

“An Investment in the Future”
Genesis 23
December 5, 1999
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84 years ago a 40-year-old man decided it was time for someone to make and sell hunting and fishing boots that would keep feet dry and free from blisters.

In 1911 he fashioned a rubber and leather boot and then sent an advertising piece to all of the non-residents who had hunted in his state the previous season.

He sold 100 of the boots for \$3.50 each.

90 of them fell apart quickly and were returned to him.

Because of his 100% lifetime money-back guarantee, he borrowed \$400 from his brother and promptly repaired the boots with a better design and sent them back to the buyers.

He soon added a few more products to his items for sale and sent out a small catalog.

From \$400 of borrowed money it was turned into a \$1 billion enterprise sold through 50 specialty catalogs.

Thus began the business that we today know as L.L. Bean.

Nov 29, 1999 Wall Street Journal p14

It was 1954 and a 52 year-old-man purchased a different kind of restaurant in San Bernardino, California.

By 1984 that restaurant chain had grown to 7500 stores.

And today has over 25,000 stores worldwide.

The man was Ray Kroc and the restaurant is known as McDonald's.

To the list could be added names like Sam Walton, Bill Gates, Henry Ford and a host of others.

Today we marvel at the size of their companies and the value of their stocks.

But what I want you to think about instead, are the initial investments they made.

These are men and women who made relatively small but very strategic investments.

I can't prove this, but I think they made those investments because of what they believed about the future.

They envisioned a day when their ideas would be widely accepted and very profitable.

They saw a future and they believed in it.

They believed in it enough to make what were probably thought by others to be "crazy" investments.

Who would have thought that a fisherman from Maine could take on the catalog titans of Wards and Sears?

Who would have thought that a little Arkansas retailer could compete with the giant K-Mart Corporation?

Others undoubtedly thought they were foolish but they believed something about the future – and they invested their lives.

Consider this statement: Your vision of the future determines where you make your investments.

Let me illustrate that in a rather crass way.

If you knew you would die in 30 days and someone gave you \$1million, how would you spend the money?

Likewise, if you knew you would die in 6 months, how would you spend the next 180 days?

Much more importantly, knowing what you know about God and the kingdom he is building, how are you investing your time and money in the future?

Look with me, please, at a short story told in Genesis 23.

Abraham and Sarah had been married more than 60 years.

We don't know much about the last 30 years of their lives together but the first 30 or more were lived in the tumultuous ups and downs of moving and near disasters and finally in the birth of the promised son – Isaac.

The author of Genesis, Moses, skips many years in their lives and picks their story up 30-35 years later.

READ Genesis 23:1-20

The heading of this chapter in my Bible says, "The Death of Sarah". But as we just read the chapter, didn't you notice that very little of this story is about Sarah.

Verses 1-2 tells us she died, where she died, how old she was, and the fact that her husband Abraham mourned over her death.

Verse 19 tells us that Abraham buried his wife.

Three verses tell us about Sarah but 16 verses are about what? They are about Abraham purchasing land for a cemetery.

Why would Moses tell this story?

I've already given you a hint in the way I began this message.

But I want you to look at the many clues Moses gives us in the way he tells the story.

Even though it is a sad occasion, it is a rather fun story.

The negotiations between Abraham and the Hittite owner of the land would sound familiar to those of you who have had the experience of buying something in a different culture.

Most of us are accustomed to purchasing items in a retail store.

We see a price tag on an item and pay that price.

But if you have gone "garage sale-ing" or spent time in Mexico or have purchased a car or house without a sales agent, then you know what an experience it can be to negotiate a price and make a purchase.

That's the experience we see here in Genesis 23.

The story begins with a prologue – Sarah dies and thus Abraham needs a place to bury her.

The story ends with an epilogue – Abraham buries his wife in the cemetery he has purchased.

But in between, we have “the deal”.

And this “deal”, this transaction, is told in four stages.

Stage One is in verses 3-6 – Abraham makes a request and the owners of the land respond.

Abraham begins by acknowledging that he is on property that is owned by someone else – namely the Hittites.

