

“Passing the Promises” (Genesis 25:1-18)

Five years ago, a wonderful man by the name of Gil Woo gave me a very meaningful gift. [Hold up a green aluminum baton.] Gil gave me this baton as a reminder that God’s call upon my life is to finish well and pass the faith on to those who will come after me. I have kept this baton on my office desk for the past five years as a visual, daily reminder of that calling.

I’m sure you’ve heard it said that the Christian faith is always only one generation from extinction. Or as Bruce Wilkinson says, “God has no grandchildren.” Instead, the Christian faith is like a relay race in which one generation passes the baton of God’s truth to another generation. As a father I have a sacred responsibility to see that my faith is passed down to my children and, if I live long enough, to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As a pastor I must earnestly seek to impart God’s truth to you so you will pass the faith on to others. As a Christian I must use every opportunity to spread the Gospel and boldly proclaim Jesus Christ.

Now, I am not accountable for what people do with the truth I give them. I cannot answer for my children; nor can I answer for everyone who hears me preach. But I will be held accountable for doing all I can to ensure that the truth I know is passed along to others, so the Christian faith will continue into the next generation (2 Tim 2:2). This applies to you as well. Whatever roles you currently occupy and whatever your stage of life, your mission is to pass the baton of faith to the next generation.

In Genesis 25:1-18, Moses pens Abraham’s swan song...his last dance...his final hurrah. In these verses, we will be reminded that *our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.*

Our story begins in 25:1: “**Now Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah.**”¹ This is certainly impressive! Sarah died at 127 (23:1). This means Abraham was at least 137 when he married Keturah. But what is even more impressive is what we read in 25:2-4: “**She bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah.**” In these three verses we discover that Abraham had other children...six more sons to be precise! All I can say to that is, “Get busy, Abe!” Can you imagine beginning parenthood *again* at about 140 years old? Can you imagine being surrounded with toddlers when you are 60, much less 160? Verse 7 informs us that Abraham died at 175. This means there could have been 38 years for the birth of these six sons. Abe would have been able to identify with the words of Flip Wilson, who said, “If I could live my life over again...I wouldn’t have the energy!”

At this point you may be wondering why Moses rattled off the names of Abraham’s other sons. When we look at these names we see a bunch of hard to pronounce gobbledygook. Yet, there’s a method to Moses’ madness. Genealogies tell a story to those who will take the time to read them. They explain the relevant history of cultures. In this context, Abraham’s six sons become the descendants of several Far East tribes. Furthermore, listing these sons of Abraham provides a demonstration of God’s faithfulness. In 12:2-3, God promised to bless Abraham. In 15:4, He promised Abraham that he would have a son. In 15:15, God promised Abraham that he would live to a ripe old age. In 17:5-6, 16, God promised Abraham that nations, kings, and rulers would come from him. In 17:7, God promised Abraham that the covenant would be passed on to his son. God was making the point that faith will continue to the next generation. When we trust in God, He is faithful to fulfill His promises. That’s why we must remember that *our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.*

In 25:5-6, Abraham divides up his inheritance. Moses writes, “**Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.**” In this section and the two that follow (25:7-11 and 12-18), those characters who play minor parts in the drama take their curtain calls making way for the chief actors who follow.² In 25:5, Abraham gave everything he owned to Isaac, because he was the legal firstborn. He was also the son of the promise. But it is important to notice that in 25:6 Abraham also gave gifts to his other sons. By giving them gifts he honored each of his sons. By sending them away to the east he indicated that Isaac and only Isaac was the son of the promise. Since he is to be the sole heir of the covenant it is important for Moses to indicate that all other heirs have been cared for and have received their due. They have no claims on that which belongs to Isaac.³ Isaac inherited everything that belonged to Abraham at the time of Abraham’s death. Yet, Abraham took responsibility for his other sons and provided for them during his lifetime, so there should be no dispute at the time of his death.

