A Promise is a Promise

Introduction

This Bible study was composed as part of a workshop while attending Equip 2010 [1]. In that workshop, we looked at Old Testament passages with an understanding that the entire Old Testament points towards Yeshua. We were given Genesis 23 to study and looked at it over three days, presenting our final Bible study on the fourth.

The **main ideas** were

- in the immediate context, "*Abraham buying into the the land of Canaan, literally and figuratively*"; and
- pointing towards Yeshue, "*Living for God's promises to one in faithfulness and obedience*".

The **target group** of this study would be Christians, perhaps young in their faith, exploring the Old Testament.

This study was presented to the workshop on 5 April 2010.

The Bible Study

> [1]Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. [2]She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her. [3]Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, [4]"I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead." [5]The Hittites replied to Abraham, [6]"Sir, listen to us. You are 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." [7]Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. [8]He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf [9]so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you." [10]Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. [11] "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." [12]Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land [13]and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there." [14]Ephron answered Abraham, [15]"Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead." [16]Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants. [17]So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre—both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field—was deeded [18]to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. [19]Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. [20]So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site. — Genesis 23 (NIV)

1. You have had a strong desire to do missionary work for a long time. Eventually this realises and you arrive with your spouse in a foreign place: a place you have desired to see for a long time. But shortly after you arrive, your spouse contracts an exotic disease and dies from it. You can barely speak the native language, at best. What do you do? How do you feel now

about being in this mission field?
2. Verses one and two tell us about the death of Sarah, and Abraham, her husband, mourning for her.
    1. Why are Abraham and Sarah important in the Old Testament? Read Genesis 17:5–7 and Genesis 17:15–16.
    2. Read Genesis 21:6–7. Name one reason why Abraham mourned his wife.
3. Why is it necessary for Abraham to buy land from the Hittites? What does Genesis 12:1–7 tell us about this?
4. Abraham insists on wanting to buy the land from the Hittites. How does Abraham feel about unearned gifts in the light of Genesis 14:21–24?
5. The transaction in our passage is a formal legal transaction in ancient near-eastern culture. What is the implication of this for Abraham?
6. A proper burial was crucial in ancient near-eastern culture. Ideally a person was buried where their forefathers were buried. Given this, what is the significance of Abraham purchasing a burial plot in Canaan?
7. Read Genesis 24:6–9. This takes place some time after Sarah's death. What does this tell us about Abraham's attitude toward God and His promises to Abraham?
8. In Genesis 15:6, we see that God credits Abraham for his faith. In our passage, we see a small example for Abraham's faith and obedience by tying himself to the land where he is an alien and a stranger (v. 4). How do these qualitites—faith and obedience—summarise a Christian's relationship with Jesus?
9. God promises eternal life through Jesus. Although we have not seen this reward for dedication and obedience with our own eyes, what should our attitude be in the light of the life of Abraham?

Critique

The Bible study was well received. It was a different approach than most other in the group had followed; their target group was more mature Christians and relied somewhat on the *Swedish Method*. My approach was partially inspired by the approach certain Bible study guides take, especially the interactive Bible studies [2] published by Matthias Media [3].

I found writing this Bible study challenging and what I presented was only, in effect, my first draft. Writing the launching question was particularly difficult and I never come back to it. I considered several different possible launching questions, but settled on the one above to get the audience thinking about loss and alienation in a strange place. I hoped to evoke some empathy for Abraham in his situation as described in the passage.

Admittedly, I never tied the passage back to a New Testament, which I probably would have done if I had more time. Possible such passages could have included, but not limited to, Romans 9:6–8, Hebrews 11:8–16, Acts 7:2–16 and 1 Peter 1:3–12.

The main points of criticism were:

- The leading questions were good, but could be less general/vague.
- I should have stayed more inside the passage, especially regarding the big picture of the Bible study.

The leader of the workshop and I were somewhat at odds about the main idea of the passage. While I placed emphasis on Abraham's faithfulness, he believed it should rather have been on God's faithfulness. I do not think one should necessarily make such a distinction: one ties in to the other (Abraham is faithful to God because He is faithful, and God will in turn honour His promises because Abraham is faithful and obedient). It should have made this point more clear in this Bible study.

Another reason why I stuck with Abraham's faithfulness as a theme, is because that is how I believe the apostles presented him whenever they wrote about him (see, for example, Hebrews 11 and Acts 7).

I wanted to tie the ideas of *faithfulness* and *obedience* to how it is when one comes to Yeshua: a person believes Yeshua can forgive sins and accepts this forgiveness (faithfulness), and appoints Him as Lord and Ruler over his/her live (obedience).

Addendum

This was a challenging Bible study to write, but one that taught me much. I learned how a Biblical passage can easily be twisted to say something which it, in fact, doesn't.

Additional questions which didn't make the final cut:

- What does v. 4 reveal to us about Abraham's lifestyle? Why do you think Abraham wants to own the land Sarah is to be buried in?
- At this point in his life, Abraham is a widower, has only one unmarried son with him and the only land he owns is a small patch which holds the tomb of his beloved wife. How well do you think this bodes for the promises which God gave Abraham?

Final Thoughts

> "The meaning of a passage is always the same and must always be taught. This must not be changed to suit a particular audience! The application of a passage can be tailored to a specific audience."
>
> "What would the gap [in the Bible] be if our passage was taken out of the Bible?"

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