

“Blessed are the Meek, for they will Inherit the Earth”

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[0 : 00] Well, if this is your first time with us or you've connected with us over the summer, that might seem like a strange chapter of the Bible to have read. Before the summer, we were in a series in these chapters of Genesis 12 to 25, a series we called The Promise. And we're coming back to this section of Genesis for a few weeks just to finish off these chapters, but they are well worth coming back to you because it is the beginning of God fulfilling his promises to Abraham. Back in chapter 12, God promised Abraham three N's. It's all flooding back to you, if you were here. Three N's, what were they? To multiply him, give him children, to magnify him, make him great, and make him a mediator. That is that God's grace and blessing would come to all the families of the earth through this one family. That promise wasn't an end in itself, but all in the service of God's master plan to redeem fallen humanity, to give his blessing back to a people that were living under the curse of sin and death, to save. And we've seen, or you can read how this family God called to be part of that plan was not always on board with God's plan over and over. We've seen God work to bless the world, and this family has made decisions and behaved and spoken in ways that has caused the people of the world not to be blessed. But through it all, God has been faithful to his promise. And where we left off in the last episode, we see even Abraham, who's got it wrong so many times before, and wrong in the same way as so many times before. We see him put great faith in God's promise. He is growing into this new identity. He is growing in his understanding of the plan. I'll leave you to see how he did that in chapter 22 later on. But from chapters 21 to 25, we get to see God deliver on his big promise and ticking the points of his promise off the list.

And okay, in the story of the Bible, they are small ticks, but ticks next to God's promises are never ever insignificant. So where does chapter 23 fit into all of that? It seems like a really strange thing to include, doesn't it? If the focus of it was on Sarah's death, we could understand, but that's covered in the first two verses, over and done. If it was about Sarah's funeral, we could understand, but we don't get to see a funeral here, do we? So what is the focus? What's it about? The focus is Abraham buying the land for Sarah's grave? A man purchases a burial plot.

That's a summary of this chapter. Some of you have done that. You know how stressful it is, how costly it is, but it's not the big thing you do when someone dies, is it? So why is it recorded in the pages of Scripture? Why a whole chapter of Genesis in this really important part of the story given over to land acquisition? Maybe that's a clue for you, but let's see why in the text together.

We've got three points this morning. Firstly, die differently. Time has passed. When we first met Sarah, she was in her 60s. She was in her 90s when she gave birth to Isaac. Now she dies at the age of 127. And we get the sense Abraham was beside himself with grief. He went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her. One of those is a technical term, a bit like we might visit a funeral home. The other is purely emotive. He went to weep over her. For as long as God's people have existed, isn't it interesting?

For as long as God's family has existed, we have grieved death in our families. If you have cried over the loss of somebody that you love, know today you stand in a long line that stretches back to our Lord Jesus who wept at the grave of his friend and further back still to the father of the faithful who wept at the deathbed of his wife. God's people grieved death.

[4 : 56] Of course, you could say as long as death has existed, humanity has grieved it. We have wept at funerals. The difference for God's people is not that we don't grieve. It is how we grieve.

Paul puts it like this in 1 Thessalonians 4, brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope. The difference is we grieve with hope. And that hope in God in grief is what leads us to verse 3 when Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, I am a foreign and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so that I can bury my dead.

Now to us, this might sound like the dreaded paperwork that surrounds a death arranging a funeral, but Abraham's request is more specific than it needs to be. Give me some land, he says.

See, he's in a tricky spot because he doesn't own property in Canaan. But back then, there were no cemeteries or crematoriums. You buried those who died in your house in a special place on your land.

But unlike his neighbors, Abraham doesn't have that. He doesn't have land. He doesn't have a burial site, a family tomb. So give me some land to bury my dead, he says. But his neighbors protest.

[6 : 30] Verse 5, the Hittites replied, Sarah, listen to us. You are literally, they say, a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead.

But don't be ridiculous, they say. Have any of our tombs. Don't worry about becoming a landowner. Take your pick. You could bury her in the Westminster Abbey of Canaan if you wanted to.

