

30. A Grave that Preaches Hope (2007)

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to the passage we read in Genesis chapter 23. A passage all about a grave that preaches hope.
- Now, we're coming today to the end of our studies in Genesis, for a little while at least. We will come back to it. But it's a good place to pause, because really the last few verses of chapter 22 round off the story of Abraham proper.
- There is a little bit more about Abraham, but really, once we get to chapter 23 and onwards, we're reading about really where Isaac is central. See these last few verses that we read of chapter 22?
- You'll see it's a little genealogy about Abraham's brother, and that's rather like a bracket that encapsulates the story of Abraham, along with that little genealogy at the end of Genesis chapter 11.
- Do you remember just before we launch into the story of Abraham? And that's one reason why it's there. It's to give structure to the narrative, to show us how this story holds together.
- [1 : 0 7] But it does more than that, as well. Contains some very important information, doesn't it? Contains something that reminds us that this story isn't actually all about Abraham's life and Abraham's story.
- Actually, it's something much bigger, much bigger. It's all about God's story. And it's a much bigger story than Abraham alone, and it's an ongoing story.
- It's the story, isn't it, of the promise. The promise that God is working out as his purposes roll on year to year, generation to generation. What if you spotted in that little passage the key words?
- Three little words, but three words that pack a very big punch. A little aside, it's actually in brackets in our Bibles. And yet it's enough to tell us, isn't it, that this story isn't over yet.
- This story is just getting exciting. Can you see them? Verse 23. Bethuel fathered Rebekah. Aha! In amongst all these names, twelve sons of Nahor, one, just one of his granddaughters gets a mention.
- [2 : 1 7] I wonder why that is. Well, of course, that's what the author wants us to ask. I wonder why that is. He's winking at us, you see. He's saying, read on in the story. Wait and see.
- You're going to find this girl Rebekah is special. You're going to find that this girl Rebekah stands out for a reason. Don't take your eye off Rebekah. You're going to discover that Rebekah is very, very special indeed.
- Rebekah is the future. Actually, that sounds rather strange. I remember thinking that once myself a long time ago. But there we are. Did you see these words?
- It's important, isn't it? Isn't it important that just before a chapter that speaks in all its length about death, about the death of Abraham's wife Sarah, of Isaac's mother Sarah, before that we get a little intimation of the future.

Just by dropping in the name of Rebekah, Isaac's wife-to-be, the one who is going to bear the promised seed, the one who is going to be the mother of Jacob, literally the mother of Israel.

[3 : 21] And God is saying to us, the future is in hand. Don't worry. God has ordered it. He's planned it perfectly. Nothing can interrupt the purpose of God's grace for his people.

Not even death. Not even the things that we fear most in life. None of these things can throw off track God's plan and purpose for the future of his beloved children.

That's true for Abraham's family, and that's true for you and your family. And you see, God wants his people to know these things, especially when they're going to face up to hard things and painful things and grievous things.

What did Jesus say to his disciples? In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome this world. Don't fear.

Don't despair, he's saying, in times of darkness and in times of sadness. Bethuel fathered Rebecca. Three little words in a parenthesis, in brackets, but absolutely full of the hope of the future.

[4 : 28] And you see, that future hope is what actually surrounds the whole of this story in chapter 23 that we're going to look at now, because it's a chapter all about a grave that preaches hope.

At first, you see, we think it's a rather strange story, chapter 23. Even one evangelical scholar says this. He says, it doesn't obviously relate to the promises or their fulfillment.

Simple biographical interest seems to dictate its inclusion. In other words, what he's saying is, well, it's one of those chapters you can just ignore and skip over, because there's no real message in it.

Well, I hope that we're going to see this morning that to do that would be a real loss, a real loss to all of us. There are indeed real and powerful things for us to see in this chapter.

So we're going to look at chapter 23. You've guessed it, under three headings, in this story of a grave that preaches hope. First of all, look at verses 1 and 2. It's all about the tears of real grief.

[5 : 31] Sarah died at Kiriath Arba, that is Hebron, in the land of Canaan. And Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. Sarah's death is a cause of real grief and real pain to Abraham.

