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THEY DON'T COME FROM OUTER SPACE Genesis 23

Last Sunday we had an early Thanksgiving celebration for our family because Michael and Carissa were here but had to go back to Mississippi this week. We were sitting around the table talking after we had eaten and Jerry mentioned to Michael something strange he had seen a couple of days before. Earlier he had been astounded by the impressive display in the sky caused by the Navy's missile test a couple of weeks ago and had talked to Michael about it. But now he had seen something else. He saw 4 bright lights in the sky one evening maneuvering in odd ways out over the ocean.

Toby immediately picked up on that and chimed in that he had seen something similar not too long ago. They both agreed that these lights were very bright, that they had none of the running lights that the FAA requires of all aircraft, and that they were moving in ways no airplane or helicopter could ever move. Wait, are you guys claiming you saw UFO's? Toby pointed out that by the strict definition what they both saw were, in fact, UFO's. They were unidentified flying objects. They clearly were objects, they most definitely were flying and they sure could not identify them. Neither of them believed that they had seen spacecraft piloted by alien beings, but they also had no idea what they were.

I am going to surprise you this morning by telling you that I know for a fact that there are aliens walking around our planet right now. In fact, there are some in this room with us today. This sounds like something out of one of those old spooky 1950's classic science fiction movies like *Invaders From Mars* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but it is real. Before you write me off as a nut job who also thinks Elvis is alive and living in an apartment in Elko, Nevada, let me guarantee you that when this talk is done you will also be certain that there are aliens on this planet. We are tipped off to this reality by Genesis 23 where we will conclude our study of the life of Abraham.

ABRAHAM EXPERIENCED GREAT LOSS

In this chapter we come to the end of Abraham's and Sarah's story. In verse 2 we see that Sarah died at the age of 127. She was an amazing woman. She was not perfect. She came up with the bad idea of having Abraham sleep with her servant as a way for them to produce a child. She was pretty angry about the whole thing

after Hagar got pregnant. But she had faithfully stuck with Abraham twice when he came up with his lame-brained “she is my sister” ploy.

We have seen that apparently she was a ravishingly beautiful woman, even at the age of 90. This has to be considered one of those things in the Bible that are difficult to believe, but it was apparently true. And at the age of 90 when it was utterly impossible, God worked a miracle and Sarah gave birth to a son. And now she is gone.

Abraham mourned and wept for her. He was devastated by her death. When our first son died more than 30 years ago some Christian people that we knew came to see us and quoted Romans 8:28 to us. God works all things for the good. They essentially were saying we shouldn’t be sad about the death of our son, because, after all, he was with the Lord. I was polite to them, but I just wanted them to go away. The message was that as believers in Jesus we shouldn’t really grieve.

Abraham grieved. He wept because of the death of his beloved wife. What those people said to us was true. Joel was with the Lord, and God would bring some good out of the terrible thing that happened. But the Bible never suggests that we should not experience normal human emotions. It never says we shouldn’t feel bad when we lose someone. Quite the opposite is true. Jesus knew all about the resurrection and the hope his followers have. He knew what was going to happen after his friend Lazarus died. Yet he wept at the grave of his friend. Death is a terrible thing. It is ugly and hurtful in the extreme. It was not a part of God’s original perfect design for human beings. It is a result of evil! The normal, the godly response to such grievous loss is to grieve, and that’s just what Abraham did.

God is not creating robotic humanoids who are like Data from the old Star Trek television shows. In the original *Star Wars* movies you see that one of the characters was a robot, or a droid, called C3PO. He may have been a machine, but in the story he displays emotion. He expresses fear on a couple of occasions and frustration at times with his companion R2D2. In one classic moment he said, “It’s our lot in life. We were made to suffer.” Even in depicting a robot humans assign them emotions that are so intrinsic to being human.

However, it is important that while we insist that we who are followers of Jesus not pretend we don’t have emotion or try to suppress it, we should also observe what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” That’s the difference. We do grieve,

especially over the loss of one we love. We grieve because we will be deprived of their presence for a time. We do not grieve as though their passing is final. Our pain and grief are very real, but they are not hopeless, and that changes the picture.