Did you catch that? Abraham passed out an inheritance to his children “**while he was still living.**” He didn’t wait until he died to benefit his children. He used what he had to bring joy to others while he was living. If you’re a dad or grandpa, how are you currently blessing your children and grandchildren? As you are able, are you seeking to give appropriate gifts? If you were to die before your time would your wife and children be taken care of? Are you planning for the future of your loved ones? More importantly, are you also passing on a spiritual inheritance while you’re alive that will go on after your death? Remember, there is no guarantee you will live out a long life; you may not even wake up tomorrow morning. Therefore, *if you want to impart a successful legacy be sure to pass the promises.*

In 25:7-8, Abraham dies. His epitaph is as follows: “**These are all the years of Abraham’s life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people.”⁴ By Abraham’s time the human life span had been so curtailed due to the physical effects of the fall that 175 years was regarded as a “**ripe⁵ old age**” (cf. 11:32).⁶ I like how Moses expands the normal genealogical formula: “**These are all the years of Abraham’s life that he lived.**” He does this for two reasons: First, Abraham is a very important person, second only to Jesus Christ. Second, I think Moses indicates that Abraham lived those 175 years to the max! He didn’t just exist; he truly lived! He didn’t merely survive; he thrived! The *NASB* reads, “**Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life**” (25:8a).⁷ Abraham died “**satisfied with life.**” It is a satisfaction similar to the satisfaction you feel after a delicious dinner when you aren’t sick but satisfied. When Abraham pushed back from the table of life at the end of his days he was satisfied. He had no regrets. He had enjoyed the journey.**

How many people can say that on their deathbeds? Not too many. Most folks come to the end and look back with regret and remorse—regret for lost opportunities and remorse over foolish mistakes they’ve made. No doubt Abraham had his share of both, yet as he looked back over 175 years he was satisfied with the life he had lived.

As anyone who has studied his story knows, Abraham didn’t have an easy life—just the opposite. Along the way he went through periods of frustration, discouragement, physical privation, and spiritual compromise. He experienced more than his share of personal loss. He saw the glitter of royal Egypt and smelled the smoke rising from the ruins of Sodom. He heard the voice of God and later lied to save his own skin. He had to give up his firstborn son, Ishmael, and send him away—an act that broke his heart. And as far as we know Isaac and Ishmael never really reconciled, nor did his wife and Hagar. He wept when he buried his wife, Sarah, and then had the satisfaction of seeing Isaac take Rebekah into her tent.

Certainly, Abraham lived a full life. He packed a lot into those 175 years. But through it all, even in the worst moments, he remained a man of faith. He never lost sight of the God who called him out of Ur 100 years earlier. For that reason—and that reason alone—he was satisfied with life when he died.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, is quoted as saying, “The art of living well and the art of dying well are one.”⁸ Abraham lived the truth of this statement—dying well means living well.

Sadly, many are like long-distance runners who sprint three laps only to slow to a stop in the final lap. Let’s face it; we spend a good portion of our lives wishing them away.

- When we’re young we want to be older so we can drive, date, and set our own rules.
- When we’re a little older we want to be older still so we can earn more and buy more.
- In the middle (or productive) years we find ourselves dreading the work we have to do and longing for the week to pass so we can enjoy a weekend.
- Suddenly we find ourselves saying, “Where did the time go?” as our kids move away.
- We then begin to look forward to retirement so we can engage in the activities we enjoy.
- When we retire we wish we had the energy of youth.
- In old age some feel that they have nothing left to give. We move and think slower, we don’t hear so well, and our bodies begin to ache.
- Some spend the remainder of their days saying, “I wish I could just go to sleep and not wake up.”

Do you see something in common with all of these sentiments? In each of these scenarios we are discontented with life at whatever stage we are. Could these words describe your life? Are you “living” life or enduring it? Are you savoring each moment or are you wishing your life away? Do push back from each day with the satisfied feeling of knowing that you have made the most of your day? Have you stopped living and started merely “existing?” This is no way to live. How differently Abraham lived his life. He lived life to the max!