Now this is a man, isn't he, who is a giant of the faith. This is a man who is a friend of God, the man who has battled and overcome kings, the man who was in the act, in our last study, in the very act of offering up his own son, his only son, on the altar to God.

And he could do that because the New Testament tells us that he reasoned that God could raise the dead because he had resurrection hope. And yet, in the place of bereavement and loss, we see this man, Abraham, mourning and weeping for Sarah, his beloved life's partner, his wife of more than 60 years.

And the grief, you see, of the saints of God is real grief. The pain in bereavement is real pain. Sarah was 127. She was very, very old. And of course, in our culture that idolizes youth, we sometimes think, well, the death of somebody very, very old, well, it can't be that hard.

It can't be nearly as bad as the death of somebody very young. Well, of course, the death of somebody very young, especially a child, of course, that's a tragedy.

[6 : 56] It's devastating. Of course it is. Such a shock. It's so unnatural, isn't it, for parents to outlive their children. But don't forget.

Don't forget the grief of the elderly. When you think to yourself, well, he was well on in his 80s. He'd had a good life. Or, you know, she was in her 90s. She'd had a good innings.

When you think about that, don't forget that when somebody has been married, perhaps for more than 60 years like Abraham, to lose a life partner like that, it's like losing part of yourself.

It's a devastating loss. And that can't but be the tears of real grief, can there? Real loss. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, when he was coming back from his wife's funeral, from burying his wife, apparently he said to his sons this.

Sons, he said, we no longer have a home, only a house and some furniture. That's the expression, isn't it, of real grief and pain, even from the lips of a giant of the faith.

[8 : 03] It's expressing the reality that the world has been emptied. Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. You see, as believers, we know, don't we, that death has been conquered.

We know that just as Abraham knew it. But we know it even more than he did. And we don't grieve as those who have no hope. But we do grieve. We do shed tears.

Death is still an enemy. It's the last enemy, says Paul. And only when the Lord Jesus comes again himself will that enemy be utterly destroyed forever. Only then will every tear be wiped away forever.

But until then, the saints of God will weep. They'll grieve. The tears are real grief. That's why, you know, it's so insensitive.

It's so foolish when Christian people sometimes pretend that that isn't so when they say, oh, we can't do anything other than show happiness and cheerfulness at funerals.

[9 : 03] We must celebrate and clap and sing hallelujah. We mustn't shed any tears at a funeral because we believe in the future. Well, we do believe in the future like Abraham did.

But Abraham went in to mourn and to weep for Sarah. Because even the greatest ones of the faith know that our full salvation lies in the future.

They know that this world will always be the valley of the shadow of death. They know that Christian joy cannot in this life exclude the pain of grief and of loss.

Our Lord Jesus understands that, doesn't he? He wept tears of real grief at the grave of Lazarus, his friend. He who is himself the resurrection and the life wept tears of real grief.

That means he understands our tears. And we need to understand the tears of real grief too, don't we? I was speaking to somebody not long ago whose father had died and he said an interesting thing to me.

[10 : 11] He said, I had cards with lots of pious verses from Christian friends, but you know, the ones that really comforted me were the people who just said nice things about their memories of my dad.

Because that's human. That's understanding real grief. Sarah wasn't a faultless wife, was she? We know that. We've read the story. But she was a faithful wife.

She was a woman of real faith. And she's held up by the Apostle Peter, isn't she? As an example to Christian wives. Read it in 1 Peter 3. But sit down first if you're a feminist. She's an example.

But Abraham too is an example, isn't he, to believers. He's an example in his grief. Just like the Lord Jesus, he shed tears of real grief.

Don't you be afraid, friends, of the tears of grief. If you're grieving for the loss of a loved one, maybe a life partner or a parent or a child, the Lord Jesus knows.

[11 : 14] And he understands your tears. He's the God who weeps with you. His word tells us that your tears are precious to him. Read Psalm 56. It tells us that God keeps the tears of our grief in a bottle.

He records them in his book. And don't be afraid either to share in the griefs of others. It's often hard for us, isn't it, we find we don't know what to say.