I have conducted many funerals. All are hard, but I can assure you there is a discernible difference between a funeral where there is hope because a follower of Jesus has gone to be with their Lord, and one where there is no hope because the deceased is seen as irrevocably gone forever. Yes, we grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

ABRAHAM BOUGHT A BURIAL SITE

Abraham wanted to bury his beloved wife's body. This led to a negotiation with some of the residents of Canaan over a burial site. He tells the local people that he is a foreigner and a stranger among them. He is not part of them and is not in his homeland, but he desires to bury his wife. So he asks if one of them would sell him land for a burial plot.

Their response is interesting. They offer to let him use any of their tombs they had set aside for cemetery purposes at no charge. This sounds like a gracious offer. No need for him to shell out any money for Sarah's final expenses. But Abraham insists on buying some land. Why did he do that? My guess is that the local residents didn't want to sell Abraham any land for any purpose. They feared his wealth and power and did not want him to get a beachhead in their land. He was an outsider, and they wanted to keep him that way. Abraham was insistent about buying land because to him it was a statement of faith. He could have taken Sarah's body back to their ancestral home in Ur and buried her there. He could have taken her body out into some uninhabited area, dug a hole and buried her there. But by burying her in Canaan on a piece of property he owned Abraham was saying this was their home. He was acting on God's promise that the land would belong to his descendants someday. Sarah and he would stay on the land God had called them to and would give to their descendants.

Abraham was staking his claim. He wanted land that belonged to him so he could bury her in it and eventually be buried in it himself. They would be there in the future when all the land belonged to the nation that would come from the two of them. This was an act of faith.

Abraham had his eye on a particular site. There was a cave at the edge of a field owned by man named Ephron that he thought was perfect. Ephron's response to

Abraham's request to buy the field appears to be quite gracious. He offers to just give the site to Abraham.

This was actually the opening gambit in a negotiation. Everybody knew that was not a genuine offer. It would have been a shocking scandal had Abraham agreed to that offer and he knew it. The idea was Ephron was showing how amazingly gracious and kind he could be. Abraham was supposed to politely decline the offer, then also be equally gracious in suggesting a price for the site. Abraham did the expected thing. He said no to the giveaway offer then said to Ephron, "You name a price." He is displaying the generosity that he was supposed to show by allowing Ephron to set his own price. Ephron said, "Well, it's worth 400 shekels, but I don't care about that. What's a few hundred shekels between friends?"

That's what he said, but it's not what he meant. He meant the asking price is 400 shekels. It is hard for us to know if that was a fair price because Zillow's records don't go back quite that far and comps are hard to find. Plus somehow the escrow people have lost the appraisal papers. What we know is this was Ephron's initial negotiating price. He did not expect to get it. He assumed Abraham would counteroffer.

I found one possible comp. In 2 Samuel 24:24 David offered to buy from a man named Araunah a field used for threshing wheat. That field would become the site of the temple of Solomon. David bought both the field, likely a larger plot of land, and the oxen on it for the sum of 50 shekels. That incident took place hundreds of years later, so we can't be sure it is an accurate comparison. Maybe there had been a recession or depression in the meantime and the real estate market had collapsed. But it suggests to me that the price Ephron asked was exorbitant and outrageous.

Abraham didn't even blink. He didn't make a counteroffer. He simply said, "Done," and handed over 400 shekels. I think he was making a statement that this was so important you could not put a price on it. It was a statement about how important Sarah was to him and even more about his faith in God's promise. In Genesis 25 Abraham's story comes to an end. We see that after Sarah's death he married again and had more children. He lived another 38 years after Sarah died. When he died he was buried in that cave next to Sarah.

