

A week ago, I had the privilege of officiating a funeral service for a member of our CPC community. Over the years, I have found it such a gift to preside over these services for a few reasons. First, it is such an honor to be included in these moments of people's lives. Second, our culture is terrible at talking about death. More often than not, we avoid the topic altogether, choosing to ignore one of the few realities that face us all. And I find the opportunity to be immersed in the conversation of death a unique opportunity to reflect on my mortality. Third, it both inspires and challenges me. Because I have learned that if one is to die well, it is largely because they lived well. There is a direct connection between the manner that we have lived and the manner in which we die. I'm reminded of that quote by George Orwell. "At 50, every man has the face he deserves."

Much of our lives result from the decisions we make along the way, of the way we choose to live. This is never more acutely aware to us than when we are grieving the loss of a loved one or a member of our community.

I always leave funerals with more questions than answers. These are not questions about the meaning of life but self-reflective questions. Questions like, do I love Lindsey in a way that I would be proud of the comments at my funeral? Am I the type of father I want to be? What is the legacy of faith I am leaving behind?

Death has a way of sharpening our senses. It refines our thinking because it forces us to examine the important things of life. So often, death is a mere abstraction to us, something that happens, but it only happens to others—a distant thought, but never a personal reality.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, "We're a society that rarely acknowledges death before it happens...Christianity is ongoing training in dying early." We really don't like talking about death. In many ways, we are addicted to youth and the safety that limits our abilities to think about death. If we are not intentional, this can crowd out our ability to live and die well because we spend our lives trying to avoid death at all costs.

I believe it would do us well to think more about death. Not in an obsessive manner, but in a healthy manner that understands its role in our lives and allows us to clarify our thinking about what God has called us to do. And so today, we come to the end of our series on Abraham and the end of Abraham's life. Because of this, I thought I would give more of a funeral meditation than a sermon. And if you will provide me with a little more latitude in my exposition, I will spend our time reflecting on the death of Abraham and what we can learn about living and dying well in a biblical sense.

So we are gathered here today to remember the life of Abraham. Abraham was a man-centered on God, a man of great faith. He was never perfect, and his life ebbed and flowed with faithfulness and doubt. But underneath it, all was a life grounded in faith.

One of the unique characteristics of Abraham was that three different times in the Bible, Abraham was called a "friend of God." This is not a common title but one that was earned by a life marked by faith. And while certainly the life of Abraham is measured as the father of our faith, he was by no means perfect. He wrestled with doubt; he had moral failings; he failed his wife, Sarah, on multiple occasions. Nonetheless, he is known to the biblical writers as a "friend of God." What a great way to be remembered! As a friend of God, I certainly would welcome such an epitaph for my own life.

In so many ways, Abraham's life was an example for us all about what it means to follow God. Our lives are not marked by our piety or ability to obey, but rather our lives are about God's faithfulness and our attentiveness to the work of God. In this vein, as we consider the death of Abraham, we can all draw parallels to our own lives, drawing inspiration for a life that was lived as a "friend of God."

So turn to Genesis 25. This is where we see the account of the death of Abraham, and it properly provides the close of the narrative account of Abraham that began back in chapter 11. As we look at Genesis 25:1-8, I want to reflect on three different characteristics of Abraham that correlate to three biblical aspirations for us all. These will guide our time this morning as a meditation on living and dying well.

### **Three Characteristics of Living and Dying Well: Fruitfulness**

The first characteristic of Abraham I want to highlight was his fruitfulness.

**Abraham had taken another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan; the descendants of Dedan were the Ashurites, the Letushites and the Leummites. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanok, Abida and Eldaah. All these were descendants of Keturah. Genesis 25:1-4**

This is an interesting opening to the account of Abraham's death. I believe there are two purposes that this section is covering. The first is simply the historical account of Abraham's remarriage and six children that were born from that marriage. It is a Eulogy of sorts.

