

33. A time to die

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If every single dead atheist or agnostic could come back and tell us, they all would say, "God is real; heaven is real; hell is real."

Someone said it well, "Man can defy the gravity, but he cannot defy the grave." For Christians, death is both a friend and an enemy. Death is a friend when it releases a believer of Jesus Christ from pain and suffering of life to the eternal life in heaven. But it is an enemy because it robs us our family members, friends, and loved ones from us. Though we have the assurance that those believers are with our Savior Jesus Christ in heaven immediately after their death, but we still grieve over their temporary separation from us.

In chapter 23 and the first portion of 25 in the Book of Genesis, we are going to find the death of Abraham's wife Sarah and Abraham himself.

A. THE DEATH OF SARAH THE PRINCESS

Genesis 23:1-2 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.

Sarah had been a good wife to Abraham and a good mother to Isaac. Yes, she had her faults, as we all do, but God called her a princess and listed her with the heroes and heroines of faith that is mentioned in the Book of Hebrews 11. The apostle Peter named her as a good example for Christian wives to follow, and the apostle Paul used her to illustrate the grace of God in the life of the believer.

Sarah died in faith of God, so Abraham knew that she was in the Lord's care. In the OT, very little was revealed about the afterlife, but God's people knew that God would receive them when they died.

Abraham loved his wife, and her death was a painful experience for him. He showed his love and his grief through his mourning. These are the first recorded tears in the Bible, and tears will not end until God wipes them away in His glory after the Great Tribulation. Even though he was a man of faith, Abraham did not feel that his tears were evidence of unbelief.

How often in my Christian life I have heard well-meaning but ignorant people say to their grieving friends or relatives, "Now, don't cry!" For those people, there is a Latin phrase – "Shut up!" Telling someone not to cry is a very poor counsel because God made us with the ability to weep. Grieving is one of God's gifts to help heal broken hearts when people we love are taken from us in death. However, we cannot mourn over our dead forever. There comes a time when we must accept what has happened, face life, and fulfill our obligations to both the living and the dead. And move on.

The late theologian Vance Havner had a wife named Sarah. Shortly after her untimely death, when a young man shared his condolences with him, "I'm sorry to hear you lost your wife." He smiled and replied, "Son, when you know where something is, you haven't lost it." For the believer, to be "absent from the body" means to be "present with the Lord." So Christians should not approach death with fear.

B. FINDING A BURIAL SITE

Genesis 23:3-16 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.

Why didn't Abraham take Sarah somewhere else to bury her? He buried her in Hebron because it is the promised land and the hope of the future is there.

Because he was not a citizen of the land, Abraham had to request a place to bury his wife. The truth was that Abraham owned the whole land. God had given it to him, but there was no way he could convince his neighbors of that.

Like Abraham, God's people today are "pilgrims and strangers" in this present world. We live in this physical body which one day will be taken down when we move to glory.

The men of the land called Abraham "a mighty prince", which in the Hebrew is "a prince with God." He had a good testimony among them, and they respected him. These Hittites did not worship Abraham's God, but they respected Abraham and his faith.

It is a wonderful thing in a time of sorrow when the child of God has a strong witness to the unbelievers around. There is a natural sorrow that everyone expects us to show, but there is also a supernatural grace that God gives so that we might have joy in the midst of sorrow. The unsaved can tell the difference, and this gives us an opportunity for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Ephron, the Canaanite, follows the cultural customs of bargaining. First, the seller offers to give the item. Then, when that is refused, the seller suggests a price, which he claims is modest but is really high. This is understood to be the starting point, and from there the bargaining begins.

Abraham shows how a Christian should do business with the world – courteously and fairly.

By the way, if you go to Jerusalem in Israel and you pay whatever the merchants ask for, they will laugh at you as soon as you leave their shop. They always start extremely high. So you need to start at a half price of what they ask for. You haggle and get the merchandise at the price you want to pay or walk away. Because you can get the exact same thing from the next shop at a cheaper price.

C. BURYING THE PRINCESS

Genesis 23:17-20 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.

The text emphasizes this property was Abraham's land not only by the promise of God but also by deed.