SIGNIFICANCE

LIFE IS TRAGIC

This is the story of two of the greatest people of faith in the Bible and it ends with them dying. Abraham previously had failed spectacularly and compromised in a

cowardly way because he was afraid of dying. Yet he finally learned to trust God. Despite all that, in the end he got exactly what he feared. He died. Doesn't that seem sad to you? Don't you wish there could be some other ending? Isn't that the tragedy of every story? No matter how poignant, no matter how inspiring the triumph, no matter how brave the heroes, the hero either goes out in a blaze of glory or grows old and dies. The stories of the greatest heroes of the faith end the same way. Noah died, Joseph died, Moses died, David died, Isaiah died, Jeremiah died, Jonah died, Daniel died, Peter, James, John and all the rest of Jesus' disciples died, and Paul died.

The awful truth is that no one lives happily ever after. They may live happily for their rest of their lives, but not ever after on this earth. All those fairy tale princesses and princes would go on to grow old and die. Well don't sugarcoat it, Rick. I know, it's hard. But it's true.

The Onion is a satirical website. Recently it ran a spurious story about a recent meeting of the World Health Organization. It said, "World Health Organization officials expressed disappointment Monday at the group's finding that despite the enormous efforts of doctors, rescue workers and other medical professionals worldwide, the global death rate remains constant at 100%. Death, a metabolic affliction causing total shutdown of all life functions, has long been considered humanity's number one health concern...The condition has no cure. 'I was really hoping, what with all those new radiology treatments, rescue helicopters, aerobic TV shows and what have you, that we might at least make a dent in it this year,' WHO Director General Gernst Bladt said. 'Unfortunately it would appear that the death rate remains constant.'"

The New York Times published an article in September about television personality Larry King. It said he is "Obsessed with death." He starts his day by reading obituaries and ponders who will give the eulogy at his funeral. He wonders if it might be Bill Clinton, but then remembers he won't be there to see it. In his fight against death he takes human growth hormone pills every day. He is planning to have his body frozen in hopes that it can someday be reanimated. He says, "It's nuts, but at least it gives a shred of hope."

God worked powerfully in my life through the worst thing Laurie and I have ever been through, the death of our son, Joel. Like everyone else I knew that we are all going to die. I knew it, but I didn't really think that way. In this country we grow up thinking things are going to get better and better. And then came Joel's brief life and death. It was like my eyes were opened for the first time. Life can be cruel and

painful beyond belief. It can happen to me. I realized that though it would take longer, I was inevitably going to the same destiny that Joel met. Everyone is heading for that same finale. There is no escape. I realized that this means that every story on earth is going to end up sad. Death is the ultimate reality for every human being. That is the most essential truth of life.

If that's not depressing enough, remember that Abraham was given these promises about owning the land of Canaan, but all he ever owned was a burial plot. God had promised him that he would have a son, that his son would be the first of descendants that would become a great nation too numerous to count, that God would bless him and his descendants, that the nation of his descendants would possess Canaan and that they would bless the whole world. That's 5 promises. By the time he died Abraham had seen exactly 2 of those promised fulfilled. He died with 60% of them unfulfilled! If God were a baseball hitter he'd be batting .400 and that's terrific. But for a God who is supposedly totally faithful to his promises, not so much. Abraham died without ever getting even a glimpse of most of God's promises!

LIFE IS NOT HOPELESS

This odd little vignette from Abraham's life reminds us of a couple of crucial thoughts. Consider this account of Abraham's negotiation to buy a burial site for Sarah and eventually for himself. Of all the things God could have included in his communication about himself, why this? What is so important about a real estate transaction that it needed to be included in God's revelation?

I believe this is in God's Word as an evidence of the profound truth that Abraham *knew* God would keep his promises. He bought that piece of ground because he knew that as promised his descendants would become a great nation and they were going to own the land of Canaan. He was planting his flag there to show that he knew it would happen. He had hope that God would prove totally faithful to all his promises!

The question before us today then is this: did God keep his promises? Yes he did. He kept all of them. He blessed Abraham, he gave him a son, he made a great nation come from him, he gave that nation the land of Canaan, and through that nation God blessed the entire world. He brought life to the whole world through one of Abraham's descendants, Jesus of Nazareth.