We know that we want to help share one another's burdens, especially in time of grief. But we don't know what to say. But, you know, maybe sometimes we don't need to say anything. Paul says to us, rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

I know myself, when I've been grieving, it's not really been words that I've wanted. It's not been words that have helped me. Things that have helped me have been the tears of others as they've embraced me.

And maybe our tears have mingled together on our cheeks. Abram went in to mourn and weep for Sarah, the tears of real grief. And yet, of course, life must go on, even in the face of death and grief and loss.

[12 : 28] There is a danger too, isn't there, that grief can paralyze us, that it can overwhelm us. And that's why it's not just good psychology, it's good theology, according to the Bible too, to face up to the tasks in hand, even in the time of grief.

There are things to be done. There are arrangements to be made for burial. There are things to be done to sort out affairs. So verse 3 says to us, Abram arose from before his dead.

He arose to make funeral arrangements, to organize a burial for Sarah. But there's more to this, you know, than just keeping busy to help him cope.

There's more to this than just the normal arrangements for a funeral too. And that's what explains the length of this text and all these details about Abraham being determined to secure exactly the right grave for Sarah.

It may seem strange, but these verses actually have for us a powerful message about real faith. Verses 3 to 16 here tell us that amid the tears of real grief, Abraham nevertheless bears witness to the tenacity of real faith.

[13 : 35] That's what this whole complicated story about bargaining with the Hittites is about. The tenacity of Abraham's real faith, even in the face of death. Sarah's burial for Abraham is an act of real faith, determined faith, tenacious faith.

Now it may not seem clear to us at first that that's what this is about. Certainly I think we can see there's tenacity, can't we? There's three rounds of bargaining, each beginning the same way, do you see?

Each beginning with Abraham opening the discussions. First in verse 3, Abraham rose up and said to the Hittites. Then again in verse 7, Abraham rose and bowed down and said to the people of the land.

And then again in verse 12, Abraham bowed down and he said in the hearing of the people of the land. Three rounds of negotiations. But what's going on? Seems rather strange, doesn't it, to be haggling at the time of a funeral.

Sounds rather bad taste, doesn't it? Of course that's why some, not all by any means, but some unscrupulous undertakers are able to fleece people, aren't they?

[14 : 40] You see these programs on the television about offering people all kinds of expensive but totally unnecessary things. And of course people are vulnerable. They don't want to be seen as stingy at the time of grief.

They don't want to be mean to their loved one who's just died. It seems a little bit, seems a bit out of place, all this haggling. But don't miss what this is really about.

Abraham is, says verse 4, look, just a sojourner and a foreigner. He's a resident alien in the land and yet, he's determined that he will have property in possession as a grave for Sarah.

Verse 4 says, give me property. And he's so determined to have it, he's willing to push and bargain and pay very heavily until he gets it. Until he gets a fully-fledged, permanent, everlasting, resting place in the promised land, in the place where the living God dwells.

Let's look briefly at Abraham's tenacity, at his skill in negotiating real estate here. I must say, I marvel at people who can negotiate business. Something just, I'm absolutely hopeless at myself.

[15 : 49] I can never do that sort of thing. Our house is full in our cupboards of cloths and chamois and all sorts of things. Whenever somebody comes to the door selling these things, I'm afraid I can't resist. Would you believe I once paid 300 pounds for five boxes of fish for our deep freedom?

I'm still in the doghouse for that one. Unbelievable. Fortunately, however, as far as the church is concerned, we've got a church administrator who's a master of the art of bargaining. And I fully believe, Alison's not here this morning, I fully believe that if Abraham had had Alison here with him, he'd have got at least 150 shekels off the price of his field.

But anyway, let's look at what's going on behind the facade of this politeness, this flattery and the bargaining, this typical Middle Eastern business transaction.

Look at round one in verses three to six. Abraham requests property for a burial place. Now, at first it looks as if he struck gold, doesn't it? We consider you a prince, they say.

You can have any of our tombs that you like. But you see, Abraham hadn't asked for that. He hadn't asked for the use of the tomb. He'd asked for property, for real estate, to be his own piece of land.

[17 : 00] What they were actually offering him was just a loan of a tomb. Use one of ours, they say. Now, why is that significant? Well, because as a sojourner, as a foreigner, as a resident alien, Abraham wouldn't normally be allowed to own real estate.