The second purpose is theological. If we were to add Isaac and Ishmael with the sons of Keturah here, we get eight sons born to Abraham. This sort of fruitfulness is surprising, given the struggle Abraham and Sarah

had of originally producing a son. I think it speaks to God's faithfulness as well as Abraham's continued and sustained faith. If you remember, the original covenant promise to Abraham was that he would be a "father of many nations." And while nations did descend from both Isaac and Ishmael, the addition of these six sons would also produce nations that would ultimately become "many nations."

If we zoom out and consider the entire life of Abraham, we can see that the source of his fruitfulness, which is represented here by a large family, we will see that all of it was a gift from the grace of God and Abraham's faith to remain in God

Remember, the story of Abraham and Sarah is one that we would not naturally characterize as materially fruitful. For many years they couldn't conceive! The book of Hebrews says that Abraham was "as good as dead," meaning well beyond childbearing years. They were also nomadic wanderers, and they had no place to call home. In the words of the great theologian Bon Jovi, they were constantly, "Living on a prayer!" With no signs of how we would categorize fruitfulness

But for Abraham, to live on a prayer meant they were walking in step with God. Think of God's initial call for him and Sarah to go. Facing the unknown, they went. They kept in step with God. This was the first step toward Abraham's fruitful life.

The biblical understanding of a fruitful life is radically different than how we would define it. For most of us, we conflate a fruitful life with material blessing. And maybe that is the case, on occasion. But there is always a deeper fruit that God is after. And Abraham's faith and commitment to faith is what drove that fruitful life.

What does fruitfulness look like in our own lives? In the metaphorical sense, how can we live a fruitful life? The metaphor of fruit is a rich metaphor throughout the scriptures. Maybe most notably is Paul's meditation on the fruit of the spirit in Galatians.

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Gal. 5:22-25**

Notice in Paul's text here that there is only one imperative or command. "keep in step with Spirit." Often, we read this as a list of commands. Be loving. Be joyful. Be peaceful, etc., etc. But that is futile and exhausting. What is Paul actually communicating to us? And why does he use this analogy of the "fruit of the Spirit"? Consider that fruit is a natural result of the particular type of plant that brings it to fruition. An apple tree does not have to think about producing apples. A pear tree doesn't focus hard on producing pears. Instead, an apple tree produces an apple because it is, in fact, an apple tree. It doesn't and cannot produce anything other than the fruit for which it was meant to produce.

In the same manner, Paul says, the fruit of the Spirit is the natural result of living in step with the Spirit. That fruit of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Therefore, we seek to live in such a way that is in step with the spirit—in continual awareness of and connection to the Spirit's leading. And then, over time, our lives begin to produce love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What I find beautiful is each of these listed is evident in Abraham's life.

Love, kindness, goodness - Care for Hagar and Ishmael

Peace - His intercessory prayer over Sodom and Gomorrah

Joy - The references to laughter at the birth of Isaac

Forbearance - The years waiting on God's promises

Faithfulness - His commitment to leaving all he had known to follow God

Abraham was in no way perfect, but his life is a picture of a fruitful life. A built-in life connection to the way and Spirit of God, and the result is an exemplar of what is possible for you and me.

### **Three Characteristics of Living and Dying Well: Faithfulness**

So the first characteristic of living and dying well in Abraham's life is fruitfulness. Turn back to Genesis 25 and look at verses 5 and 6. Here we will see the second characteristic of living and dying well from Abraham's life, and it was a life of faithfulness. *"Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east" (Genesis 25:5-6).* The responsibility of the designation of the inheritance and passing of wealth onto the next generation fell to the patriarch of the family. Ultimately, it is the prerogative of the father to designate who would be the heir of the inheritance; he was also responsible for providing for the rest of the children as well. Here you see Abraham doing both of these tasks. Isaac is the rightful heir, and so Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But he is also taking care of his other sons, *"while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons."*

What is so striking in this remark of Abraham's life is that at every step of his journey, Abraham was attentive and faithful to the promise that God had made about his son Isaac, that he was the divinely chosen heir. And not only was Abraham attentive to this, but his faithfulness to the promise meant he was constantly protecting the divine promise. He does so here by ensuring the inheritance falls to Isaac after his death. Abraham is faithful to his family and faithful to his children, caring for each of them, but also caring for them in a manner that is faithful to the promise of God.