Abraham was among the group of people described in Hebrews 11:13 when it says, "All these people 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.” He lived by faith that God would keep his promise, and God did. Life was hopeful because God is faithful.

Abraham’s life was a picture of an even larger implication. Hebrews 11:16 says of Abraham and others, “they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one.” In other words, ultimately Abraham’s hope wasn’t just in some things that would happen on earth, his hope was in the fact that he would be in God’s eternal kingdom forever. He had the same hope that God offers us in Jesus Christ. That most familiar verse, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Our hope also is not merely in God doing some good things in our lives on this earth. We, too, look forward to a heavenly country.

APPLICATION

OUR HOPE IS IN HEAVEN

Abraham is presented in the Bible as the model of faith. His story tells us that we should expect that life will hold stresses, conflicts and tests, that we will not be perfect but God keeps his promises anyway, but that we will not experience the fulfillment of all our longings in our lifetime. Some of God’s promises remain to be fulfilled after we leave this world.

Like Abraham we are to look to a better country, a heavenly one. This is a sort of good news, bad news kind of thing. It’s really good news that we have the certain hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom. Contrary to what our very secular world tries to tell us, that life will be the farthest thing from boring. It will be real, it will be tangible and physical, and it will be what we’ve dreamed of all of our lives.

There are longings that we all have that are never fully sated in this life. No matter how successful, how loved we are in this world, no matter how much approval we have, we still long for more. Approval, success, love, glory are all wonderful, but isn’t strange that no matter how much we get, we still desire more? Why is that? It is because we are longing for a better country, a heavenly one. It is in that eternal kingdom that we will finally be overwhelmed by total fulfillment of our longings.

Laurie, Carissa and I went last week to see a performance of the musical *MixTape* that featured Dylan, our worship leader. The play is mostly a long medley of music from the 1980’s, including television and movie themes. Some of it is hilarious. They do a Jazzercise routine and a Richard Simmons bit that are a riot. It is an effective reminder that we do a lot of things that seem to make sense right now that

in 25 years are going to look silly and be the subject of ridicule. They had some cool parts too, like the *Top Gun* bit when they sang *Danger Zone*. But there were a couple of moments when they performed songs that touched something deep inside me and made me aware of some undefinable aching. Part of it is a sadness over the impermanence of life, but part of it is a longing for something that is just beyond my ability to identify. What I am longing for is something not of this world, something beautiful and permanent, something I wish for but will never have in this world.

I have mentioned this before, but I have had a number of moments in life that were so beautiful, so emotionally powerful that I wanted to hold them, to keep experiencing them continually. But I can't. They are there, and seemingly in an instant they are gone. Those are echoes, calling me to the place where such moments will be continual. This is going to be better, more exciting, more fun, than we can even dream of. The New Testament pictures God's kingdom being like a wedding feast. Do you know why? It is because in New Testament days a wedding feast was the most fun people had. It was the pinnacle of entertainment. God is telling us his kingdom is going to be more fun than anything you've ever imagined.

That's the good news. The bad news is that we want that life right now. We want to experience the fulfillment of our fondest dreams right here on earth right now. But that is not our hope. Abraham's experience tells us we'll only get a taste of God's promises in this life, but the real fulfillment only happens in his eternal kingdom. Like Abraham we will die never having seen the whole package.

