

"Death and Births "

[For those online, there is the text of Scripture at the end]

Introduction

To everything there is a season, a time to be born, a time to die. The writer of Ecclesiastes well knew his stuff. Things come and go. Ebb and flow is natural as the tides and it's natural in the realities of Scripture. So in today's lesson we read about the birth of a set of twins, the first ones in the Bible, and the death of the Founding Patriarch, Abraham. Life goes on.

Some want to know when life begins. Is it at conception? Is it at birth itself? Bill Cosby the great American comic said 'life begins when the last child moves out of the house, and the dog dies.' But whatever else we can say about life and death, we know it's going to happen to all of us. We wouldn't be speaking to you today either online or here in Chatswood if you had not been born. And for each of us, death is a certainty.

Today as we study, let's try to remember deaths and births and the purpose of our own birth and death. Today we will note the ending of Abraham, the full life of Ishmael, and the focus on Jacob and Esau. All the while, let's remember that we too have a birth and a death. How shall we make the most of it?

In 1846 the former president of the US, John Quincy Adams suffered a stroke. Although he returned to Congress the following year, his health was clearly failing. Daniel Webster described his last meeting with Adams: "Someone, a friend of his, came in and made particular inquiry of his health. Adams answered, 'I inhabit a weak, frail, decayed tenement; battered by the winds and broken in upon by the storms, and from all I can learn, the landlord does not intend to repair.'" So on we go to our study today, death and life and how to make the most of it.

Abraham's death

The chapter begins with the ending of the great hero of faith, Abraham. He rallied to live on 175 years, and saw children and grandchildren and especially those two grandkids Jacob and Esau. Ishmael outlasted him by 51 years. What do we remember about Abraham? Heaps of things. Some were listed in the record of Scripture; others are yet to unfold for us.

One morning in 1888 Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, awoke to read his own obituary. The obituary was printed as a result of a simple journalistic

error. You see, it was Alfred's brother that had died and the reporter carelessly reported the death of the wrong brother. Any man would be disturbed under the circumstances, but to Alfred the shock was overwhelming because he saw himself as the world saw him. The "Dynamite King," the great industrialist who had made an immense fortune from explosives. This, as far as the general public was concerned, was the entire purpose of Alfred's life. None of his true intentions to break down the barriers that separated men and ideas for peace were recognized or given serious consideration. He was simply a merchant of death. And for that alone he would be remembered. As he read the obituary with horror, he resolved to make clear to the world the true meaning and purpose of his life. This could be done through the final disposition of his fortune. His last will and testament—an endowment of five annual prizes for outstanding contributions in physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, and peace (the sixth category of economics was added later)—would be the expression of his life's ideals and ultimately would be why we would remember him. The result was the most valuable of prizes given to those who had done the most for the cause of world peace. It is called today, the "Nobel Peace Prize."

Not everyone has such an honorable tale to tell about dying. The plaque read, "Here lies Jamie Smith, wife of Thomas Smith, marble cutter. This monument was erected by her husband as a tribute to her memory and a specimen of his work. Monuments of the same style 350 dollars." Or Woody Allen who quipped, "It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

For the believer, Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.

Abraham lived to 175, and little is really said about his dying. He was buried in the cave of Machpelah which he bought for a fair price from an earlier chapter. This point is emphasized that we might know the claim for the Land is both divine in origin and physically just.

He lived (in verse 8) to a ripe old age. The Hebrew says a *good* old age. Perhaps this anticipates the ending of Jacob, where his years are called 'evil.' The theme of 'good' vs 'evil' is not only major in Genesis from the Garden on; it continues in Hollywood cinemas to this day. And perhaps in your own life as well.

Y'shua later taught that we had to choose good, and we have to live in good, if we want to see the blessings of God. His promise of course, was that the Holy Spirit would come along and give us the grace to live good lives.

Abraham of course lives well into the next few stories, even 15 years into the life of Jacob and Esau, but no further mention is made of him, as nothing further of his life must be recounted. We all come to an end, and when it's over, it's over. I don't mean to be shameful in my lack of compassion. In fact, quite the opposite. The Jewish religion requires the almost immediate burial of a person, within the day of death. Why? That we might remember them in their living and not in their dying. We don't lay in state, we don't have wakes. Burial is almost

immediate waiting only for the arrival of near of kin from distant parts. Abraham has lived a full life, a life of faith. And his good was already done in believing through the 10 trials, and in following Yahweh with all his heart. His testimony is blameless to the end. Nothing really needs to be said beyond this.

In verse 10 we read that Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife. Now she had already been buried for over 30 years, so why mention her now? What do you think? (pause). Perhaps to evoke memories or to demonstrate the bond of husband and wife even in death. Not a major point, but of interest to me.

I don't usually quote Catholic scholars, but Thomas a Kempis wrote this on dying, "You ought so to order thyself in all thy thoughts and actions, as if today you were about to die. Labor now to live so, that at the hour of death you may rather rejoice than fear. [From Imitation of Christ]"

A bank in Binghamton, New York, had some flowers sent to a competitor who had recently moved into a new building. There was a mix up at the flower shop, and the card sent with the arrangement read, "With our deepest sympathy." The florist, who was greatly embarrassed, apologized. But he was even more embarrassed when he realized that the card intended for the bank was attached to a floral arrangement sent to a funeral home in honor of a deceased person. That card read, "Congratulations on your new location!"