Here are some ideas how you and I can enjoy the journey more:

- Instead of starting the day with, “Oh no,” start it with, “THIS is the day which the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.”
- Make time for God and savor those moments. Read His Word and share your heart with Him every day.
- Talk about yourself and your life in the positive rather than the negative. Focus on the blessings rather than the struggles. Make it a point to look for the silver lining.
- Think and speak well of your health. Focus on what you can do rather than what you can’t.
- Give yourself fully and enthusiastically to your various responsibilities.
- Whistle while you work (unless you are in a library).
- Look for new things to try and learn, and then try them and learn them: a new language, a new skill, a new place to visit, reading something different or listening to some music outside of your normal tastes, playing an instrument. Don’t focus on the things you used to be able to do, that you can’t anymore. . . focus on the things you wanted to do but didn’t have time to do before! Have some fun!
- Take time to notice beautiful things.
- Resolve that the next time things don’t go as you planned you won’t pout but will view it as an unexpected adventure.
- Begin today to live so that when your life is over people will be able to say that you lived a satisfying life.⁹

What happened after Abraham died? Moses writes, “...**he was gathered to his people.**” Does this phrase simply mean that he took a “dirt nap” in the family grave, end of story? Is it true that there was no thought of an afterlife? Unfortunately, too many carelessly conclude that this is precisely the case. Actually, the expression “**he was gathered to his people**” cannot mean he was buried with his relatives and ancestors. In 25:8-9 such an analysis is impossible, because we know that none of Abraham’s kin, except his wife, was buried at the cave of Machpelah. In the Old Testament those who have already died are regarded as still existing. The event of being “gathered to one’s people” is always distinguished from the act of burial, which is described separately (35:29; 49:29, 31, 33). In many cases only one ancestor was in the tomb (1 Kgs 11:43; 22:40), or none at all (Deut 31:16; 1 Kgs 2:10; 16:28; 2 Kgs 21:18), so being “gathered to one’s people” could not mean being laid in the family sepulcher.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, Old Testament saints didn’t have the full revelation of the resurrection of the body. This awaited a later unveiling, in the New Testament. However, it seems certain that these early participants in the promises of God were fully expecting to enjoy life after death. In the New Testament when Jesus was speaking to the Sadducees (i.e., a political/religious party who did not believe in the resurrection), He used the argument that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not the God of the dead but of the living (Matt 22:32). Thus the patriarchs were not to be counted out of the hope of resurrection.¹¹

All of this to say, death is not a period—it’s only a comma. The moment a believer closes his eyes in death he is in the presence of Jesus. This is why Jesus told the thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Jesus promises that there is life beyond the grave. He not only promised...He demonstrated that truth with his own resurrection. Paul said, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). With this in mind do you still fear death? Will it not be a true “gathering to your people”? Death is a time of reunion.

In 25:9-10, Abraham is buried. Moses writes: “**Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife.**” The emphasis of the narrative in this section lies in the fact that Abraham was buried in the field that he purchased from Ephron the Hittite. The final resting place of Abraham was in a portion of the Promised Land that he rightfully owned (23:1-20).¹²

This tiny bit of land represented a toehold in the land of promise. It was like a small title deed to the whole land of Canaan. By burying Abraham there alongside his beloved wife Sarah, his sons were saying, “Daddy lived by faith in God’s promises. And when he died he still believed in them. We’re burying him right here, because someday all this land will belong to us.” Thus the torch of truth passed down from one generation to another. *Our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.*

In 25:11, we have a very important verse in which God blesses Abraham’s son, Isaac. Moses writes, “**It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi.**” This final verse gives us two significant facts about Isaac. First, God “blessed” him. This statement must be connected to the initial promise of blessing in 12:1-3 and then traced through the narratives. The blessing was passed on to Isaac; the God of Abraham was to be the God of Isaac as well. Second, the verse also reports that Isaac dwelt near Beer-Lahai-Roi, which means “well of the living One who sees me.” Here, God had heard Hagar and delivered her (16:14). And here Isaac had come to meditate as he awaited Rebekah (24:62). In the next section of the book Isaac prays at this same location for his barren wife (25:21). Isaac thus dwelt in a place where prayer was effectual, where God could be found, and God blessed him.¹³

Now notice the phrase “**after the death of Abraham.**” God often uses people in a way that makes them quite famous, but the fact remains—God’s men and women die. Fortunately, others take up the task and continue God’s program.¹⁴ God’s work just keeps rolling on. No one is indispensable in His program. I like to say, “God’s program will continue on just fine without me.” My guess is: His program will continue even stronger without me. This is one reason why it is so critical for you and me to pass the promises to the emerging church. God’s program will go on quite nicely without us, but we are still responsible to *pass the promises and ensure a successful legacy.*

The last chapter of Deuteronomy closes with these words, in 34:7-8: “Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated. So the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end.” And then it says in 34:9-12: “Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land, and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”

Did you catch that? The book of Deuteronomy ends by saying, “Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses” (34:10a). What a legacy! Who could ever live up to that kind of reputation? Joshua was the young understudy of Moses, but what I want you to see is the very next verse. We’ve come to the end of Deuteronomy. The next verse is the first verse of the book of Joshua. Listen to this: “Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ servant, saying, ‘Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel’” (Josh 1:1-2).