The Hittites were descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah.

Abraham and Sarah moved to this region of the world at God’s command, they were promised that someday the land would belong to their descendants but as of NOW, the land belonged to someone else.

That is an important point in the story.

Like the Spanish landing in Florida and the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, the land was already inhabited.

And so Abraham asked to buy some land to make into a cemetery.

And in this first stage of the deal, the Hittites respond by saying that because Abraham is a well-recognized and respected leader among them, therefore he can have any grave he wants to bury his wife.

Abraham asked to purchase land but they offer him only a grave.

He would have a place to bury his wife, but he wouldn’t OWN any of the land.

And so the story moves on to Stage Two.

Genesis 23:7-9 “Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. 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, 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.”

Notice the formalities.

V7 “Abraham rose and bowed down before the people.”

We saw the same thing earlier in V3 where “Abraham rose...”

We will see it again in V12 “Abraham bowed down before the people...”

The Hittites likewise are very polite.

They refer to Abraham with great respect.

Have you ever noticed how respectful everyone is (or is supposed to be) in a court of law in our own country?

The judge is referred to in a certain way and everyone is given the title of Mr. or Miss or Mrs.

The language is formal and strict social courtesies are observed carefully.

So it was here, this was a legal proceeding.

The city leaders were gathered and Abraham begins formal negotiations with them.

So in this Second Stage, Abraham asks the leaders to intervene on his behalf with the specific owner of the land Abraham wishes to purchase.

He wants the leaders to convince the owner to sell and to name a fair price.

You get the impression that the seller was already present in the meeting and now he steps forward to speak.

He said, V11 “No, my lord. Listen to me; I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in the field. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.”

Now this is fun, in one sense, because everyone present knew what was being asked and yet they wouldn’t directly address the issue.

Instead they talked all around it.

Abraham wanted to own land in that country.

They were willing to let him bury Sarah there, but they weren’t certain they wanted him to own land.

This indirect method of negotiation is common in our day, as well. I will illustrate that later.

And so we move to the Third Stage of the transaction.

Again Abraham presses his case.

Genesis 23:12-13 “Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land 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.’”

And again, Ephron, the specific owner of the land responds.

Genesis 23:15 “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.”

I find this humorous.

All along Abraham has been asking to purchase the land.

All along the Hittites have been avoiding that subject by offering just a burial site instead.

But when it finally comes to naming price, Ephron, the Hittite, states the price but minimizes price as a real concern – “What is that between me and you?”

I remember several years going with my brother, who then lived in Wisconsin, to visit a man from whom my brother wished to purchase an expensive piece of machinery.

I remember driving up to the man’s farmhouse and then sitting down with the man on his porch.

My brother and the man spoke to each other for about half an hour on every subject except the reason for our being there.

I kept waiting for the “deal” to be discussed but soon my brother said we had to leave and we did.

When we got back in our car I asked my brother why he hadn’t talked about the machinery and the price.

Does the guy even know why we were there?

He responded that the man knew exactly why we were there.

And it would have been wrong to discuss the price.

A previous conversation had indicated my brother's interest in the machinery.

This visit was to verify that my brother was serious.

And that was accomplished just by the visit, not by discussing the machinery.

A subsequent conversation would complete the transaction.

There would be no haggling over the price.

In the visit to the farmhouse that day no one said anything about what everybody knew.

The conversation was at one level but the deal was at another level.

That's what's happening here.

The conversation is formal and polite and at one level, but the real issues are not being directly discussed and are at another level.

The real issue is that Abraham wanted to OWN land – a permanent place.

He wanted a place that would belong to him and his family for generations.

The Hittites were not certain they wanted this alien, this foreigner, to have landholder rights in their country.

But in the story we move to STAGE Four:

Genesis 23:16 "Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighted 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."

The deal was done.

Genesis 23:17 "So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre – both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees with in the borders of the field – were deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city."

Now when you look back over the story what do you notice that the author emphasized over and over again?

1. The exact location and extent of the land being purchased:

V2 “She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.”

V9 “...sell me the cave of Machpelah... which is at the end of his field.”