We want life to be full of God's blessing. We want health, security, riches, love, success, approval and glory right now. We may have some of that, but that is not what God has promised us and it is entirely possible that whatever we experience in this world will be far short of what we want. For most of us, life is going to be a battle, full of obstacles, unmet expectations, our own personal demons and failings, broken dreams, painful losses and hardship. Oh it won't be all bad, but it is hard. And as I said even at its best it leaves us with some longings unfulfilled, it leaves us sad over the loss of so many wonderful things, over its impermanence. ***If our faith is not capable of giving us strength, hope, encouragement, peace and joy in the midst of trial and grievous loss, then it is not a faith suitable for this life.***

HOPE IS ESSENTIAL

Many of you know Mike and Kim Fox. We have prayed for them as Kim has been fighting a battle with cancer. This week we learned that her doctors have told Kim

that they are going to stop treatments because they are no longer having any positive effect, they are only weakening her and making her life more unpleasant. In other words, the battle is over and cancer has won. She is going to die, and it won't be very long. Mike and Kim are terrific people. This is grievous news. If all we have is this life then this is as bad as it gets. There is literally no more hope. And our problem is that we humans are desperate for hope. The only thing that can keep us going in a world that is full of obstacles, hardships, losses and disappointments is hope.

I love what God has given me to do in my life, but it is work. That means it is demanding and hard. You all know exactly what I mean because no matter what your job some part of it is difficult and tiring. How does it affect you when you have a vacation planned a few months down the road? You have hope of a break, and that gives you the strength to keep going with all your heart. You know it is not forever, and that makes all the difference.

You all know that Laurie and I have been friends of Mike and Dee Riley for many years. Mike this year took over as the football coach at the University of Nebraska. In case you don't know, let me tell you that in that state Cornhusker football is not a matter of life and death, it's bigger than that. Those fans are rabid. Mike's tenure there has gotten off to a start that is less than auspicious. They lost their first game when they had the game won with only seconds to go, but BYU scored a touchdown on a desperation Hail Mary pass from midfield on the final play of the game and beat them. They lost their 3rd game when they trailed the whole game, mounted a furious comeback to tie the game in regulation, only to have their quarterback throw an interception in overtime to lose it. Then they lost their next game by 1 point in the closing seconds. So it has gone. By the time they got to their 8th game the villagers had their pitchforks and torches out and were rioting. Mike had become Public Enemy Number 1 in Nebraska. I watched a game on television and the TV announcers were expressing dismay that the talk around Nebraska was about whether Mike would be fired before the season ended or after. But then, despite being a heavy underdog, they beat previously undefeated Michigan State, ranked in the top10 at the time. Then they won again. In their final game they face undefeated Iowa. If they win that game guess what will happen. The villagers will put away their pitchforks and go home. It will have been a disappointing season, but by going on a winning streak at the end, beating highly ranked teams in the process, they will have given hope to their fans. If there is hope, then people can deal with the disappointments of today.

In Jesus Christ we have hope. We have hope that for people we love like Kim Fox this is not truly the end. Hope that my son Joel and my Dad, people who have been a part of our church like Thyra Fellows, are not gone forever. We will see them again and it will be joyful. Hope for us that when our time comes it will be a transition to a far better life, not the end forever. Hope that our desire for true and permanent joy will finally be fulfilled because God has guaranteed us that it will be. Hope that God will get us through whatever we must face and that our losses and our suffering are never wasted, that God will make something beautiful out of all of it. It is this hope that sustains us day after day all of our lives.

MEANWHILE, WE ARE OUTSIDERS

We can see something else significant in this story. It is clear that Abraham was treated like an outsider here. Hebrews 11:13 says of people like Abraham, “They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting they were foreigners and strangers on earth.” Like Abraham being a stranger in his society, believers in Jesus are strangers on earth! We don’t belong here. In the New American Standard translation 1 Peter 2:11 addresses followers of Jesus as “aliens and strangers.”

Aliens? There’s a television commercial advertising Cheez-It crackers that makes me laugh. In it a lab researcher in a white lab coat and holding a clipboard and a pen is speaking with a block of cheese. He mentions the new Cheez-It cracker that has grooves in it and says it’s the “best of both worlds.” The cheese says, “There’s more than one world?” The lab guy starts to respond, “No it’s just...” but the cheese goes on, “they’re among us disguised as humans, and you’re one of them!” He yells out, “Security. He’s one of them and he’s got a probe.” The lab guy says, “It’s a pen.” The cheese says, “It’s a probe.”