Because then he wouldn't be a resident alien. He'd be just like everybody else. He'd be having all the equal rights and privileges of the people of the land. So the Hittites want to honour Abraham.

They do. They even flatter him. But what they don't want, they don't want him to become a member of their own landowners club. That's what's going on here.

That's the unexpressed subtext. But you see, Abraham is very tenacious. Round 2 begins in verse 7. He's very polite. He bows. He's very skilful too.

He picks up on their generosity. He says, Thank you so much. You're being so understanding. And yes, well, there is one particular tomb that I'd like to have.

[17 : 58] It's a cave at Machpelah and it's Ephron's. If you'll sell it to me, not just loan it, well, I'll pay top dollar as long as it's all public and proper, verse 9, you see. It'll be done in full view of all.

Just a small thing, he says. It's just a little cave at the end of his field. Well, verse 10 says that, of course, Ephron happened to be there in person, which, of course, Abraham knew fine well.

And either Ephron smells a prophet or he thinks that perhaps he can ward Abraham right off the thing by saying, well, ah, you see, the cave, it's not quite so simple as that, Abraham, because, you see, well, without that cave, well, that whole field is really useless.

It's valueless. Nobody's going to want to build a lovely big house on that field with a graveyard at the bottom of the garden. So, you see, it's all one lot, cave and field together. And he says, verse 11, I'll give you the whole thing to use.

Well, Abraham knows fine well that that's just a customary way of saying it's all or nothing, mate, and I want a good price. So, the final round begins in verse 12, you see. And Abraham calls Ephron's bluff.

[19 : 10] He says it loudly so that everybody can hear, verse 13, how generous of you, Ephron. But I couldn't possibly accept such a gift. Name your price and I'll pay the price in full.

And so, of course, Ephron seizes the moment. Price. He says, ah, well, it's a mere 400 shekels, but what's that to a man of your great substance and a man like me?

These are just trifling sums for people like us. Well, in fact, we can't be sure, but it seems very likely that 400 shekels was a very exorbitant sum indeed. If you read 2 Samuel chapter 24, you'll see that hundreds and hundreds of years later, David, the king, bought the whole of the threshing floor of a runner for just 50 shekels, including all the oxen for his sacrifice.

And that was a big enough place to build the whole of the temple of Solomon. So, it rather looks like 400 shekels was a very extortionate price indeed. But, the point is this.

Abraham didn't haggle at all. Totally against the custom, he just accepted the full offer price. Verse 16 says, in the public gaze of everybody around.

[20 : 20] He weighed out the silver in front of everybody and he even used their scales and their currency. Why? So that no one could ever possibly gainsay that Abraham had the undisputed legal title and right to that piece of real estate.

A permanent property in the eyes of the world. Now, it's a story of tenacity and determination in negotiations for sure, but you might be saying to yourself, what's it got to do with faith?

Why does somebody like Abraham who was perfectly happy to be a sojourner, a resident alien all through his life with no land to call his own, no settled house, only tent, why is he so determined that in death he must have a permanent possession for a grave?

Well, the answer, of course, is because he had faith in the promise of God, the promise of a future, the promise of a destiny with the God of promise in the land of promise.

Abraham wasn't going to follow the usual custom and take his wife Sarah back to his homeland to bury her in Ur of the Chaldees, no, he was going to bury his wife in the promised land, and in the permanent bit of land that God had promised him and which he now was ensuring was his forever.

[21 : 46] And he did that because he knew that the future of his family was real, and that the future of his family lay in the place, in the land, in the kingdom, if you like, of his God, the covenant God.

And his burial of Sarah was an act of a tremendous faith, because faith was in the promise of God's future. You see, there's a great paradox here. In verse 4, literally, Abraham says, a sojourner, a foreigner am I.

There's a great pathos in that statement, don't you think? It is often in time of bereavement, isn't it, that we feel most keenly our sense of homelessness in this world.

We feel the sense of not really belonging in this world of our earthly pilgrimage. And yet, at the same time, that can be a great comfort for us, can't it?