Dying is a reality and a substantial one at that. What we do with the days we have on earth, even filling them with humor, makes the most sense to me. My major point today is that in the record of our living *is* the record of our dying. Let's honor God with our substance and with our passing, making the best of all opportunities to glorify Him.

Who better than Y'shua to teach us this? He after all went to the Roman cross and died on our behalf, taking our sins on Himself, and this death is the most celebrated and recognized symbol in the world. (I told a story about Hindu witness in Malaysia where the only symbol I could communicate about Jesus was the cross). Y'shua knows that in death, we have a story to tell.

Ishmael's years

All we know in this selected encyclopedic entry for Ishmael is very limited. The number of children is selected to be twelve, which appears to be a deliberate attempt to set these individuals off as founders of a new and separate people (22:20; 17:20). No mention is made of the blessing of Ishmael from 17:20, and we hear nothing more about Ishmael in the book of Genesis. The children of Ishmael, however, continue to play a part in Genesis and beyond

Isaac's life

What we learn most about the life of Isaac is that he is a demure, fading character, whose life is more about his father's life and his sons' lives than it is about his own choices and perspective.

Abraham in verse 5 gave 'him all that he had.' Isaac did not earn it; he is a recipient. Eliezer chose Isaac's wife for him. Isaac sins like his father with the Pharaoh and his sister. His children immediately are the focus of his years. Later on, Rebecca and Jacob go toe to toe in securing God's blessings from Isaac. I say that Isaac is a passive one, and this is not bad, just an insight into his personality. A follower is necessary for the leader to truly lead.

The two brothers, Jacob and Esau will be the focus of our story for the next several weeks, so we will only begin to highlight it at this point. And it's all in the telling of the story of Isaac. Good vs. evil is too simple to label this. The drama of two brothers, which we saw in the Eden narrative, is again emphasized here.

Who will carry the blessing? Who will carry the birthright and the promises and the knowledge of God to the heathen nations around them? Who will survive? This seems like some episodic reality TV show, doesn't it? Forgive me for that commercial sound, but the drama of choice here is something that the TV people play on. They know you want one winner at the end of a horse race. So it was on Tuesday at Flemington in Melbourne. So it was at the end of an election in the US on Tuesday. And so it is in our lives today. Who will win, Jacob or Esau? That's the continuing question for several weeks, as we follow the tablets of declaration about the generations of Abraham.

The twins are born in pain and question. Their mother Rebecca is struggling with the reason for her near miscarriage. They come out with one grabbing the heel of the other. It's exciting and painful and nerve-wracking and all very interesting. We, as I say, will study these two characters in much more depth in the weeks to come. For now, their introduction is one of mystery and mayhem, and their birth is the introduction of a whole new episode in the drama of Abraham's children. Who will carry the pleasure of God in their being? Who will be selected?

To summarize, then... let's think back to death.

Summary

Is there something beyond the grave for you? Is there something beyond your natural birthright you would dream of?

Christopher Columbus was the great Iberian sailor from 1492 who 'discovered' America. He died in Spain in 1506. There is a statue there in the city of Valladolid. It is a monument commemorating the great discoverer. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the memorial is a statue of a lion destroying one of the Latin words that had been part of Spain's motto for centuries. Before Columbus made his voyages, the Spaniards thought they had reached the outer limits of earth. Thus their motto was "Ne Plus Ultra," which means "No More Beyond." The word being torn away by the lion is "Ne" or "no," making it read "Plus Ultra." Columbus had proven that there was indeed "more beyond."

So what is beyond for you? Will what you have done or believed or manifested ...will all that be written in one paragraph on one of your children's journal entries? God wants us to live and to enjoy life and to know Him personally. He wants us to share the blessings of Abraham and to be filled with His joy and pleasure.

Here are some things I see as we conclude, and you can add your thoughts to your own list.

- 1) Mourning is right, and comforting those who are mourning is a biblical precept of great value
- 2) God wants you to choose good over evil in your daily life. Choose to follow His plans and leading, and to do what He wants
- 3) Making our mark in the world is more about faith and faithfulness than about great deeds.
- 4) In every season of discomfort and pain, a new chapter will come along with hopes for another future

Dear friends, we have eternal life due to the Saviour Y'shua, due to His love and forgiveness. His Resurrection has proven His new covenant. His teaching is great, and yet it goes well beyond that to His life and death. No amount of good works will give us enough information to help us overcome evil. No amount of information will help us overcome our own evil inclination. Only the messiah can repair our relationship with God, which will in turn give us pleasure with Him.

If you have never experienced this eternal and new life about which we are speaking, if you are yet outside the relationship with God, then pray with me. If you haven't yet been restored into fellowship with Him, maybe God is vindicating you today. Won't you pray this prayer and ask God to forgive you of your sins, whatever they might be, and come home to pleasure with God? Lord forgive me in the name of the Messiah, the Serpent Bruiser, Y'shua himself. Forgive me for all my sins, and make me clean again. Give me eternal life in the name of Y'shua and make me born again. I trust you.

Actual Text

Gen. 25:1 ¶ Now Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. And she bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. And Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. And the sons of Midian