The choicest tomb is open to you. It's an extremely generous offer, isn't it? But you see what they're doing. Abraham has said he's a stranger with them. He's not one of them.

They say, oh, but you are. You're not blood, but you're basically family. Bury your dead with our families. Have a share in our land. And again, that's a really kind offer. He's been their neighbor for a long time. It's a welcoming community. They see him as one of them. But Abraham knows he's not one of them. And part of the tension in this story is that he needs to keep that distinction clear.

He's not part of their families. He's the father of a new family. And in fact, if he simply was to blend into their families, then their families would never receive God's blessing because God has promised that he would bless the families of the earth through this one family. So Abraham needs to keep the lines clear. He needs to stay distinctive. He is in the land, but he's not of the land.

[8 : 09] It's God's family today. We say we are in the world, but we are not of the world. And one way we live out our distinctive identity and the world sees that we are different is in the way that we grieve death. I've taken three funerals in the last two years. And one of the most challenging things has been being clear with families about the difference between a secular humanist funeral and a Christian funeral. I can tell you that whatever Christian influence there once was in the world of death and funerals is now gone. What people care most about is what will be said about the person who they are grieving. The songs that she loved, the stories that he told. And that shouldn't surprise us because what else is there if you do not have hope in death? What's left? Death is so awkward and disruptive and fearful to us that as a society we cannot even speak about death at a funeral.

That is where we are. But a Christian funeral is different. We grieve differently. We stand at the graveside and we stare death in the face and we weep. But we do it with hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it's only about the person who has died insofar as it is about the relationship of that person with the one who died and rose to life and holds the keys of death and hell. It is a worship service. We celebrate God's victory over the graves. And so I'll say this to you brothers and sisters, please do plan for a funeral like that. If your hope is in Christ, prepare your family for a worship service for a worship service when you die. Please, if you're paying off your funeral, if you're investing in a burial plot, come and speak to your minister about the service.

I can't plan it for you. I can't ask you after you're gone. And think about your body, what happens to it. The reason there have historically been graveyards next to churches is because the burial of the body symbolizes our belief that that same body will be raised from the dead on the last day, that God will resurrect us. He will resurrect those who have been cremated to or lost at sea or whatever.

But burial will become an increasingly distinctive Christian way of expressing our hope in the resurrection of the body. It says death is not the end of the body. So invest.

If a burial plot is out of your price range as it is increasingly coming, arrange for your remains to be interred at a graveside service. But have your remains committed to the earth. It speaks, doesn't it, of our hope in Christ. Let us stay distinctive in the way that we grieve and handle death.

[11 : 26] Our non-Christian friends and families are no doubt respectful and loving, but they do not know how to grieve because they do not have hope. Like Abraham said to the people of the land, we say, we are foreigners and strangers here, but we look to a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. So we handle death differently. And that can be a really powerful way of holding out hope to a dying world. The top five opportunities that I have had to share the gospel with non-Christians have been the two weddings and three funerals that I've done since I've been here.

So die differently. That might seem like a really strange thing to say, but it is precisely why Abraham goes on to say, will you speak to this guy Ephron for me about his field? And verse 9, ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you. This is our second point, live differently.

So the Hittites have said, don't worry about the land, just use our tombs. But Abraham very respectfully declines and says, in effect, since you care so much, well, please speak to that guy and see if he'll sell me his land. And then begins this really weird kind of haggling.

Okay, normally, right, the buyer is trying to force down the price and the seller is trying to push up the price. What do you notice that's different about this bargain? Abraham wants to pay full price.

Ephron says, no, my Lord, listen, I'll give you the field and I'll give you the cave. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Ephron wants nothing for his land. It's a gift, he says. Forget about the price. Again, these guys are extraordinarily caring, aren't they? Abraham clearly respects them.

[13 : 22] There's no love lost here. But Abraham insists, listen to me. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead here. Name your price, he says.

Now, I guess there could be a kind of shame and honor thing going on. We do this, don't we, when we get a coffee or go out for lunch. No, I'll pay. No, I'll get this one.