V11 “I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it.”

V17 “So Ephron’s field in Machpelah near Mamre – both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees with in the borders of the field – were deeded to Abraham as his property...”

V20 “So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham...”

Is there any doubt left as to where the land was located and how much land was included?

2. The name and identity of the seller:

V3 “Abraham... spoke to the Hittites”

V8 “Ephron, son of Zohar”

V10 “Ephron, the Hittite...”

V13, 14, 16, 17 “Ephron” is named.

Is there any doubt about who sold the land to Abraham?

3. The fullness of the price is emphasized.

V14 “the land is worth four hundred shekels...”

V16 “Abraham agreed to Ephron’s terms and weighed out for him the price he had named... four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among merchants.”

Is there any doubt about the price that he paid and that he paid full price?

4. The public nature of the transaction.

V3 “Abraham... spoke to the Hittites.”

V7 “Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites.”

V10 “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 the city.”

V12 “Again Abraham bowed down to before the people of the land.”

V16 “the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites.”

V18 The property was deeded to Abraham, “in the presence of all the Hittites.”

Is there any doubt that this was a public transaction with many, many witnesses?

The location of the land, the extent of the land, the price of the land, the seller of the land, and the witnesses to the land are emphasized greatly. **Why?**

There was to be no doubt that this land BELONGED to Abraham and his descendants.

The author is emphasizing the permanent nature of this transaction.

Abraham was making an investment – a permanent investment.

In what? In a cemetery only? No!

He was making an investment in the land – the land of promise.

60 years earlier God had said,

Genesis 12:7 “To your offspring I will give this land.”

Genesis 13:14-17 “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.... Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

Genesis 15:18-21 “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river the Euphrates...”

And Abraham believed the promise.

Note that at that time the Hittites owned all the land.

Abraham had no idea how, but that land would one day belong to his descendants and he was making an investment in it now.

This is where his descendants would also live and be buried.

Abraham is taking steps to commit his descendants to this land – the land of promise.

By burying his dead here, Abraham is marking it as “home” even though at the time he was a foreigner without rights.

What great faith!

What an example!

Abraham believed God, that all this land would one day belong to his family.

That is why Abraham lived there, that is why he invested in it.

It was the future.

Here is what the author of Hebrews wrote about Abraham in this regard:

Hebrews 11:13-16

“All these people (Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham) were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing 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.”

God has declared with even greater certainty that our future is that “better country – a heavenly one” – the kingdom of God.

The future in God’s thinking is millions from every people group of the world knowing his grace and responding to his Lordship in their lives.

Psalm 2:8 “Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance”.

Genesis 12:3 “and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

John 10:16 “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd.”

Matthew 24:14 “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Matthew 28:19 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...”

The future in God's thinking is us and our children knowing him and serving him.

And doing so on the new earth that he will re-create when Jesus comes again.

Revelation 5:9 "...with (Christ's) blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

That's the future.

Do we believe God sufficiently that THAT future is the one we are investing in?

Abraham didn't know how God would bring it pass, but he invested his life, his family, and his fortune in the future God had promised.

The Apostle Paul wrote, Romans 12:1 "Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God..."

Where do we make our investments?

Is our future in retirement programs, vacations, condominiums and town houses, or is it the kingdom of God?

Where do you make your investments?

It is the evidence of what you truly believe?

Peter and Stephanie Engel, next summer will be moving to Southeast Asia.

Why?

Because they believe the future God has promised.
And they are investing their lives in that future.

Bob Buford of Tyler, Texas was a cable television pioneer and reached the place in his life at the age of 45 where, as he said it, he "had more money than meaning".

At that point he took a look at what the future truly was and decided to invest himself and his money in that – the kingdom of God.

A woman of this church, an example of scores of others, received a modest inheritance.

Instead of doing what most would have done, she gave \$20,000 for the training of Pastors in India.

Why?

Because she believes the future God has promised and she is investing in it.

Hundreds of families in this church live modestly and sacrifice many things they could have now and in the future because they believe in the future God has promised and they are investing in that future.

How about us?

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