Now isn’t that interesting! In the final chapter of Deuteronomy there is a big buildup for the reputation of Moses. But the beginning of Joshua just matter-of-factly says, “Okay, Moses is gone. Now, Joshua, get up and get going.” God always has people ready when He blesses His work. That’s true in our narrative because Abraham has now died, and the focus turns to Isaac. God is blessing Isaac, the son of Abraham.¹⁵ The point is: The death of Abraham made no difference to the faithfulness of God to His promises. Abraham had the responsibility of ensuring that the blessing as God planned it would pass to Isaac. The message in this is straightforward: Believers will die, and so they must ensure that the work begun in them by God will continue, as God desires. It may be through their children or it may be through some other means; but no one may personalize the program so that no thought is given to the next generation.

With 25:11, we have finished the “**generations**” of Terah (Abraham’s father, 11:27). But before the narrator continues with the promised line of Isaac he rounds out the episode with the “**generations**” of Ishmael (25:12-18).¹⁶ God blesses Abraham’s son, Ishmael (25:12-18). Moses writes, “**Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael,¹⁷ Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Abraham; and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.**”

These verses demonstrate that God kept His promises to Ishmael. This too highlights the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His promises concerning Abraham.

In 16:10 and 21:18, God had promised to make Ishmael a great nation and to give him many descendants. Furthermore, the phrase “**twelve princes**” recalls the promise in 17:20 where it was promised to Ishmael that “twelve princes” would be born to him and become a great nation.¹⁹ God had pronounced that Ishmael would live in hostility toward his brothers (16:12), which finds its fulfillment pattern in 25:18b. Thus, even in the peripheral characters of this great salvation history God is faithful to His Word. This drives the reader to continue with the narrative, since God would certainly bring His promises to fruition for Isaac, just as He did for Ishmael.²⁰

What made Abraham’s life so great? What was the secret of his enormous influence that persists across the centuries? Why is he revered by billions of Christians, Muslims, and Jews? He was a man of faith! The “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11 normally gives one verse to each hero of faith. Abraham is given 12 verses as the example of faith par excellence.²¹ While he was not perfect, his life was characterized by faith!

If you want to follow in Abraham’s s footsteps you too must be a man or woman of faith. You too must leave behind a legacy. You can do this in many ways. For our purposes, I will simplify the life of faith.

- Worship God. Be intimate with Him. Let your spouse and children see you pray and read the Word. Practice the disciplines with them.
- Model obedience. Cultivate a teachable, responsive, humble, and obedient spirit. When God tells you to do something, do it! You can ask questions in eternity. For now, simply obey.
- Invest in people. Be sure to fellowship with other believers so you can impact as many lives as possible.

When it comes to relay races, the victory does not necessarily come to the fastest and most impressive runners. The victory goes to the team that was the most successful in passing the baton from runner to runner. You can be the fastest and most impressive individual runner in the world but if you fail to successfully pass the baton to the next runner the race will be lost. When you fumble the baton you lose the race.

Our goal at Emmanuel is different. [Call up four individuals of different ages and have them pass the baton.] One runner finishes his race. Another takes the baton and continues down the track. From Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph and across the generations the baton is passed—all the way from Machpelah 4000 years ago to Emmanuel in the 21st century. You will have a successful legacy as you pass the promises of God on to others.

