

# THE LIFE-GIVER

by Steve Zeisler

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I am sure you have had the experience of being disappointed at coming to the end of a book you have loved, knowing you would no longer be able to enjoy the people and the story in which you had immersed yourself. I feel like this now that we have come to the end of Abraham's life in our studies. We began in Genesis 11 with the announcement that Terah had three sons, one of whom was Abraham. From the announcement of his birth, we have now come in Chapter 25 to the announcement of his death and burial. It saddens me to finish this study, for I have come to appreciate this man so much. I look forward more than ever now to the chance to meet Abraham in glory.

Our Lord Jesus gave one of his most significant statements of self-disclosure in the tenth chapter of John when he said, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." For the people who would listen, he came with a message of life from God available for needy people. The message about Jesus Christ, the gospel we preach, is not just an intellectual exercise. It is not only logical truth we acclaim. Jesus came so that we could have life, so that we could change that which was drab, sorrowful, and decaying in our spirit into something of moral beauty, joy and color. In fact, he came that we could have life so abundant that it overflows from us, the channels through whom the life of God is given to others. We are to be streams so filled with the good news that it overflows the banks of our lives to benefit the lives of those around us. The life given to us becomes life shared with others.

If anything characterized Abraham's years on earth, it was his consistent ability to touch other people for God's sake. When Abraham was present, peace, unity, worship of God and spiritual growth were developed not only in him but in those around him. He was a source through whom others were given life. Of all places, we are perhaps made aware of this most powerfully in the description of his death. Even in the last verses of his story, he is a life-giver. Look at chapter 25, verses 1 through 6:

**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 were Ephan and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Elsaah. All these were the sons of Keturah. Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.**

Sarah died when Abraham was well past a hundred years of age. Then he married a woman named Keturah by whom he had sons and grandchildren. This passage mainly consists of the names of his wife, their sons and the ensuing grandsons. Even though we are approaching the end of Abraham's story, the final verses continue to reveal his vitality--God bringing physical life into the world by children being born to him. These physical births picture what was true spiritually. Wherever Abraham went, people were benefited, opportunities were made available, and life sprang up.

All of Abraham's children--Ishmael first, then Isaac the son of promise and the six sons of Keturah--became heads of great families. Each founded a nation that prospered generation after generation. There is a wonderful promise given in Isaiah 60 concerning the tribes of the sons of Abraham. Isaiah predicted that they will return spiritually to the worship of God.

Look at Isaiah 60:4-6:

**Lift up your eyes round about, and see;**

**They all gather together, they come to you.**

**Your sons will come from afar,  
And your daughters will be carried in the arms.**

**Then you will see and be radiant,  
And your heart will thrill and rejoice;**

**Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you,  
The wealth of the nations will come to you.  
A multitude of camels will cover you,**

**The young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
All those from Sheba will come;**

**They will bring gold and frankincense,  
And will bear good news of the praises of the Lord.**

Abraham's children founded families whom Isaiah predicted would come to Jerusalem to worship God, bringing praises to Him and gifts of gold and frankincense.

You cannot encounter Abraham without seeing him give life to other people. He gave gifts to his children so that they could have life and go on to become great families who would eventually know the Lord. Even as Jesus promised, Abraham had a life so abundant that others could share in it.

Easter was a touching experience for me this year because I had the honor of preaching to this congregation. That morning, Ray Stedman on his 69th Easter, led the congregation in worship. As most of you know, he is highly regarded all over the world as a Christian statesman for his generation. He had the right to preach in this church on Easter by virtue of his godliness and seniority in this church which he has shepherded for so many years. But he chose not to. And at one point in the service, he bent over his grandson to help him read the Scripture. As he graciously prayed for me and allowed me to preach, I was struck anew by his humility and godliness. He has referred to many of us younger pastors as his spiritual sons.

Ray reminds me of Abraham, someone who gives life to other people and provides opportunities for them to grow in their influence and develop their spiritual gifts. This kind of person not only knows how to be a man of God himself but also how to encourage others to grow in knowledge or in their service of the Lord.

Even at the end of his life, God used Abraham to father sons who would become heads of families who would be won to Christ. With tongue in cheek, some have commented that these verses in Genesis 25 are a commentary on Romans 11:29 which says: "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." You will remember Abraham was impotent at age 100, and when he contemplated his own body he considered himself as good as dead. But God by miraculous means restored his potency. Now decades later, he married again and had more children. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable; once the Lord gave him the capability to produce children it was never taken from him again. I think the message is clear: he was a source of vitality and life for others.