Because that very sense of homelessness in this world also points us to that wonderful reality of where our home truly is, our eternal home. When Hudson Taylor's wife died in China, he wrote this, love, he says, gave me the blow that for a little while makes the desert more dreary, but heaven more home-like.

[23 : 02] For a little while, the desert seems more dreary in this life, but heaven so much more home-like. I've heard many people express exactly that sentiment to me when one of their loved ones in the Lord Jesus Christ has died.

They say things just like that, just makes heaven seem so much more wonderful. I long for it more than I ever did before. Now, don't be pompously pious. Don't come to me and say, oh, no, no, no, pastor.

It's Jesus we should be longing for in heaven, not just our loved ones. Of course, it's Christ's coming that we long for. But don't be more pious than the apostle Paul.

He wrote to the church in Thessalonica and encouraged them by reminding them very, very firmly that the dead in Christ will rise first and together with them we will meet the Lord Jesus Christ in the air.

Encourage yourselves with those words, he says. Heaven seems that much more home-like. You see, that's what this chapter is all about. Abraham is tenacious in his faith in God's promise of the future.

[24 : 06] And that's why he's determined that Sarah's got to be buried in the land of promise. He's determined that though he is a sojourner on earth, he will not be homeless in the future.

See, his burial was an act of faith. He was claiming for his wife and for himself and for his family later on after him, claiming real estate in the place that God had promised to him as an eternal home.

He was looking to the future, he was looking to a permanent dwelling through the certain fulfillment of the promise of God. He was looking to the day of resurrection, to the day of permanent citizenship in God's city, the city with real foundations.

Abraham's whole life from the time God first called him right to the end of his life, Abraham's whole life was lived with that future in view. The apostle tells us that absolutely plainly.

If you don't believe me, turn to Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 verse 9 says this, By faith, Abraham went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

[25 : 14] Why? For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth, for people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

They desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. See, Abraham knew that and he looked to the future.

And so even in the darkest days of his bereavement, even amid the tears of real grief, he shows the tenacity of real faith.

He plants his dearest loved ones in the dust, in the land of promise, and he does it in sure and certain hope of the fulfillment of God's promise for the future, of a real homeland, of a heavenly country, of a permanent city built by God.

I wonder if you've heard of the Moravian Church. The Moravian Church were begun by Jan Hus in Bohemia, the Czech Republic really.

[26 : 38] He was an early Protestant reformer about a hundred years before Martin Luther even and he was burned at the stake for his faith. When I visited Prague a few years ago, the highlight of my trip was going to the place where Jan Hus lived and where he preached and seeing his pulpit at his church.

It's been restored. It's well worth a visit. But the Moravian Church still exists today and they call their graveyards, they call it God's Acre.

And when they bury their dead, they see themselves as planting the seeds of their dead ones in God's Acre. And they're waiting for the growth and for the future.

And actually, they plant the dead also, not by nuclear family altogether in one place, but they plant them, as they call it, by their choirs. What they mean by that is by the place that they sat in the assembly of the church where they were alive.

Wonderful picture, isn't it? The whole of the congregation being planted in God's Acre awaiting the day of the resurrection of the dead. And actually, many of them still have a tradition on Easter Sunday morning at sunrise.

[27 : 45] They have a sunrise service in God's Acre and they see themselves there as the church militant on earth together with the church triumphant celebrating and waiting for the great resurrection to come because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, that's what Abraham's faith is doing here. He's planting Sarah in God's Acre awaiting the certain promise of the future, staking a permanent claim in the land of promise to an inheritance that will certainly be everlasting.

That's what God had promised Abraham back in chapter 17 verse 8. He promised him everlasting property. Same word that's used right throughout this chapter of property. I'll be your God, he says.

I'll be your offspring's God too. I'll give you and your offspring the land as an everlasting possession, as an everlasting piece of property. How could Abraham himself possibly have property along with his offspring who haven't even been born yet?

Well, very obviously only if Abraham himself was to rise to live forever bodily along with his offspring. That's why when Jacob died all those years later in Egypt, he wouldn't be buried in Egypt.

[29 : 02] He insisted that Joseph and his brothers took him to the land of Canaan and buried him exactly there in the cave of Machpelah beside Abraham. That's why Joseph, do you remember, before he died prophesied that the day will come when the Lord will visit you, his people, and take you back into the land of his promise.