But his faithfulness is taken even further by the lengths of proactive care he goes to protect the promise of God. Notice also what he does in verse 6, *"...and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east."* Although this seems like a subtle narrative afterthought, I think it is actually quite important. The nature of familial relationships in the ancient world is that there is certainly the potential for family rivalries and the potential threat of the other sons seeking to take the inheritance of the one son.

Abraham, in his faithfulness to the promise of God, made certain to protect what God had begun in his family. So to both protect Isaac and

to ensure the promise to the best of his abilities, he sends the other sons away from Isaac. Think for a moment of the care and the foresight this took. Think of the seriousness this conveys about how Abraham understood his responsibility to be faithful to what God had given him.

How seriously do we take our responsibility to protect our spiritual life with God? I don't mean this to be a source of shame, but a genuine question, because I personally think this is a question that we may not think about very often.

For Abraham, he anticipated the potential threat to what God had laid out before him. He anticipated that life was not neutral. That the life with God is either moving toward or away from the things of God. We must be actively seeking faithfulness if we are continuing to grow in our connection with God.

A Theologian out of Notre Dame, Matthew Bates, likes to speak of faith as "allegiance." I like this metaphor because it captures the intensity of the faith commitment with subtle nuance. The idea of allegiance brings to mind ideas like loyalty, commitment, and active belief.

If we map this onto Abraham's life journey as we have seen it unfold in the past few months, we recognize pretty quickly that while Abraham's faith was anything but a consistent "success," his allegiance never faltered. He continued to pursue God. He would question and doubt, yes, but his allegiance was always toward God.

And here, as Abraham's life was coming to a close, we see another great example of his allegiance. Protecting the divine promise of God by providing for his sons and also sending the other sons away from Isaac so as to not give space for the promise to be compromised.

Where do you place your faith? Where do you place your allegiance? Is it in Jesus as Lord? Is it in your ability to overcome circumstances? Is it in your political affiliation? I think Abraham here is a good example of how to demonstrate foresight in our daily lives to protect against situations that may threaten our spiritual lives.

I am reminded of the advice of the author of Proverbs, "*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it*" (Proverbs 4:23). Above all else? More than your house? More than your car? More than your kids? and career? And social standing? Above all else, guard your heart. For Abraham, this meant ensuring the promise would be protected. What does this mean for you? It may mean re-organizing how you go about your day-to-day life.

### **Three Characteristics of Living and Dying Well: Fullness**

So Abraham's life has offered characteristics of living and dying well by fruitfulness and by faithfulness. The final note on Abraham's life is that it was marked by fullness. Look down at our last two verses today. "*Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people*" (vv. 7-8). Notice the seemingly positive tone in the author's voice, "died at a good old age, an old man and full of years." There is a sense of a life well-lived, which ultimately gave way to a good death.

The word for fullness used here has more to do with quality of life rather than quantity of life. I think of it in terms of how we can speak about our "hearts being full." It doesn't mean that they are physically filled, but rather, we are content, full of life. In a culture marked by expediency and instant gratification, this sort of long view can be a challenge to how we understand a "full-life." Our world is built to try and understand a full life in terms of quantity of life. We are constantly chasing the latest fad to extend our life and avoid death.

But the irony we all face is that to live a full life does not mean that we spend our time avoiding death. Instead, if we are to live a full life, we have to look straight at our finitude. Think of the Psalmist words in Psalm 90. "*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom*" (v.12).

The modern world affords us the possibility of thinking we can transcend our limits. And at times, this can be positive, but more often than not, it is an example of our pride that leads to destruction. The way to freedom and fullness is not to avoid our limitations but embrace them. And in so doing, we chose God's way and allowed that perspective to shape our daily living.

I would imagine that this crossed Abraham's mind when he was first given the promise and the invitation to "go." There was an incredible amount of unknown. Where would he and Sarah stay? Where would they end up? What was the purpose of the journey? The only certainty they had was that it would be dangerous. So they got up, left all they knew, and lived well.

