpent.

Who would inherit the promises of God. Who would be a covenant head over an innumerable multitude as many as the sand of the seashores. As numerous as the stars of the heavens.

Who would inherit the promise given to Abraham of sin being cut off. Something that he has to reflect on through circumcision that was given as a sign of this covenant promise.

[17:24] Abraham's faith says, okay, I will pay an absurd price for this expensive burial ground because Abraham is looking not in sorrow at his circumstances but looking rather in expectation at the God who's over all of this.

And so the question that I want us to think about secondly tonight is how do we live with the same kind of expectant faith?

What do we do in our lives to live as Abraham lived? And the reason I say that is because Abraham is the template for all faith. If you go to the New Testament that's abundantly clear.

Abraham is the the one who's held up as an example for us to follow of living by faith. He has been given a promise from God.

He doesn't have very much tangible evidence of it physically and what he can see. He's given covenant promises. He's given covenant signs. So what does he do with the promises of God?

[18:40] How does he act in light of the promises of God? What about Abraham's actions? His lifestyle? What shows confidence and assurance that God has made a promise to him and that it's going to be fulfilled?

And that question is enormously relevant to us today. Because the question remains for us how do we live among the nations watching on that says to all those watching on these people really do believe in the promise of their God.

These people take seriously the things their God has said. So for example you go to Romans 8 we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.

I mean these are verses that we know they're words that we're very familiar with and yet they're words which in times of trial times of difficulty in our lives we might initially think these words can't be true.

They might lead us to doubt them. They might lead us to a place where we say this God who is spoken of here maybe doesn't love me because difficult things have come into my experience.

[20:14] When things in our lives are hard we might wonder and say do things really work together for good? There are situations that make it seem to us down here in the trenches that God has lost control.

But expectant faith will always look forward. You take Scotland today where there seems to be over recent years over recent generations a sustained decline in the fortunes of the church.

The church everywhere seems to be in retreat. A few bright spots perhaps where that's not the case. Will God really work all of these things together for good?

Does God really have a purpose for the church in Scotland? Perhaps for you as a congregation standing on the cusp of a vacancy fearful of how long it takes to fill rural vacancies in the free church.

I know I was intermoderator for Trotternish for an absurdly long time. Arguably we had a pandemic in the way as well but we managed a five year vacancy with Trotternish before Nigel came.

[21 : 39] Does it really feel like God's in control? Or do you wonder and doubt it? And the question is what actions do you take now in your life or in your life corporately as a congregation that says you believe the promises of God?

And some of them might seem like really absurd things. Perhaps gathering for prayer. And again this is perhaps another application of this in fact to think about prayer.

Again if you think about the book of Acts. The book of Acts tells us that after the day of Pentecost they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

The early church they gathered around preaching. They gathered in fellowship with one another. They gathered around the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Possibly just gathering ordinary meals as well.

Just met together and encouraged one another. But they also gathered together and assembled around prayer. And you know sometimes I wonder we think that don't we?

[22 : 53] That you know going into a vacancy perhaps it's going to be a time of decline. Perhaps it's going to be a time of things getting slower in the life of the church. But why not expect to see and long to see a growth in the prayer meeting attendance?

why not commit as a congregation to praying together more effectively for the situation you are in? Because God is one who hears prayer. And the promise of God is that when his people who are called by his name humble themselves and turn and repent and seek his face he will hear from heaven and he will heal their land.

The same when times of persecution come. Perhaps times of bitterness have entered into your spiritual experience because somebody is afflicting you. Ultimately it's the evil one.

Satan desires to afflict and overthrow and discourage the church. And so times of persecution will come. We should be in no doubt about that. We're forewarned. But James writes and says count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing.

[24 : 24] There are times of trial where where the temptation is to think in despair.

And that's ultimately what Satan wants when times of persecution and trial come. When times of sorrow and loss are afflicted on us. When trials come to us.

The temptation is not only to think perhaps that God is not in control but to allow ourselves to slump into despair about our circumstances. To think there is no hope.

There is no relief. There is no deliverance. There is nothing forthcoming. And yet James says count it all joy.

Because the steadfastness of your faith shows completeness. Because the way in which you weather and face times of trial and persecution and difficulty that come show the tested, as Paul puts it, the tested genuineness.

[25 : 33] of your faith. Which is more precious than gold. There is something wonderful about Christians who meet times of trial with faith.

Trusting in a God who has made promises. And that takes us back to where Abraham was. death of God's death.

And that's the death of his beloved wife. And what is Abraham to think? Was the promise for her null and void because she has now died?

That's not an Old Testament question. That's a New Testament question. It's a question that the Corinthians were asking. It's a question that the Thessalonians were asking.