And when that day comes, don't leave my bones here in Egypt. My bones are going with you to the promised land. The very last chapter of the book of Joshua tells us about the burial of Joseph's bones in a piece of land that Jacob had bought hundreds of years before.

Why all this interest in graves? Why all this interest in bones? Well, because the bones of God's people have a future. Your bones and my bones, a permanent future in resurrection bodies, in a resurrection world.

That's the Christian hope. Not that we'll be wisps of ghosts floating about on clouds forever and ever, disembodied. No! Real flesh and blood, bodies, in a real world of real substance.

And we'll have real estate, property of our own that's ours forever and ever and ever. A real home that will never fade, never ever spot or blemish. And that's what this chapter's all about.

[30 : 19] It's a great resurrection chapter. In the clearer language of the New Testament, we began our service with Peter's words. We're exiled, he says, in this world.

Yes, we are, but we're elect exiles. We're born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead to an inheritance, to property, to a possession that is undefiled, imperishable, unfading, kept in heaven for you.

as we wait, just as Abraham waited, for a salvation fully to be revealed in the last time. And friends, when we are treading the dark paths of the valley of the shadow of death, we need to be as tenacious in our faith as Abraham was, don't we?

And by faith, we need to be fixed on the living hope that we have. Even more certainly we have it than Abraham had it. And the glorious future harvest. Something that will certainly and definitely spring to life from the plantings in God's acres.

For the things that we plant in the midst of tears now, it's like the psalmist's words, you who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. We have a living hope. That brings me finally from the tenacity of real faith to the last few verses, 17 to the end, and the tokens of real hope.

[31 : 50] These last few verses, you see, emphasize just that, a tangible token in the present of the fulfillment of all of God's promises in the future. This whole story about one little field, one little cave, an unobtrusive little cave at the end of a field, but it's real and it's visible and it's Abraham's and he's got the title deeds in his hands.

God has promised him the whole land in the future for his offspring and also somehow for him too. He's been promised it for eternity, forever, from the forever God. And he's lived his whole life standing on these promises.

And just like many others who will come after him, Abraham too would die in faith, not having seen the things promised but seen them from afar, greeted them from afar.

But he did, he did receive some things. He received some things along the way that were tokens of the real hope in which he stood. And that's what this chapter is about.

Look at how it's framed from beginning to end. Sarah dies, verse 2, where? In the land of Canaan. And she's buried, verse 21, verse 20, in the land of Canaan.

[33 : 06] She's at rest in the promised land. Not just in any old place, but in a property, a possession of Abraham. Give me property, Abraham says.

Something permanent, forever. And verses 17 to 20 tell us that beyond any doubt, that is what he has. A field made over to Abraham, verse 18, as a possession.

Permanent, not just borrowed. Publicly attested before everyone at the city gate. Verse 20, made over to Abraham as property. Permanent real estate. God had promised him an eternal future, an eternal home, a place to dwell, settled forever with God, and settled forever with the multitudes of spiritual offspring that God would bring him through his great covenant promise.

And Abraham himself had seen it only from afar in the future, yet to be, but he didn't die without possessing a piece of it. He had in his hand the title deeds, a stake in an everlasting possession.

God's promise was on its way to fulfillment, a token of real hope. I think it's rather wonderful that it was amidst the tears of real grief that through the tenacity of his real faith God granted him such wonderful tokens of real hope.

[34 : 28] But that's our God, isn't he? What a wonderful comfort to Abraham in his hour of grief, in his hour of bereavement and sadness and loss to know that God hadn't forgotten him.

To know that God had not forgotten any of the promises he'd given to him or any of the blessings that would come or any of the true hope for the future. And as a token of that hope, God gave him a place, a real place in time and history, a cave in Hebron, just near Mamre.

Remember, Mamre was the place where Abraham and Sarah had received so many of those great promises. And in that very place he had a place that he could go and see and stand on and touch that was a standing witness to the reality of God's promise.

