

NO ONE'S EVER REALLY GONE

GENESIS 25:1-18 APRIL 20, 2022

In *The Last Jedi*, the Skywalkers and company deal with passing the torch from the older generation, who are dying off, to the younger, amidst significant family drama. In the movie, Luke Skywalker famously says, "No one's ever really gone." That may have been a screenwriter's attempt at being profound, or it may simply be that Disney wants to be able to bring back any marketable character when necessary.

Our text tonight catalogs the death of two characters and the passing of the torch to the next generation. Of course, we Christians already know that death is not the end. That is a truth that secular science is once again starting to admit. Recently the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* published a piece examining rarely-studied phenomena at the time of physical death.¹

Though clinical death is marked as the moment the heart stops beating, brain signals continue for a time after cardiac arrest.² "Researchers found the presence of gamma activity and electrical spikes when people are technically dying. This is typically a sign of a heightened state of consciousness."³ The lead author of the piece writes, "The advent of [CPR] showed us that death is not an absolute state."

The Bible reveals that death is *not* an absolute state. It is a passageway from this life to the next - the *ultimate* life, where we are gathered together among one of two groups. Tonight, Abraham and Ishmael are both "gathered" into the afterlife, while the family lives on and God's work continues.

Genesis 25:1 - Abraham had taken another wife, whose name was Keturah,

Who is Keturah and where did she come from? When did she and Abraham get together? We're not told any of these details. Scholars fight it out over whether she came on the scene before Sarah died or after, and over whether Abraham *should've* been in a relationship with her or not. But the text does not comment on it. Apparently it's not important for us to know, or perhaps it's simply better for us to meditate on the situation and have the Lord speak to us through it.

Should Paul have allowed John Mark to go with him on another missionary journey or should Barnabas not have invited him? The Holy Spirit doesn't take a side in the text, so we assume that there are things we can learn from *either* perspective. In a similar way, the Bible doesn't endorse or condemn Abraham's relationship with Keturah. It simply gives us something to think about.

Genesis 25:2-4 - ²and she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. ³Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. Dedan's sons were the Asshurim, Letushim, and

¹ <https://nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nyas.14740>

² <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/when-are-we-really-dead-new-study-sheds-light?c=444988160808#Accidental-discovery>

³ <https://www.brainetomorrow.com/2022/04/08/near-death-brain-activity/>

Leummim. ⁴And Midian's sons were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were sons of Keturah.

A few of the names are recognizable - Midian, as well as Sheba and Dedan who show up especially in the book of Ezekiel. Asshurim here is *not* the Assyrians we meet later in the Old Testament.

There are 16 descendants listed. And in them we see a literal fulfillment of some of the promises God had made to Abraham. He had told Abraham that He would multiply him greatly and that many nations would come from Abraham.⁴ That has been proven true. In fact, in this passage we see at least 6 specific promises that were truly and literally fulfilled for Abraham. There are the promise of multiplication and many nations, but also that Abraham would live to old age,⁵ that even though he would produce many nations, his truest offspring would be traced through Isaac,⁶ that *Isaac* would be his heir,⁷ that Ishmael would produce 12 tribal leaders,⁸ and that Ishmael would settle near his relatives.⁹ All these promises were specifically made and particularly fulfilled.

God really keeps His promises! Not halfway. He doesn't move the goal posts. He never fakes us out. He keeps all He has promised for this world, for Israel, for you, and for me.

Keturah's descendants settled in places we identify today as Arabia and Syria.¹⁰ And some of them would have dealings with the children of Israel, generally acting in hostility toward them.

Genesis 25:5-6 - ⁵Abraham gave everything he owned to Isaac. ⁶But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines, and while he was still alive he sent them eastward, away from his son Isaac, to the land of the East.

In verse 1 Keturah is called a wife, but her legal status was that of a concubine, which means her offspring would not have any right to inheritance.¹¹ We feel weird about that, but our modern view on family is different than it was in previous generations, really up to even the *recent* past.