Or consider the month after month grind of infertility, as Abraham and Sarah were living in the dissonance of the promise of a child and the reality that this was seemingly never coming to fruition. They could have given up, and in some ways, they did through their laughter at the promise. But they never allowed it to turn to bitterness and away from God.

What made Abraham's life full was that at every turn, he chose God. Even when it didn't make sense, even when it didn't appear the "right" decision, even when he thought he had every reason to throw in the towel, he chose God.

Abraham lived 175 years; that is a lot of years. And for Abraham, each one was full. Each one was filled with adventure, faith, and challenge. A life that is centered on God and living into the Spirit's calling is not a life promised to be comfortable. It is not a life that will be easy, but it is a life promised to be full.

There is a seeming passing note at the end of verse 8, "*...and he was gathered to his people.*" We know from Abraham's story that he came to faith in God later in life. Therefore, we can be sure that "his people" is not strictly speaking about his ancestral lineage. But rather, his people were referenced for those who exercised faith in God. I can't help but think of Hebrews 11 and the great chapter on faith, where the author lists those men and women who lived by faith in so many unique circumstances.

The worldview in the ancient world differed from our own in that it was a much more collectivist world. We have been so deeply shaped

by individualism that we view our lives as isolated existences, but as Christians, we live in a long tradition of faith. We are born, live, and die within a community of gospel hope.

Consider this short passage of scripture; it is saturated with tons of people. It lists the genealogy of Abraham's children with Keturah; it makes this mention of the "people" of God. It goes on to list the numerous sons and family that buried Abraham.

We have much to learn about the collective nature of the people of God. I think it is one of the ways that Abraham's life was, in fact, marked by fullness. There is nothing adventurous about an isolated existence. A life that is centered on self-preservation, self-fulfillment, and self-expression is destined to shrivel because we are not created to bear the weight of identity solely within ourselves. Rather, as Abraham found himself in the community of faith, so too we are to find our purpose and identity within the community of faith

And so Abraham was "gathered to his people." He has died in the community of hope; this is a subtle and beautiful contrast to our individualism and an encouragement to us all. We, too, have the opportunity to live and die into this community of hope; a life well-lived and death done well is marked by the fullness of the community we find ourselves in. So how full is your life? Do you have a sense of your limitations? Have you considered that your days are numbered? Is it marked by a richness of community?

Five or so years ago, I got a call that my dad was being rushed to the hospital with some health complications. He was having serious issues with his heart and ultimately would spend multiple weeks in the ICU and even more time in the hospital. At one point, I went in to visit with him before a procedure and left thinking it was the last time I would see him.

I think back over that encounter with him often. I think of how so much of the so-called important things seemed meaningless at the time. It focused my thinking; it narrowed my perspective. The same happened to my dad, mom, brothers, and sisters. Death really does have a way of sharpening our focus. They are formative encounters to brush up with the reality that we suddenly look to what is of utmost importance.

My dad ended up making it out of the hospital and has had an incredible return to health over the course of many years. And even now, we will talk about that experience and the formative impact it had on our family.

## Hope of our Resurrection

As Christians, we experience death differently because we know that death is merely a part of the journey, not the end of the journey. To be absent of the body is to be present with the Lord. Therefore, we learn

to live and die well. Abraham's life offers all of us an example of living and dying well.

These three marks of Abraham's death are inspiration for us all, and they leave us an example to lead a life of fruitfulness, faithfulness, and fullness. Each of these is not a call to perfection but a call to live a life of faith, connected, sustained, and in step with the Spirit as God slowly shapes and forms us more into his people.

As we finish our time of reflection this morning on the life of Abraham, "the friend of God," I want to close by reading from Hebrews chapter 12. All of chapter 11, the author of Hebrews has been chronicling the "Heroes of the faith." Writing about the ways their life was marked by extraordinary faith. And then, we get to chapter 12 and listen to the encouragement that the author offers.

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3**

May we, too, not grow weary and lose heart. But may we find the life of Abraham an example to us on the possibility of a life fixed on Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of our faith.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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