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Introduction

How are you going to end your race of faith? In some ways, the start is not really the issue. It is good to get a good start, especially in a race like the 100 metre sprint. But the Christian life is not sprint, it's more like a marathon. So how you end or whether you make it to the end is more important than how you start. Often I get carried away and think that my job as your minister is to help your next step of faith. I can't change what you have done in the past in your Christian walk and the future is a long way off, but I might be able to influence your next step. And that next step is important, but really the most important step is the last step of faith. That will determine whether you step from this world into God's world. Whether you have persevered in your faith till the very end.

The first step is really important, because you decide to walk with Jesus. The steps after that are also important because you determine whether you want to grow in your faith or whether you are just satisfied with where you are now. But the last step of faith.... to me that is the most important. How have you ended? Where has your faith taken you? What has it achieved?

One of my lecturers at theological college and a man who I admire greatly, once told us that he was a Christian because of his mum's faith. She had been a great example to him about what faith in Jesus was all about. But his mum had become a Christian because one of her best friends had died well. She had faced the spectre of death with grace, with quiet determination, with trust in Jesus and that had made an incredible impact on my lecturer's mum. So her last step changed a whole family's walk with God.

That was what happened this time last year with Ian Hill wasn't it? As the tumour restricted Ian's physical activities, his witness actually increased. He was able to have a special time with his family and his friends, where his faith was just radiant. I reckon he changed in those last weeks. He became bolder and he spoke more openly about the things that were important to him. He and Nonie opened up their home and the light literally streamed from that place. And one of the last things he did was to give every single person in our Church a book, a book to read to help them in their next step of faith.

So what will Abraham's last steps of faith look like? The first ones were great, leaving Ur and coming to the promised lands. The next ones, well some were incredible and others were disappointing to say the least. But what about his last steps of faith? Well the author of the book of Genesis, writes in chapters 23, 24 and 25 about the legacy that Abraham leaves not just to his family but ultimately to the whole world.

1. Genesis 23 – Trusts in God's Promises

And the first part of that legacy is a real trust in God's promises. Abraham probably reaches the lowest point in his life on the day that his wife passes away. What a terrible day that is. I have not experienced it myself, but I have looked into the eyes of hundreds of people who have lost their closest friend. What a tough time to go on. All your hopes, your dreams, your expectations of doing more things together are dashed. Life will no more be the same, ever again.

Abraham loses his wife Sarah and he mourns for her, he weeps over her. This is not the time to keep a stiff upper lip. This is not the day to think that it is important to be strong. It is a time to deal with your grief, express your pain and to cry. That is what this man of faith does. He mourns for his wife, he weeps over her loss.

How long should you do this? I think it will be different for each person. Some will seem like they spend very little time mourning, others will cry for the rest of their lives. I was talking to one of our ladies a few months ago and commented that she had done remarkable well since the death of her husband and she just said words to the affect, you have no idea the amount of tears I have shed that no one else has seen. Even men and women of faith like Abraham who have Christian partners, still need to mourn and cry at the loss of the relationship that meant so much to them.

Abraham mourns and cries and then he gets up and arranges his wife's burial. But the problem is he has nowhere to bury his wife. God has promised him the whole land, in every direction that he looks. But at present he owns no land, none whatsoever, so what is he going to do for his wife?

He could send her back to the old country, but God had said their future was here, not there. He could put her with the locals in their burial grounds, but she is not a local, she is the mother of many nations. So he decides he will buy his first block of land and he knows exactly where he wants it to be. For about 70 years ago, in Genesis 13, when God had promised him the whole land of Canaan, verse 18 says he moved his tents to the great trees of Mamre at Hebron and then built an altar to the Lord.

So in chapter 23 when his wife dies, he has his eyes on a cave of Machpelah near Mamre, which is at Hebron. It is exactly the same place! Abraham is a man who is trusting in the promises of God. He's filled with grief, he might be rich with cattle, silver and servants, but he still hasn't received any of the promises of God. And yet right where God had promised him so much, he decides to bury his wife.

Which may of course explain the arguments. Because, you see, it may well be that the Hittites would rather **give him** a bit of land for a burial plot; than to **sell it** and **hand over the title deeds**. And it may be as well that Abraham is taking the same attitude as in chapter 14, when he wouldn't take a reward from the king of Sodom. He doesn't want their charity. He doesn't want them to say that they helped make Abraham rich. He wants everyone to see that God was the one who had kept his promises.