For example: I was surprised to learn that until 1969 in Germany, children born out of wedlock weren't even legally considered to be *related* to their father. As far as the law was concerned, they had a right to *sustenance*, but not to *inheritance*.¹²

Now, admittedly, in the Old Testament we are heartbroken when we see parents playing favorites with their kids. Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. It's not a good thing in light of how God

⁴ Genesis 17:2, 5

⁵ Genesis 15:15

⁶ Genesis 21:12

⁷ Genesis 15:4

⁸ Genesis 17:20

⁹ Genesis 16:2

¹⁰ See *Waltke, Kidner*

¹¹ Genesis 25:6, 1 Chronicles 1:32

¹² Josué J. Justel *The Rights Of A Concubine's Descendants In The Ancient Near East*

has taught *us* to love now that Christ has come and given us a new perspective on what it means to be a loving human being - what it means to be a spouse and a parent and a new creation in Christ.

At the same time, we recognize that the Old Testament is the story of God's faithfulness to deliver the Messiah. There's a lot more to learn, but that is the great theme of the Bible: God reconciling man to Himself by sending His Son. He did so through a *specific* nation which came from a *specific* family which bottlenecked down to one guy from time to time. Abraham was *one* guy. Isaac was *one* guy. And our enemy the Devil has wanted to derail the work of God from the beginning. Throughout the centuries, there has been a concerted effort to destroy that one, specific family through whom the Lord would bring the Messiah. And so, it was important that Isaac be protected and preserved. These other sons might threaten Isaac or be incentivized to attack him.

Now, on a *devotional* level, this sending away of Keturah's sons gives us at least four things to think about. First, we are reminded that God the Father does not owe us *anything*. These sons had *no* claim on anything that belonged to Abraham. And that would not have been a surprise to them.

You and I deserve *nothing* from God but to be sent away from His presence. In fact, that leads us to our second devotional thought: In the end, there are those who *seem* like they are children of God, but the Lord will ultimately say to them, "I never knew you, depart from Me, you lawbreakers."¹³ Many will play the part, but in reality are not members of the new covenant given by Jesus. Just as these sons of Keturah were not covenant sons and so were sent away, so too, those who do not do the will of the Father in heaven will be sent away from the Kingdom, denied heaven's inheritance.

But, that leads us to the third devotional thought: Consider what God has done for sinners. We were like the these sons. We have no right to heaven. We should be sent far from the presence of the Father because only the true Son of Promise deserves the glory. But, God, in His grace, has *adopted* us. He redeemed us and adopted us by His good pleasure!¹⁴ You see, in the ancient world, when a father *adopted* a son he had with a slave or a concubine, *then* they were legitimized and made heirs of the household. *Then* they were made citizens of the city and given access to those things they had no right to claim for themselves.¹⁵ No longer were they slaves, no longer were they outcasts, they were now family members who enjoyed inheritance. This is what God has done through us, not *in spite* of His only begotten Son, but with full participation with the Son.

And the fourth devotional thought here: God gives us everything but still has more to give. I love how it's phrased: Abraham gave everything he owned to Isaac *and* he still gave gifts to these other sons. God's supplies of grace and peace and wisdom and help cannot be exhausted. He gives to the full and then keeps giving. He gives us everything that is required for life and godliness and we can continually supplement our faith day by day with the *more* that He gives.

Genesis 25:7 - ⁷This is the length of Abraham's life: 175 years.

¹³ Matthew 7:21-24

¹⁴ Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5

¹⁵ Justel

I was thinking about these long lifespans in the Old Testament. Young earth creationists give the earth an age of about 6,000 years.¹⁶ Abraham lived for 3% of that time. Adam lived for 15% of the entire history of earth!

We tend to think God is taking too much time to accomplish His promises. But the days of our lives really are a vapor in comparison to the unending span of eternity. Paul tenderly reminds us that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.¹⁷ God is not slow or slack, He's right on time.

When Abraham died, Isaac was 75 and his twin boys (Jacob and Esau) were 15.

Genesis 25:8 - ⁸He took his last breath and died at a good old age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his people.

Sometimes we talk about a person going out "in a blaze of glory." Abraham went out in a blaze of *contentment*. Your version may simply say "full" with 'of years' in italics, meaning that was added by translators. What made his life full and contented? *It was the Lord!* Because Abraham walked with God and kept his heart near to the Lord, God was able to bring great things *to* Abraham's life and *through* his life. In chapter 24, Moses wrote that the Lord had blessed him in every way. Even unbelievers looked at his life and said, "God is obviously with you, helping you in everything you do."¹⁸ *That's* what gave a vulnerable nomad peace in an unpredictable world. He made mistakes, he made miscalculations, but he walked with God, and God led him to fullness and contentment.