A promise already being fulfilled in the present. the tangible token of a future that was yet to be fulfilled. Think about Moses' readers as they first heard these words about to enter the land after decades in the wilderness, carrying Joseph's bones with them in a box to know that they would come to this place, the field of Machpelah, a place that spoke to them of God's promise fulfilled in the past and a standing witness that what God had done in the past and was doing in the present he would continue to do all through the future.

A grave that preached hope. Preached hope to Abraham, to his offspring, to Moses' people, to Israel. And aren't we who are in Christ who are true heirs and offspring of Abraham, heirs of the same promise, aren't we a people who possess also a grave that preaches hope?

[36 : 14] A real tomb, in a real cave, in real time and history, in a real place, not so far from Hebron, just in Jerusalem. A grave that preaches the glorious hope of the resurrection from the dead and of everlasting life.

Not because it's got bones of a dead patriarch, but because it's empty. Because Abraham's true seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, conquered death and rose from the dead, that we also might share the same hope, the hope of resurrection, the redemption of our bodies.

And we're still waiting for that too, aren't we? Just as Abraham did. But the empty tomb of Jesus is a wonderful token of real hope, isn't it? Because He's the firstfruits.

He is the resurrection. His resurrection is the down payment, says Paul, that guarantees ours. And we too have an inheritance promised in Him.

We don't yet possess it all, of course, just as Abraham didn't yet possess everything. But Paul says, we too have a down payment, don't we? When you believe, he says to the Ephesians, you are sealed with a promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee, guarantee of what?

[37 : 26] Of our inheritance until we acquire full possession of it. A token, a real hope. And you know, the presence, even now, of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our church, doesn't he bring us so many tokens of real hope all the time?

Hope for God's promised future. Just think about the everyday means of grace that God gives us just by sharing fellowship with one another in our lives and the church. Just think about the great hope that we have and the buttress to our faith when we see others coming to Christ, when we see others growing in grace.

Aren't these tangible tokens that God's promise is at work now in the present? And that God's promise for the future is assured. Dick Lucas often says, do you want to see a miracle to help your faith?

Look around you. Look at the person sitting next to you in church. There is a miracle that God has called from death to life and is sustaining today in the faith of Jesus and will bring to completion.

And when we think about it as Christians, isn't it true that our lives are punctuated, full of tokens of real hope that encourage us, that remind us so often, especially in our darkest times, that God hasn't forgotten us, that he's alive, that he still cares, that he's with us.

[38 : 45] Answered prayers are tokens of real hope like that, aren't they? It's been such an encouragement to us as a fellowship of late as we've prayed for specific things about our building project and God has answered prayers most wonderfully and we've been reminded God's alive, he's with us, he hears us, he hasn't forgotten us, token of real hope.

Maybe it's something in your daily readings that in a difficult time the Lord just brings to you and reminds you God hasn't forgotten me. Somebody said to me just this week that in a time of struggle and of pain God's word has been coming to them just like words from heaven in their daily reading reminding them of God's presence and his care, tokens of real hope.

Sometimes it's just a letter or email we don't expect something that encourages us and helps us. We had one just like that this week that I circulated around the building development team from a minister elsewhere who was telling us the terrible travails and troubles they had with their whole project and how it was the worst time in his whole life and then a paragraph began like this but that all seems like ancient history now.

It went on to describe the blessing that it's been to them to have their building fitted out for the ministry of the gospel. Little things trivial things maybe things that seem very insignificant like the cave at the end of a field but tokens that remind us even in our tears even in our times of grief and sadness that our faith is not in vain that our hope can be assured.

That's what the grave at Machpelah was to Abraham. It was a grave that preached hope for the future. A reminder that the God who is fulfilling his promises tangibly in history will bring to fruition all his promises for eternity.

[40 : 43] But aren't you glad that we too that we too have at the very heart of our faith in real time and in real history and in real geography a tangible token an empty grave a grave that preaches hope.

That's the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Lord even amid the tears of real grief grant us also like Abraham the tenacity of real faith to grasp hold of the glorious promises that you give us and will you open our eyes to rejoice in the bountiful tokens of real hope that you give us and bless our path with so often as we walk with you day by day.

Do this Lord that we might live now for the glory of Christ and then hereafter in that glory forever that we ask it in his name.

Amen.