In verse 5 Isaac was distinguished from the other sons. Even though Abraham gave all of his sons enough financial wherewithal and encouragement to make their own way in life, Isaac received everything because he was the son of promise. Isaac was the one on whom the heritage of Abraham and the promises of God would fall. Frederich Buechner wrote about the time when Hagar was expecting Ishmael and how God promised both she and her son that they would not be forgotten. He explained: "The story of Hagar is the story of the terrible jealousy of Sarah and the singular ineffectuality of Abraham and the way Hagar who knew how to roll with the punches managed to survive them both. Above and beyond that however, it is the story of how in the midst of the whole unseemly affair the Lord half-tipsy with compassion went around making marvelous promises and loving everybody and creating great nations like the last of the big-time spenders handing out ten dollar bills." I think something of the same spirit applies to these later sons as well. They were not the sons of promise, but they all received benefit from Abraham. The Lord regularly reached out to the world through his servant

Abraham to give benefit and blessing to other people.

In verse 7 and following, we learn of the final demise of our hero. There is a compact series of phrases that we will consider individually, but this passage is a beautiful summary of his life. Wouldn't it be great if someone could write these things about us at the end of a long life? Look at verses 7 through 11:

**And these are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife. And it came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi.**

Abraham lived 175 years. For reasons no one is quite sure of, the patriarchs aged at about half the rate common to us. I think if we had seen Abraham at 175 years of age he would have resembled someone of 90 years today. For us to live 90 years-to go from birth through childhood to the raising of a family and accomplishing work worth doing-is to eat every course of the banquet of life, even dessert. If we live until 90, we will have seen everything offered to people, all of the experiences and opportunities.

For Christians, dying is nothing to fear. In fact, it is something to be anticipated. But God also favors us when he chooses to let us live to the end of an ordinary course of life and see his faithfulness at every stage. Is God faithful to young people just starting out as servants of the Lord? Yes he is! Is he faithful to singles? Yes, he is! Is he faithful to young families? Yes, he is! Is he faithful to grandparents? Yes, he is! Those whom he allows to live long lives get to experience everything. Since Abraham lived 175 years, he did not miss any of the courses in the banquet.

We are further told that he lived to a 'ripe (or good) old age'. Clearly this is how he was perceived by other people. He was a good and winsome old man. He was the kind of man we would want to be around and learn from. Abraham had forgotten more things than I will ever know in life. He had been on more adventures, loved more people, laughed at more things and fought more battles than you or I will ever experience. Someone whose memories are a treasure chest of the faithfulness of God is a good old man who can retain his joy in life and his love for the Lord. You probably know people who in their old age are not good old people. Because of their anger, bitterness, and guilt, it is difficult to be around them. Not Abraham! He was a good old man, somebody who was sought out even in his old age.

When I was 16 years old, I had the opportunity to spend an evening with a number of other high schoolers in a cabin in Colorado with a good old man named Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life. Retired from full-time work as a servant of God, he told us stories about the places he had seen and the things he had done. He was a great Christian leader who had a tremendous effect on his generation because he heard the call of God and led evangelical Christians into a renewed concern for unchurched youth. I remember being delighted at 16 to listen to someone who had been through so much. He praised the Lord to the end, even as he told his stories to us. What a privilege for me as a youth to hear the wisdom of this good old man!

There are many stories about the church fathers. One stands out to me. The apostle John, in his 90s, was carried about by fellow Christians to meetings because he could no longer walk. With the little energy he had left, he continued to teach, "Little children, love one another." To hear a man who had lived that long and become that beautiful urging love must have carried tremendous weight. A good old saint who has served long and well can have an impact that others cannot. Such was Abraham.

In addition to what others said of him, listen to what he thought of himself: "He was an old man and satisfied with life." When he looked at his life, he was satisfied with who he had become. He was glad to look back over the decades of walking with God and taking adventures for the Lord's sake. When Abraham thought of the people he knew, the wars he had fought, the questions he had asked, and the failures he had lived with, he did not regret the course he had followed.

How many people to their sorrow arrive at old age only to regret most of their life? They cry in their hearts, "Where did I lose my way? Why did I spend so much time and energy on things that do not matter?" They feel the futility of the life they have lived. Not Abraham!

He had trusted the Lord as far back as he could remember. Even his failures became lessons from which he grew. He was satisfied with what God had given him to do. What a great testimony! While other people said he had lived to a good old age, he looked at his own life and was satisfied with the choices God had helped him make in order to build a life worth living. In fact, it is a life that has stood for 4,000 years as a model of what it means to live by faith. He was satisfied with his life, and God was satisfied with him. As a result, Abraham is exalted in Scripture as an example for every generation since his own.

Further, we read that 'Abraham was gathered to his people.' This is a difficult phrase to interpret precisely. I think it certainly emphasizes the fact that he did not return to Haran where his father and the rest of his family lived. When he said 'no' to his old life and embarked on the new life of following God, he never looked back. When he died, he had no home country other than Canaan which had been promised to him by God. Thus, when he was gathered to his people, he went to the cave of Machpelah where his wife was buried and where his children would later be buried. Now his people were those who had taken the adventure of faith with him, and it was this country not the old one that would be his. Thus, he was 'gathered to his people,' the ones whose destiny lay in the land promised by God.