And so we see a bit of reverse haggling. They say, **look, take the video camera and the widescreen TV for nothing. It's a gift.** He says, **No, I want to pay twice the price on the ticket.** Abraham says, **sell me a burial plot.** Verse 5 and 6, look what the Hittites say back to

him. They say, "Sir, listen to us. You're a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead."

They say, "Take whatever you like." Pick the best. It's yours because if you take their words at face value, they **respect** Abraham. He's a powerful man. With an army, with huge herds, with all the trappings of success. But Abraham's **not going to take it as a gift**. He bows down to them, and he says to them in verse 8, "If you're willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me. Talk to Ephron; ask him to **sell me** the cave down the end of his paddock, the cave of Machpelah. Ask him to **sell it to me at the full price** so I can use it as a burial site."

If you're a haggler yourself, you'll be scratching your head. Don't **give it to me**. Ask him to sell it to me at the **full price**. Not even a discount. And in the end, Ephron charges him 400 shekels of silver, probably two or three or even five times the price that would appear in the real estate agent's window. And finally, Abraham lays Sarah to rest. In the field that he's bought at an incredible price. When he could have just had it for nothing.

Here is a man who trusts in God's promises. Who refuses to get rich the world's way. Who doesn't want to be compromised by the standards of the people who live around him. I wonder if that is the sort of legacy we are going to leave? Someone who trusts God's promises completely. Who refused to take the dodgy option. Who refused to compromise God's standards. Who remembered that heavenly riches were more important than earthly riches and so when the choices came to serve money or serve God, we wanted to serve God! Even in our moment of grief we are willing to trust in God's ways, in God's timetable rather than our own. But this isn't the only legacy that Abraham leaves, for in chap 24 we see that he also

2. Provides for his family

For his son Isaac is not yet married and so his thoughts turn to finding him a wife. Isaac must marry and have children for the covenant blessings to be received. Abraham understands this, so he doesn't sit idly and wait for God's plan to be fulfilled. He does his part and takes appropriate action; in this case he begins to look for a wife for Isaac.

So Abraham made preparations to find the right girl. He didn't just assume that God would bring the right girl along if he waited long enough. He instead made plans. For Abraham knew that guidance about the future doesn't just happen. God gives us a role in shaping our future and our family's future. God could do everything supernaturally, but instead he works through us and through our decisions. So we should make our plans and then take them to God. We look to see if these plans are in line with his word, we pray about them and then we step out in faith.

This is what Abraham did, for firstly he gets his chief servant, his most trusted man and tells him his plan and he makes him swear that he will follow Abraham's ideas. He has to swear "*by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth*". Important plans have to be done knowing that God is watching us and has a right way of doing things and a wrong way.

Next he tells his servant to choose someone from his own way, his own family, for a wife needs to be found among those who believe in the same God. Abraham knows that the people who live around him worship other gods and so for his son to marry a religious lady,

but a lady whose religion does not trust in the same God as he trusts in, would be disastrous. For this would put the promises of God in jeopardy.

This is the first time in Scripture that this principle is stated, that a believer in God should marry a believer in God. In fact this is about the only advice God gives us. The Bible never says we should marry the person who takes our breath away, or who is rich or kind or friendly, even though some of these qualities are important. It says we should marry a believer and that is what Abraham is determined will happen to his son.

Next Abraham's servant is to bring the girl back to Canaan and under no circumstances is he to take Isaac away from where he is living. For this is the land of the promise. This is the land that God has given to Isaac and his descendents.

And lastly Abraham reminds his chief servant that God will be with him, that God would send an angel before him and that he will bless his actions. Do you see what Abraham has done here? He has made plans for the future, but before he has made his plans he has carefully weighed up what God would want him to do. He has looked at God's promises and then chosen a path consistent with these promises. And once he has made his plans he has committed these plans to God realising that in the end, God and His angels will ensure the right thing happens.

This is a good model for us to follow. When we are making decisions for ourselves and our families we need to have a plan. What job does God want you to do? Where does he want you to live? Whom should you marry? How do you raise your kids, your grandkids? What does God want you to do with the days ahead? Check out what God has said to us through his word. Prayerfully consider the options. Realise that others may make different decisions to you. And then give your future over to God and realise he may over rule your plans, but he will always be consistent to his promises.

Some people seem to think that receiving God's guidance means doing nothing, that you just have to let go and let God. But Abraham knows that faith doesn't work that way. So if he is going to leave a legacy for his son and his descendents then finding the right woman for Isaac was extremely important.