But I think this is something different. This isn't lunch. This is land. And all this time that they've been talking, they've been sitting. Did you notice where are they sitting? They're sitting in the city gates. And the city gate back then was where legal cases were sorted out, in public, with witnesses, often with the leaders of a city. So this isn't haggling at a market stall. This is on the phone to the solicitor. And Abraham wants to pay, I think, to make sure that everyone understands that the land is not a loan or a gift, but that he owns the land outright. He's paid its full value.

It's his name on the title deeds. So there's no coming back later and taking it back off him. And if that's what you want, says Ephron, okay, it's 400 shekels. But what is that between me and you? Just have it. Bury your dead. And this passage that's been so light on detail and description, we've hardly seen anything, have we? Or suddenly in verse 16, we zoom right in and slow right down.

And in very vivid detail, we see Abraham agreeing to the terms and weighing out the money, 400 shekels, silver shekels, to the normal weight used by the merchants at that time, all in the hearing of the Hittites. Everything grinds to a halt. And Genesis is saying, this is really important.

[15 : 22] This is how Bible texts do it. It's saying, can you see what is happening here? One commentator writes, the reporter is aware that it is so important for Abraham to gain unimpeachable possession of the burial place that he will pay any amount for it.

Why is this so important? Because what we're witnessing is the very first smallholding in the promised land, coming into the possession of God's family. This is God beginning to give this family this land. It wasn't enough to bury Sarah's body in a burrowed tomb or to bury her body on gifted land. He had to buy the land to bury his wife's body in a field he owned outright.

Because he saw it as the first installment in God's promise to give him the land in perpetuity. This field of Machpelah is the show home that foreshadows the entire development.

It is the first spade full of earth out of the foundation of what will become God's family home. And so Abraham did things differently and distinctively because his hope rested in God's promise. It's the same hope that compels the brothers at the end of Genesis when Jacob dies to travel back to this very place and bury their father's body in this very tomb.

It's the same hope that compels Joseph to say to his family, I'm about to die, but God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And then you must carry my bones up from this place. And so 400 years later, when God did come to rescue his people, Moses did take the bones of Joseph back from Egypt and the Israelites buried his bones in the promised land. See, these guys insist on being buried in this land because God promised it to their family as part of his covenant love to them and as part of his plan to redeem the world.

[17 : 50] Their burial there is an expression of their hope in what God has promised for them and for the world. A rescue from sin and death. And so Abraham's bargaining, it must have sounded really weird to the people of the land. What does he want to pay for? They might have even been put out or offended.

He's turned down their generosity not once but twice. What's wrong with our tombs? When we set our hope in what can't be seen, the promise of God to redeem his family and this world, brothers and sisters, it will result in a different way of life here and now. A different way of costing things. A different way of dealing with the stuff of this world. It has to. If this world is all that there is and death is the end, well let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Or in modern terms, you only live once. If God has promised a land to his family where we will live forever, well we live and die for that land. We pay whatever price we have to to be found in it.

And listen, he has promised. Peter says, in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells. Here's Hebrews commenting on Abraham's faith and hope. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.

He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. He didn't make his home here, but he set his sights on his forever home there. Friends, is that how you were living? And is that what you were living for? It was costly for Abraham. One writer says either this was a huge tract of the choicest land, or Abraham paid way over the odds. 400 shekels of silver was not loose change.

It is costly for me to say to bereaved families, I'm not going to read that, but I'm going to preach from the Bible. Because I have hope in Christ and the stuff of this world will not do at a funeral.

[20 : 16] It is costly for you, perhaps, to say to friends, I spent time today thinking about how I'm going to die and preparing for my funeral so that you get one last chance to hear the best news that you could ever hear.

It's costly, perhaps, for you to say to your families, you're not going to receive quite as much as maybe you think in my will, because I want my earthly goods to go to the work of the gospel in other parts of the world. It is costly in our day to believe and to contend, as I hope that you would, that every single life is intrinsically valuable. The very youngest, the very oldest, the very poorest, and that image bearers of God should not be legally terminated. That is no way to die in God's world.