Even his descendants saw this land as their home. It is striking to read the story of Jacob who, although he died in Egypt, made his sons promise to bury him in Canaan. Many decades after, Joseph insisted on being embalmed so that 400 years later, at the end of the Egyptian slavery, he could be carried back to the land to be buried. 'Gathered to his people' is a phrase that reflects the faith of these men in the promises of God about this land.

The phrase probably also refers to the day when we will all be gathered with Abraham in the heavenly city. Jesus told a parable about a poor man who, having been taken into the bosom of Abraham, looked across a great chasm to see a rich man tormented in hell. The key to Jesus' description of heaven is the phrase he used: 'gathered to Abraham's bosom' (Luke 16:22). This may be the idea implied in Genesis 25 as well. 'Gathered to his people' anticipates the day when all the people who have the same faith as Abraham will be gathered together before God in the heavenly city.

This last week I took my family to Monterey to see the new aquarium. As part of the trip, we stopped at Mission Carmel, one of the many missions established by Junipero Serra and the Catholic priests who first won Indians to Christ in California. Mission Carmel is one of the biggest, best restored and most remarkable of the old missions. Since my two oldest children have studied California history in school, they knew all about the missions and Junipero Serra who is buried in Mission Carmel. It was interesting to watch my kids. Because they knew how important Father Serra had been, they were eager to find his tombstone. They wanted to see where he was buried. Here is a man who traveled through this state many years ago, yet he is still remembered for his influence.

By faith, Abraham insisted upon being buried next to Sarah in the one plot of land he owned in Canaan. Because people feel the weight of his influence to this day, they continue to visit Machpelah while traveling in Israel in order to see where this man is buried. Still being in the land God promised him, Abraham's remains make a statement about his faith and remind us of the reliability of God's promises.

Jesus said, "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly." Because we participate in the life that comes from God, all the things that represent the heart of God-joy, adventure, freedom, courage, mercy and justice-are born in us. And this life is so abundant that other people can benefit from it as well. Jesus described blessings "pressed down and overflowing" (Luke 6:37). The overflow is an invitation that allows other people to know the truth and to receive both physical and ultimately spiritual benefit from the presence of God in our lives.

Abraham was a life-giver. Melchizedek, Lot, Abimelech, Ishmael, Isaac, Hagar and Keturah-all the people that God brought into Abraham's life-came away better people as a result of knowing him. They either came away

as believers encouraged in their belief or were protected by his courage or were benefited in some other way. None could walk away unchanged or untouched.

We are told in Galatians 3 that we are the direct-descendants of Abraham. Therefore, those of us who have faith like his should become like him. If Christ is within us giving us life, then we too should be men and women of influence who give life to those around us. Our presence should bring peace to any setting where there might be tension or hurt, whether it be in our neighborhood, our work, or our school. Like Abraham, we too should be people who bring about a concern for justice and mercy where they are otherwise absent. We should cause others to ask questions about the living God, and we should lead others to worship God as Abraham did. To be life-givers, to be the source of the bounty of God to the people in our world-this is our calling.

Adam is the first great figure in the book of Genesis. Abraham is the second. Adam started out in the garden as the master of the creation, all that God had given him. God had made everything imaginable to bring beauty and delight to Adam. But by his own choice, Adam ruined everything and went from the highest point to the lowest, banished from the garden and clothed in animal skins. He lost everything.

Abraham's story is the opposite. He started with nothing. In fact, God told him to leave what he did have, his family, homeland, and culture, to go to some unknown, unspecified place. He did not start with any advantages, but by the end of his life he was a man of power and influence. God gave him wealth and family, transforming him into a man of great spiritual stature. He started with nothing but was given everything in the end.

Thus, Abraham reversed the tragedy of Adam. The story of salvation began with Abraham through whose line God would invade the race and turn back the tragedy that Adam's choice had brought into our existence. Now people who believe can start out with nothing and end up with everything, an abundant life and influence upon others. Because of his faith, Abraham is commended to those of us who long to be righteous. Only by faith can we attain the new, abundant life.

In the first message of this series, I quoted the last paragraph of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I would like to repeat it now as we end the series. Because of the reversal of Adam's tragedy, our lives can not only grow to a good old age, but they can also be satisfying. We can receive all the things that Abraham was given: influence, joy and adventure. But this is only the beginning. As C. S. Lewis says, this life is only 'the cover and the title page.' When Adam's tragedy was reversed, when salvation entered this race and faith was made available, we began an adventure that can only become more extraordinary as we go along. The end of Abraham's life was only the beginning of the next great story. I think Lewis captures this beautifully:

"And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

This is the adventure to which the Lord calls us. This is the life that Jesus came to give us. I urge you to believe that God can make you a life-giver. You can receive a life from him that will last forever, and you can give it to others. I hope you will take up the challenge.

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