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Notes

¹ Ross writes: “There is no way to tell for sure when Abraham married Keturah, but the verb “took” and adjective “another” imply that it was after the death of Sarah.” Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 426. Sailhamer writes, “There is little basis in the Hebrew text for the translation ‘Abraham had taken a wife’ (NIV mg.), as though Keturah had been a wife or ‘concubine’ of Abraham in his younger days at the same time he was married to Sarah. Some have suggested that Keturah was one of the ‘concubines’ mentioned in v. 6 and hence these sons were born to Abraham and Keturah while Sarah was alive. Support for that interpretation appears to come from the fact that the Chronicler called Keturah a ‘concubine’ (1 Chron 1:32). Though Keturah is called a ‘concubine’ in Chronicles, she is called a ‘wife’ here in v. 1, which would seem to preclude her from being a mere concubine during the time Sarah was alive.” John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

With that said, other Hebrew scholars believe that these events are not necessarily in chronological order following the events of the preceding chapter. Rather, they are listed here to summarize Abraham’s other descendants before the narrative of his death. Accordingly, it is suggested that the word “took” is better translated “had taken.” Waltke writes, “In Gen 24:36, Abraham’s servant declares that Abraham has already given everything he owns to Isaac. This statement assumes that he has other children. Also Abraham already judged his body too old to beget children when he was 100 years old (17:1, 17); it is biologically unlikely he fathered six sons when he was 40 years older and “advanced in years” (24:1). It is possible that God rejuvenated his body, but that if he fathered them after 140 years of age, then they are even more supernatural than Isaac, which is theologically unlikely.” Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 335-336. Youngblood says that this section serves as a “flashback.” Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 200. While I have high regard for these men, I am opting for the choice of all of our English translations.

² Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 178.

³ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 535.

⁴ The expression “to be gathered to one’s people” is similar to another expression, “to go to one’s fathers,” found in Gen 15:15. The former phrase is found frequently—for example, here in Gen 25:8, 17; 49:29, 33; Deut 32:50; and 2 Kgs 22:20.

⁵ Sailhamer notes, “The mention of Abraham’s ‘good [*tobah*] old age’ also serves as a contrast to Jacob’s years that are characterized in 47:9 as ‘few and difficult’ (*ra’im* lit., ‘evil’). Thus, within the context of the Book of Genesis, Abraham and Jacob provide a narrative example of the contrast of ‘good’ (*tob*) and ‘evil’ (*ra’*), a theme begun in the first chapters of the book and carried through to the end (cf. 50:20). Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Electronic ed.

⁶ No doubt these 175 years were measured and metered out by the perfect hand of providence (Gen 50:20; Isa 46:10). See R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 323.

⁷ The *NIV* translates this last phrase “he was an old man and full of years.” Unfortunately, this translation makes it easy to miss the significance of these words. The Hebrew word rendered “full of years” literally means “full of, satisfied with.” See HALOT (Gen 35:29; Job 42:17; 1Chron 29:28).

⁸ See <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/epicurus148954.html>.

⁹ Bruce Goettsche, *Living In Between* (Genesis 25:1-11): <http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/080199.html>

¹⁰ Readers of the text should not infer something special from the use of *Sheol* in some of these texts. In every one of the sixty-five instances of *Sheol* in the Old Testament, it refers simply to “the grave,” not to the shadowy region of the netherworld. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament supports the notion that the patriarchs expected an afterlife (Heb 11:13-16).

¹¹ Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic ed.

¹² See also Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Electronic ed.

¹³ Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 425-26.

¹⁴ Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 426.

¹⁵ Woodrow Kroll, “When You’re Surrounded by Headline Grabbers,” *Back to the Bible*: <http://www.backtothebible.org/radio/today/24683>

¹⁶ In between the major sections of Genesis dealing with Abraham (11:27-25:11), Jacob (25:19-35:29), and Joseph (37:2-50:20), there are smaller sections dealing with Ishmael (25:12-18) and Esau (36:1-37:1). Genesis 25:12-18 looks briefly at Ishmael before continuing the story.

¹⁷ The book of Genesis tends to tidy up the family records at every turning point. Here, before proceeding with the story of Isaac's family, the narrative traces Ishmael's family line. Later, before discussing Jacob's family, the narrative traces Esau's family line (Gen 36).

¹⁸ Like his father, Abraham, Ishmael was also gathered to his people indicating that Ishmael was a believer in God and shared in the spiritual blessings of all who die in the faith. See notes in Genesis 25:19-34.

¹⁹ This must also be connected to the promises of Abraham, for many nations and kings were to come from him (Gen 17:6). Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 431.

²⁰ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 113.

²¹ Moses, the runner-up, receives six verses. Waltke, *Genesis*, 341.