You see when I am in an unfamiliar city and get lost I don't just guess, I ask someone who knows what direction to take. When I don't understand my tax return, I don't just do my best, I go to someone who knows the right answers. You and I don't know what decisions to make in life but we can pray to the One who has the answers. Then follow his leading by His Word and His Spirit.

Well the rest of chapter 24, shows us what happens to Abraham's plans. Abraham's servant goes to Abraham's old region and when he arrives what is the first thing he does? He prays. He might have taken a number of weeks to get there, he might have been praying all that time, but he has now arrived and he needs God's help.

But notice that praying doesn't stop him from using his brain either. For look at what type of girl he is looking for – someone who is hospitable, who will open her household up for their

guests. So he waits at the well to see who will be hospitable to him. But more than that, Isaac's wife will need to be energetic and hardworking to run Isaac's large household. So he prays for a lady who will offer not just him a drink but his camels as well.

Now Abraham's servant has ten camels in train and seeing a thirsty camel can drink up to 90 litres of water in one sitting, you can imagine watering ten camels might take a couple of hours of hard work. But along comes Rebekah, hospitable, energetic, hardworking, from the right family and beautiful. Beauty is not the first consideration, not even in the first couple but it is the icing on the cake. God has led Abraham's servant to the right place.

So Abraham's second legacy is his provision for his family. Not just money, flocks, a good business. But an approach to working out God's guidance and help in the finding the right mate. Are we leaving that sort of legacy to those around us or are we so consumed with leaving them money or houses or a good education that we forget how we treat our wife or husband is going to show them how they should treat their wife or husband. So many times I have seen in my ministry terrible family situations that are just repeated in the next generation. By our conversations, by our actions, by our family life we can leave a lasting legacy to those around us.

3. Looks to the future.

Lastly, Abraham's not only trusts in God's promises, provides for his family but he looks to the future. In Genesis 25, Abraham dies at a good old age, an old man full of years. He is buried in the cave that he bought for his wife Sarah. Now there is not much detail in the passage about how Abraham dies. But the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11, the famous chapter about faith, says this.

"All these people, (and he has just been talking about Abraham and Sarah) were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them for a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on this earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own... Instead they longed for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them"

Abraham throughout his life and certainly at his death was looking toward his future. He wasn't so caught up with the here and now, with the things that he could see and smell that he forgot about where he was going. He knew what his last step wanted to be. So he kept his eyes on heaven, on God and made sure that was the direction he was travelling. Even if his life wasn't filled with the blessings that he wanted it to be filled with, he kept ever onward toward the one who would fill his future with blessing. And he did that right until the very end. So he died well. Faithful till the very end.

John Wesley famously said, "Methodists die well." It would be wonderful if we could also say, "Presbyterians also die well." Or even better that "we live and die well!" For we have our eyes on God. We live in the present with one eye on the future. We are not so consumed with our comforts, our security, our blessings that we continually chase after these things. Instead we rest on God's promises, we look to the future, we give to our

families the things of the utmost importance. We remember that Kingscliff/Tweed Heads is not our home, we are just passing through. That God has prepared a place for us with Him, for all eternity and to get there and to get others there is the most important work we do in our lives.

Last century an American tourist visited the renowned Polish rabbi Hofetz Chaim. The tourist was astonished to see that the rabbi's home was only a simple room filled with books, plus a table and a bed. The tourist asked, "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" Hofetz Chaim replied, "Where is yours?" The puzzled American asked, "Mine? But I'm only a visitor here. I'm only passing through." The rabbi replied, "So am I, so am I."

Are we only just passing through? Or are we accumulating more and more stuff here on this earth that we can't take with us. Are we converting our material riches into eternal riches? Are we leaving a spiritual legacy to our family and friends that will stay with them for the rest of their lives and on into eternity or are we just leaving them a material legacy.

Let us look again at Abraham, whose life and death is a great example of faith in God. The Christian Sociologist Dr. Tony Campolo writes, "A research project, was conducted with people over the age of 90, and the interviewers asked these people, "as you look back on your life, what do you wish you had done differently?" Four answers emerged from a sizeable majority: they wished they had risked more. They wished they had spent more time with their kids. They wished they had done more to leave a legacy. They wished they had something other than money to pass on to the next generation."

What are we passing onto the people around us? And ultimately is it worth passing on? Yes the last step is important, very important, but we don't know for those around us when we will take that last step. But what we do know is that they are watching our next step. So what will you pass on today? And ultimately is worth passing on?