There's a couple starting at the Ministry Training Academy next week who moved from New Mexico to be in Aberdeen. They're newly retired, but they moved because they said, we don't want to waste our retirement sitting in front of the TV. We feel that God has more work for us to do. So they have come from America to study in Aberdeen, to be equipped to share God's word and be useful to him in the final decades of their life. This is chapter two, they said. That is costing them real dollars and cents.

It's costing them time with their family in the States. It's costing them opportunity to travel the world, to pursue hobbies, to sit in front of the TV. But we live by faith in God's promises. We are looking forward to a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells. That is our forever home. And I hope that whatever it costs us to live today for that world, that we consider it worth it. And we do pay the price for the hope that Christ has given us through his resurrection.

Friends, that is why we live differently, why we die differently, grieve differently, because we trust in God's promise to us on earth of a forever home, a promised land, where death is no more secured for us by the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus.

[22 : 33] Which brings us to our third and our final point, and I hope differently. As we come to the end of this chapter two things are stressed, that Abraham now legally owns the land, we've got that, and that he used it as a burial plot. So Ephraim's field in Machpelah near Mamre, both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field was legally made over to Abraham as his property.

Afterwards, Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre. So the field and the cave in it were legally made over to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

It's important that Abraham legally owned the land, we've got that. But would it have mattered then if he had used the field for a farm, or to build a house on? Is Sarah's death and burial just an excuse for a land grab? Or is her death and burial actually a part of the story? One writer, Matthew Emerson, comments that in the ancient world, burial was in itself a special claim to the land.

I guess even today if you were to buy a family burial plot, you're not going to sell it on in the way that you would a house or a field. And even hundreds of years later, there were all kinds of laws about handling human remains, aren't there? When they were laying the tram lines down in Leith, they uncovered a part of a graveyard and they couldn't just dig it up. They had to count all the bones, gently brush the soil off them, label them, map them. There's a sense under the law in which those bones still had a claim to the land. They couldn't just be taken away.

So when Abraham bought this pot of land to bury his wife and family in, it is a special kind of never-ending claim to the land. And if that's the case, says Emerson, then what does the burial of the body of Jesus tell us?

[24 : 43] It's probably the bit we're most likely to gloss over in the story, but it's there in the Apostles' Creed. He was crucified, died, and was buried. We read in Matthew's Gospel the account of his burial.

It's historical fact. He was buried. But what does it change for us that he was buried? Part of it, he says, is that his death and burial was a claim to the land he was buried in. Which in terms of God's promise to us is a never-ending claim to this earth. Jesus said his death left an inheritance to his people. He has bequeathed us something. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

So if our trust is in Christ, his death left us a great inheritance and his burial in part secured it for us. It was a borrowed tomb, but it is his world and he has promised to give it to his people.

I don't know what you think of that. I find that a really helpful bridge between his death and resurrection to think that Jesus went into the grave as a promise that one day I will come out of the grave and inherit a new world where we will live God's family forever without death but with the living God.

He went into the grave as the promise that ye will come out of it if your trust is in him. And it is that great hope that we live for now, that we die for, that we long for, maybe particularly at the graveside. And all because God is faithful to keep that promise to us in Christ, to redeem all those whose trust is in him from sin and death forever, body and soul, in life and in death, death so that we might live with him in a new world forever and ever. Let's put our hope in him together as we pray. Let's pray together.

[27 : 01] Father, how we thank you that you sent your son Jesus to die that we might live, to be buried that we might rise. How we thank you that he lives forever to save completely all those who draw near to you through him. And so we do. Our Father, we come to you now and we put our trust and our hope in Christ.

And Lord, we pray by your spirit that you would help us to rest our hope in him completely. Forgive us, we pray, for when we reserve, Lord, our hope and our trust in this world.

Lord, when we keep our options open. Lord, forgive us, we ask, and rid us of that cynicism. Lord, let us trust completely in the promise of your word that you made so long ago to Abraham and is still true to us in Christ. Lord, help us, we pray, to live and to die for the promise of eternal life in your kingdom. For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well, we're going to close together by reaffirming and confessing together our hope in Christ.

Christ, our hope in life and death. Let's stand together as we sing and encourage one another with these words. Amen.