Commentators point out an important theological idea in this verse. Abraham was *not* buried with his ancestors - only Sarah was in that tomb - so "gathered to his people" means there is a life *after* this one. Abraham took one last breath in 2,000 B.C., Canaan and woke in eternity. Awaiting him were Adam and Noah and Abel, the very first inhabitant in that abode we call Hades. It must have been an interesting moment, because that place where Abraham went was *named after him!* Sometimes when people die we name auditoriums or hospital wings or stretches of freeway in their honor. Abraham got down to Paradise and someone would've told him, "Welcome to Abraham's bosom! Let us show you around!"

It speaks to us of how much care God takes to prepare a place for us. You and I may not have a chamber named after us in eternity, but on the other hand, *we might!* God does not love and reward us generically. He has a deep, personal, individualized affection for us. In Revelation 21 we're told that the names of the Apostles are written on the foundations of the city walls in the New Jerusalem. We need to not think *less* of God's love for us and His future plans for us.

¹⁶ <https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/how-old-is-the-earth/>

¹⁷ Romans 8:18

¹⁸ Genesis 21:22

Genesis 25:9-10 - ⁹His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hethite. ¹⁰This was the field that Abraham bought from the Hethites. Abraham was buried there with his wife Sarah.

I wish we knew more about this dynamic. At age 89, Ishmael, the exile, returns to join with Isaac in burying their dad. The other sons do *not* seem to be there. By this point, Ishmael was an established clan leader. Perhaps he arrived with an entourage, whereas Isaac had only a wife and two teenage boys who don't get along very well.

Genesis 25:11 - ¹¹After Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac, who lived near Beer-lahai-roi.

After Abraham's death, I'm guessing Isaac felt a little exposed. From one perspective he was weakest among the brothers. The 'second son' who usurped the firstborn. He was no archer, he had never battled against Chedorlaomer. He had no face-to-face meals with the Angel of the Lord. But we don't have to worry about building ourselves. Instead we walk with the Lord and *He* strengthens us and blesses us in whatever ways He knows we need.

Genesis 25:12 - ¹²These are the family records of Abraham's son Ishmael, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave, bore to Abraham.

We're reminded of several things here. First, that Ishmael was *not* who God had appointed for His purposes. Ishmael represents for us the work of the flesh - man's scheme to do God's work for Him.

Second, we're reminded that even though he was the son of the slave, God had not failed to reach out to him. God involved Himself in Ishmael's life. He *saved* his life there in the desert. He did not reserve grace *only* for Isaac, but showered it on Ishmael as well.

There is common grace God pours out on all people. Jesus said, "God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." God is a God of unfailing grace and goodness, even to the undeserving. That doesn't mean everyone receives His *saving* grace - that is received through faith in Jesus. But God shows kindness to unbelievers as well.

Genesis 25:13-16 - ¹³These are the names of Ishmael's sons; their names according to the family records are Nebaioth, Ishmael's firstborn, then Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ¹⁴Mishma, Dumah, Massa, ¹⁵Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. ¹⁶These are Ishmael's sons, and these are their names by their settlements and encampments: twelve leaders of their clans.

The prophecy that Ishmael would father 12 tribal leaders was literally fulfilled. God is in charge of the flow of human history, the rise and fall of clans and kingdoms. That does not negate free will, but God knows and, in many cases, has reported to us future history. His will cannot fail.

Genesis 25:17-18 - ¹⁷This is the length of Ishmael's life: 137 years. He took his last breath and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸And they settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt as you go toward Asshur. He stayed near all his relatives.

Will we see Ishmael in eternity? I'm not sure. It causes us to think about where we will be gathered when we pass from this life to the next. There are only two peoples we can be gathered to: The saved and the lost. It gives our lives great purpose to consider where we're headed and how we want to be received when we get there. Do we want to be saved "as through fire?" No. We want that fullness of contentment and reward that God wants for us. We want to finish well, the way Abraham finished well.

We seem to live in a time when many Christians are not finishing well, at least not many prominent Christians. It's not necessarily an easy thing to do, but it should be a natural development as we walk with the Lord. Or, really I should say, it should be the expected *supernatural* culmination of our lives as we follow the Lord and submit to His guidance and commands.

When we go the way of Abraham, we can take great comfort in the facts that life greater than we've ever known is waiting for us on the other side and that we can trust God to care for those loved ones we leave behind. He always got more to give to us, He keeps His promises, He will lead us home at gather us into glory at just the right time.