

The Death and Burial of Sarah

Genesis 23

Genesis 23 - *“Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ² So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. ³ Then Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴ “I am a foreigner and a visitor among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” ⁵ And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ⁶ “Hear us, my lord: You are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place, that you may bury your dead.”*

⁷ Then Abraham stood up and bowed himself to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. ⁸ And he spoke with them, saying, “If it is your wish that I bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and meet with Ephron the son of Zohar for me, ⁹ that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he has, which is at the end of his field. Let him give it to me at the full price, as property for a burial place among you.”

¹⁰ Now Ephron dwelt among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the presence of the sons of Heth, all who entered at the gate of his city, saying, ¹¹ “No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of the sons of my people. I give it to you. Bury your dead!” ¹² Then Abraham bowed himself down before the people of the land; ¹³ and he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “If you will give it, please hear me. I will give you money for the field; take it from me and I will bury my dead there.” ¹⁴ And Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, ¹⁵ “My lord, listen to me; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead.” ¹⁶ And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, currency of the merchants. ¹⁷ So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, which were within all the surrounding borders, were deeded ¹⁸ to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.

¹⁹ And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ So the field and the cave that is in it were deeded to Abraham by the sons of Heth as property for a burial place.”

Background Notes

Sarah died at 127 years of age. She is the only woman in the Bible whose age is given, both here and in chapter 17. To give Sarah a proper burial, Abraham bought a field and cave known as “the field and cave of Machpelah” from Ephron the Hittite. The Hittites were a non-Semitic people who originated in what is now Turkey. However, groups of Hittites were living in Canaan during the patriarchal times. In fact, the negotiations between Abraham and Ephron seem to reflect

Hittite custom, when Ephron insisted that Abraham take the field and cave as a gift. According to Hittite custom, that made Abraham fully responsible for the upkeep and dues on the cave.

The negotiations between Abraham and Ephron may further reflect a Bedouin type of bargaining or haggling process, where the seller offers the desired item first as a gift (v11): *“No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of the sons of my people. I give it to you. Bury your dead!”* Continuing the customary process, when the buyer insists on paying for the item, the seller gives the supposed value of this expensive gift at an inflated price, in this case 400 shekels of silver. Then the bargaining would begin. This was an inflated price, because Jeremiah bought a field for 17 shekels of silver (32:9).

Ephron may have been trying to take advantage of Abraham, knowing that Abraham was in a state of grief. And Abraham did not bargain - he paid the full outrageous price of 400 shekels of silver. Why? Perhaps because, in his grief, he didn't want to be involved in a bargaining process, or perhaps he didn't want to be indebted to Ephron. So Abraham bought the field and the cave of Machpelah, and there he buried Sarah. Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah were also buried here. You can visit the cave of Machpelah in Hebron today.

Doctrinal Points

1. The believer's death should be a demonstration of great faith.

Hebrews 11:13 says: *“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”* Who is meant in the phrase, “these all died in faith”? Look back at the passage. It means **all** faithful believers, from Abel on, including Sarah. Hebrews 11:11 says: *“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.”* So Sarah was a woman of faith. She had some doubts along the way - she laughed at the promise of God, and had to be rebuked by the Lord Himself. Overall, however, Sarah was a woman of faith. She lived by faith, and she died in faith.

What does it mean: “to die in faith”? It means to face death without wavering in your faith, and to trust the Lord fully right to the end. This was true of Sarah, and it should be true of us. The believer's death should be a demonstration of great faith. It's one thing to demonstrate faith when you are living; it is quite another thing to demonstrate your faith when you are dying. The way you face death can be a demonstration of great faith.

Some of you know one of my college faculty colleagues, Jim Catron. Jim has cancer, and he faces the possible prospect of death in the near future. But Jim's outlook is an outstanding demonstration of faith in God. There is no questioning of God's sovereign ways or of God's goodness. There are no doubts concerning his faith. Jim is a great example of a great faith.

How will you face death? How will I face death? Let's pray that your death and my death will be demonstrations of great faith. The believer's death should be a demonstration of great faith.

2. The believer's death should be a time of great witness.

Sarah's funeral was a great witness to the people of the land. In that day and that culture, the custom was to bury your dead in the land of your fathers, the land where your relatives lived – in your homeland. Abraham came from Ur, and the relatives who had left Ur with him did not live in Canaan. They lived in the area of Haran, about 500 miles away. But God had promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham, and Canaan was now his home, even though Abraham was still a "sojourner" in the land.

When Abraham buried Sarah in the land of Canaan, rather than returning to Haran or Ur, it was a great witness to his faith in God. The people of the land acknowledged him as "*a mighty prince among us*," and he would have been recognized as a man of great faith in his God. So Sarah's funeral was a great witness to the surrounding community.

Have you thought about the fact that your funeral can be a great witness? Every Christian funeral should be a witness. In the way we handle ourselves, Christians can demonstrate that our grief is not like other people's grief. It's not the kind of grief of people who have no hope. We know that the believing dead are in the presence of the Lord, and that we will be together again. We'll see them again in Heaven!

However, more than just a witness in general, a Christian funeral can be a great witness in the way it is planned. Before my father died he wrote down specific instructions that the gospel was to be clearly proclaimed at his funeral. I spoke at my Dad's funeral, and it was a joy to carry out his instructions. There were a number of unbelievers there, and they heard the gospel in no uncertain terms. It was a great witness to them.

A few years ago a Christian girl from our town was tragically killed in a car accident. Her parents did not hold a "wake" or visitation before the service. The memorial service was held in a large church, thus the family's unbelieving friends and neighbors were "forced," out of respect, to come to the service - and hear the message of Jesus Christ! It was a great time of witness.

Sarah's death was a time of great witness, and your death can be a time of great witness. The believer's death should be a time of great witness.

Practical Applications

1. It's not wrong to grieve.

Abraham *"came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her."* Why, you may say, was Abraham mourning? Wasn't he a man of great faith, who trusted God to meet his needs? Didn't he know that Sarah had died in faith and was with the Lord? Yes, that's all true, but the death of Sarah was a time of great loss for Abraham. Sarah was his wife and companion for many years. Faith does not set aside natural affection and great sense of loss!

It was not a lack of faith that caused Abraham to grieve. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 says, *"But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope."* We do not sorrow as others sorrow, but we do sorrow, because we will greatly miss our friend or loved one who has gone to Heaven before us. We don't grieve as people who have no hope of eternal life grieve, and we won't grieve forever - but we do grieve. It was not wrong for Abraham to grieve, and it is not wrong for believers today to grieve.

2. Let's not distort the biblical concept of death.

The Bible teaches that, for the believer, death is a stepping-stone to glory. When we die, we are "absent from the body and **present with the Lord!**" 2 Corinthians 5:8 says: *"We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."* The body of the believer is an earthly "tent." It's a temporary dwelling that will be folded up and put away when the believer enters the presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:1-6). The body is laid away to await the resurrection.

I believe that Christians may distort this truth by excessive emphasis on the body at the time of death - elaborate and costly caskets, lengthy "viewings," and so on. It may be that the Jewish custom (both then and now) of burying the body quickly, without embalming, is probably more in line with the biblical concept of death.

When Margie and I go to be with the Lord, we would like people to remember our lives, and not spend time viewing the "earthly tents" that we have left behind! It is our hope that people will think of us as having "finished the course," and having "kept the faith." We will be rejoicing in the presence of the Lord! Our "earthly tents" will quietly be folded up and laid away to await resurrection.

Let's not distort the biblical concept of death.