When you get to the end of Genesis, you find that Abraham's tomb is quite full. Sarah was buried there, and then Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah; and then Jacob joined them. And this was the place Joseph told his descendants to bury him, taking his bones with them when they came into the Promised Land.

Genesis ends with a full tomb, but the four Gospels end with an empty tomb! Jesus has conquered death and taken away its sting. Because of His victory, we need not fear death or the grave.

We do not sorrow as those who have no hope. Because we've been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and we are looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.

D. THE OBITUARY OF A PATRIARCH

Genesis 25:7-11 This is the sum of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: one hundred and seventy-five years. 8 Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. 9 And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, 10 the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth. There Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife. 11 And it came to pass, after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac dwelt at Beer Lahai Roi.

After a person dies, we read the obituary, and after the burial, we read the will. Speaking of an obituary, whenever I see the obituary section in the newspaper, I am amazed that all those people died in alphabetical order. Just amazing.

Let's start with Abraham's obituary. He died "in a good old age" as the Lord had promised him in chapter 15. He had walked with the Lord for over a hundred years

and had been the friend of God. Old age is "good" if you have the blessing of the Lord on your life. In spite of physical deterioration and weakness, you can enjoy His presence and do His will until the very end.

Abraham passes from the scene, being one of the most important men of the Bible. He is mentioned 70 times in the NT alone.

Like Sarah before him, Abraham "died in faith." For more than 100 years, he had been a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth, seeking a heavenly country. And now his desires were fulfilled. His life had not been an easy one. But he had walked by faith and the Lord had brought him through.

I need to talk to those who have been in the Lord for a long time and now you are facing your sunset years. You have so much wisdom to offer to young believers in the Lord. Instead of sitting on your hands and expecting someone to serve you, you go serve others. Let God use your wisdom and service for the Kingdom and His glory to the maximum. Because there is no retirement age in the service for the Lord.

Abraham was flourishing and fruitful to the very end. How few people really experience joy and satisfaction when they reach old age. When many of them look back, it is with regret. When they look ahead, it is with fear. When they look around, it is with complaints. You don't have to be like that anymore. When you truly walk with God, you get to understand His peace, His joy, and His hope.

E. THE WILL OF A PATRIARCH

Genesis 25:1-6 Abraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah. 2 And she bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. 3 Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. 4 And the sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abidah, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. 5 And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. 6 But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of the concubines which Abraham had; and while he was still living he sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east.

Abraham left his material wealth to his family and his spiritual wealth to the whole world, all who would believe in Jesus Christ.

When God renewed Abraham's natural strength for the begetting of Isaac, He did not take that strength away, and Abraham was able to marry again and have another family. However, he made a distinction between these six new sons and his son Isaac, because Isaac was God's choice to carry on the covenant line. Keturah's sons received gifts, but Isaac received the inheritance and the blessings of the covenant.

All who have trusted Jesus Christ are the children of promise as Isaac was the child of God's promise. This means that we have a share in Abraham's will. What did he leave us?

1) Abraham left us a clear witness of salvation through faith.

He could not have been saved by the ritual of circumcision because God declared him to be righteous long before Abraham was circumcised.

2) Abraham left us the example of a faithful life.

Wherever Abraham went, he pitched his tent and built his altar, and he let the people of the land know that he was a worshipper of the true and living God. When he

offered Isaac on the altar, Abraham proved his faith in God and his love for God. He was not saved by works, but he proved his faith by his works.

3) Abraham left us the Jewish nation.

It is through the Jews that we have the knowledge of the true God, plus the Word of God and the salvation of God. It is beyond my understanding how anybody could be anti-Semitic when the Jews have given so much to the world and have suffered so much in this world. Unfortunately, the Jewish people thought their relationship to Abraham saved them, but they are no different from unsaved Gentiles who think they are going to heaven because their parents or grandparents were Christians.

4) Abraham left us the Savior of the world.

Our Lord promised Abraham that through him all the world would be blessed in Genesis 12. He kept that promise. It is up to individual people to claim and to believe that blessing in Jesus Christ.