It's a question that preoccupies the New Testament saints. And I think it affects us as well. You know, when loved ones die, having not seen the coming of Jesus, we wonder, is it really true?

[26 : 43] And Abraham is wanting to bury Sarah in the land of promise because he believes, I think, in a very nascent way, that the promise is still hers.

Not of an earthly city, but of an eternal city that God will establish. That she will have a place in the ultimate fulfillment of God's purposes in the promised land.

And as the writer to Hebrews is pointing out, the promised land isn't a promise about the land itself. It's a promise about the everlasting everlasting. It's a promise about God's dwelling with his people. It's about a promise of something looked forward to, but not realized.

Only begun to be grasped at the coming of Jesus, who says, Behold, I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I am going to prepare a place for you, I will come again and bring you to be with myself.

So that we have that hope that those who have died in the Lord, those who have fallen asleep in Christ, they have a share in that hope. So much so that when Christ comes again, he will be accompanied with an army with banners, and the dead in Christ will rise first, and they will go up and meet with him in the clouds.

[28 : 02] The cave of Macfella will be like that that day. It will be a cave emptied of its dead because they want to go to be with the Lord Lord when he comes to establish the everlasting city of promise and inheritance for his people.

And so when we stand, as we so frequently do, at the grave of the righteous, and we wonder, what does all this mean?

Our gaze and our attention as Christians ought to be taken forward to the emptiness of the grave that will one day be all of ours, that we will share with Jesus an empty tomb.

That will one day belong to our loved ones who have died in Christ, that theirs will be an empty place because they are not there, but because they have gone to be with Christ.

And so we have to ask ourselves, what are we expecting? Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to his great mercy.

[29 : 22] He has called us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

And these are the words of Peter. How much we glorify God for the hope that is ours. And we glorify him by living now in light of that hope, in light of that expectant faith that is looking for these things to be revealed.

Which brings us ultimately to the gospel. This is the offer of the gospel to every one of us tonight. The offer of the good news of the gospel is that God has promised that all who come to Christ will be forgiven.

Will be. There is an inheritance that has been bought for you by Jesus because he paid an expensive price for what was purchased to fulfill our hope.

The blood of the Son of God shed at the cross satisfies everything and stands forever as the testimony over God's people.

[30 : 56] not look how much Abraham paid for the cave and that goes into the kind of cultural memory of the Hittites. But look at how much God paid for you at the cross.

Look at what he paid to vanquish sin's hold over you. Look at what he paid for you to have that inheritance in the resurrection.

That place in the heavenly city for your name to be written in the Lamb's book of life. What did he pay? He paid the blood of his Son.

And the forsakenness of that cry. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? An expensive price.

That has now been paid. Nothing need to be added to it to realize the salvation of all of God's people.

[32 : 05] And so I leave you tonight with that question of you coming to him. Will you come expectantly to him? Because the fullness of the price has been paid already.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, help us tonight to see the wonder of an expectant faith. Jesus went to the cross with that.

He went to the cross with that expectation, enduring its shame, despising in fact the shame, with the expectation of the joy that was set before him. He paid the price, obedient and faithful.

May we tonight, therefore, realize that it is for us given to live by expectant faith as well. To live with that desire of knowing the fullness of your revelation and the fullness of your gift to us.

May we find that more and more to our satisfaction and to our delight, to our assurance and to our confidence, so that we ourselves would live with an expectant faith going on.

[33 : 10] To see that all is complete in Christ Jesus. All has been achieved. And may we have faith and trust in his sufficiency. We ask this in his name.

Amen. We're going to sing in conclusion these words at the end of Psalm 16. And sing Psalms version, page 17. Before me constantly, I set the Lord alone because he is at my right hand. I'll not be overthrown. Therefore my heart is glad, my tongue with joy will sing. My body too will rest secure in hope unwavering. For you will not allow my soul in death to stay. Nor will you leave your Holy One to see the tombs decay. You have made known to me the path of life divine. Bliss shall I know at your right hand. Joy from your face will shine. That's the hope of the Christian that's spoken of there. The same hope I think that Abraham would have had as he buried his wife. That expectation that we will not be left to the tombs decay. But that like Jesus will be raised up on the last day.

[34 : 14] So let's sing to God's praise. Before me constantly, I set the Lord alone. Before me constantly, I set the Lord alone.

Because he is at my white hand, I'll not be overthrown.
Lord alone. Therefore, my heart is glad. My child with joy will sing.
And hope and wave and aim.
You will not allow my soul in death to stay.

[35 : 45] Nor will you leave your holy one to see the tombs decay.

You have made known to me the path of life divine.
Blessed shall I know at your white hand. Joy from your face will shine.
Now the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with each one of you now and always. Amen. Amen.