They’re among us disguised as humans, and you’re one of them. I’m talking to you, follower of Jesus. You look like everybody else. You’re disguised as a normal human being, but you’re as alien here as E.T. was. Philippians 3:20 says our citizenship is in heaven. That’s where we belong, that’s where we are at home. We will never be at home here. The fact that we do not belong here, that in fact we are aliens here, has some implications about who we are and how we live.

We are going to be different.

I’d like you to do a little thought exercise with me for a moment. Imagine that you go on a vacation to the Cayman Islands. While you are there how might you be different from the local people?

Well for one thing you are going to view the news quite differently. You might read in the newspaper that there is a big brouhaha because it turns out that the new Clifton Harris High School in George Town on Grand Cayman has been assessed at a value \$40 million less than it cost to build it! Let's imagine that they are having elections. They are electing candidates for their National Assembly. In addition they are debating a proposal to have the government provide universal health care, an idea that is hotly contested.

As a tourist, an outsider, you might find all of those things of some interest, but are they going to consume you? Are you going to get up in arms over the cost of the high school? Are you going to argue with people over the health care proposal? No, you may discuss them a little with someone, but in the end you're not going to get particularly invested in any of that stuff because this is not your home.

You're not going to be concerned about fitting in with Caymanian society and becoming popular there. You want to respect their customs, of course, and you want to be loving to the people, but you aren't going to be obsessed with adopting their customs and being like them, winning their approval. You are not going to get caught up in your position in society, in building lots of wealth on the island, on making your hotel room the nicest decorated hotel room on the island, on being sure to have the latest in Cayman fashion when it comes to clothes. You are only there for a little while. It is not your home, so you are not going to be totally focused on life on that island.

You begin to see the implications don't you? We don't belong here. Why do we get so uptight about the maneuverings and politics of this world? Of course we are interested and we can discuss them with people, but we invest little emotion into it because this is not our home. And we are always aware of the fact that we are just passing through on our way home, so all the things of this earth we see as things we merely use while we are on our sojourn here.

Our daughter, Carissa, is somewhat bemused by what she experiences in Mississippi. She lives in a place where there is literally no scenery because it is flat and heavily wooded. In her words when they drive anywhere it is like being in a tree tunnel. In the winter it is cold, gray, barren and brown. In the summer it is so miserably hot and humid you can't go outside. It offers near zero when it comes to cultural attractions. And people think camo is the height of fashion, to be worn everywhere. Being from California she is used to seeing mountains and hills and sweeping vistas of the ocean. She is used to a vast array of restaurants, plays, concerts and all manner of outdoor activities. She is used to weather that allows her

to be outside year around. But in her town are people who cannot imagine living anywhere else. That's because the farthest they've ever been from home is maybe to the big city of Jackson, the capital 90 minutes away, or possibly to the gulf at Mobile, Alabama a couple of hours away. They are satisfied with a town nearly devoid of charm because they don't know any better. But she does and she wants more. She longs for home. We are in a world where this is all people know and they want nothing more than what they have here. But we know better. Our home is so much better, and because of it we are going to be different.

We will be viewed with some suspicion

We are outsiders here. Carissa experiences this in Mississippi. She is an outsider, and everyone knows it. She and Michael had an odd experience. One day they flew to Oxford, Mississippi in a private plane they had rented. Once there they went to a café to get some lunch. They walked into the café and every person in it turned and stared at them. It was obvious they saw them as outsiders and weren't sure what to make of them.

Abraham was feared and respected, but not included because he was an outsider. We should not be surprised if we are not included, if the world neither understands us nor cares about us, if it discounts us and shuts us out. We are aliens. We are different and more than a little suspicious to them. This world is not our home. We are aliens, walking around looking like normal human beings, but we are far from normal. We are God's children, before whom angels, those powerful beings, are in awe. Yes, we are different, misunderstood, potentially despised. All I can say is "vive le difference." Let's never forget that we are citizens of heaven.