

Genesis: *The Relationship of Grief and Faith*
Genesis 23:1-20

As we continue our journey through Genesis, we come now to the final three stories which will conclude the story of Abraham: the death of Sarah, the marriage of Isaac, and the death of Abraham. All three stories tie together themes that have been present throughout Abraham's life. We will start with the story of Sarah's passing in Genesis 23, so please stand and let us read Genesis 23:1-20:

Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ² And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. ³ And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, ⁴ "I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." ⁵ The Hittites answered Abraham, ⁶ "Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God ⁷ among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead." ⁷ Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. ⁸ And he said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, ⁹ that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place."

¹⁰ Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, ¹¹ "No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead." ¹² Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. ¹³ And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." ¹⁴ Ephron answered Abraham, ¹⁵ "My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels ¹⁶ of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." ¹⁶ Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

¹⁷ So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over ¹⁸ to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

My message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) What Grief Reveals; 2) Investing in Faith; and 3) A Better Country.

I. What Grief Reveals

When I sat down and re-read Genesis 23 earlier this week, I will admit that I was uncomfortable and tempted to skip this chapter. I did not immediately see what there was to preach on, and there was an unusual sense of dismissiveness in my mind. However, as I prayed and began to read deeper, I realized why I was feeling the way I was feeling: this text has to do with the death of a beloved wife—and that is not anything at all that I want to think about.

I suspect that many of us here today would rather not dwell upon the reality of death and the impending/inevitable loss of those we love. I have parents and precious in-laws who are in their 80's, not to mention a beloved bird-dog that is 12...I don't want to think about the loss that awaits me, either. We don't want to think about death and loss, and yet every week there is a family in this church that grieves the passing of someone they dearly loved. Every week. Loss is unavoidable on this side of Eden. Grief will find us all.

So, it is appropriate for us to walk slowly through this chapter and honor the story of Sarah's death as we observe the grief of Abraham, the father of our faith.

Our text reads: Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ² And Sarah died at Kiriath-Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

Sarah died at the age of 127. In the ancient mindset, Sarah's long life would have been seen as a sign of blessing from God, which is ironic given how long everyone thought her to be cursed by God due to her infertility.

Remember that Sarah was the daughter of Terah from the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans. She was raised as a moon-worshipping pagan like Abraham who shared the same father as Sarah, though she was born of a different mother and was ten years younger than her half-brother. By the time we first hear of Sarah in the biblical narrative, she is already married to Abraham, though we have no idea how long they had already been married when Terah moved the family from Ur of the Chaldeans to the city of Haran in the southern part of modern-day Turkey. Given how early the ancients would typically marry, we can assume that Abraham and Sarah had been married for many years by the time that Abraham first heard from God in Genesis 12, because at that time Abraham was already 75 years old and Sarah was 65 years old. In truth, we can't know for certain how long the couple was married, but we do know it was at least 60 years if they were married right before God's call in Genesis 12. That's a long time to be married. My parents are celebrating their 60th year of marriage here in a few months, so this story hits close to home and here's what I can tell you: my dad loves my mom more now after 60 years than he has ever loved her in his whole life. I think the same was true for Abraham.

We learn that Sarah was in Kiriath-Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan when she died. That fact is given to us because the last thing we heard about Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 was that they returned to Beersheba in the land of the Philistines and remained there for some time. That was 25 years ago, so it's possible that the whole family moved back "home" to the region of Hebron at some point which is probably synonymous with Mamre where they used to live before Isaac was born. The name Kiriath-Arba means "City of Four", suggesting the four primary cities in the region of Hebron: Aner, Eschol, Mamre, and Hebron.

I think it's also likely that Abraham and Isaac were out west tending the flocks when they got word that Sarah had passed. We get the sense that Abraham was not home when Sarah died, so the action picks up when Abraham arrives and "goes in" to see his deceased bride. Predictably, it is more than he can bear. We read, "And Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her." Church, there is nothing more heartbreaking than watching a spouse of 60 years sit beside his or her beloved who has just died. I have been in the room in that scenario on more than a few occasions, so I can imagine this scene all too well.

When you have been married over 60 years, most of the people who might have remembered your childhood or your younger years are already dead. The one and only person

who remembers who you were and all the adventures of your life is your spouse—he/she is the only person who was there with you through it all. So, when that spouse dies, the loneliness that ensues is something that most of us cannot even comprehend.

Sarah remembered Abraham's father and mother and all the extended family. Sarah remembered that day when God called Abraham to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house. She was there, and she had to make the decision to leave her family as well. As Abraham sits beside the bed of his deceased bride, all of these memories come pouring into his mind. He remembers the day they were married; their first kiss and the consummation of their relationship. He remembers their life together with their father, and the hard conversations that preceded their departure from everything and everyone they had ever loved. He remembers that first tenuous journey into the land of Canaan with his beautiful bride, not knowing what to expect, fearful that he might be killed because men were always drawn to his attractive wife. He remembers the foolish arrangement they had made to tell everyone that "Sarah was his sister." He remembers Sarah as the intended concubine of Pharaoh in Egypt and Abimelech in Philistia. He remembers when Sarah convinced him to take a second wife in order to have a son, and Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar. He remembers how Sarah saw clearly that the Plan B wife and child had to go, even when Abraham could not see that for himself. He remembers that miraculous day when Sarah gave birth to Isaac and the joy Isaac brought to his mother's heart. Memory after memory floods the heart of a husband now separated from the love of his life, a woman who he had loved for the vast majority of his days; and we read that "Abraham mourned and wept" for his wife.

This is the first and only record of Abraham weeping. Nothing is noted of Abraham weeping when he was called to leave his father's home. He does not weep at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; nor is Abraham said to weep at the altar of Moriah with the dagger in his hand. And yet now, at the deathbed of his beloved bride, the patriarch weeps.

"Why would Abraham weep over the death of his wife? Doesn't he have faith in God? Doesn't he trust God?" These kinds of questions sometimes arise within the believing community, and my response to said people is a firm: Please stop! Shedding tears for those who have died is NOT an act of faithlessness—on the contrary, our grief reveals our love. Faith and tears are not incompatible; not in the least. One could easily argue that Abraham had more faith than the average person, and Abraham wept when his wife died. Jesus had perfect faith; Jesus wept along with Mary and Martha at the grave of Lazarus.

Death is our enemy. Death is an intruder. Death is a product of and the Fall. It was to conquer the power of sin and death that Jesus endured the cross and claimed victory over the tomb upon His resurrection! Church, please resist any notion that we are less than faithful when we weep in the absence of those who have died. The tears of grief reveal the heart that loves. F. B. Meyer writes:

Sorrow is love widowed and bereaved, and where that is present, its most natural expression is in tears. Religion comes not to make us unnatural and inhuman but to purify and ennoble all those natural emotions with which our manifold nature is endowed. Jesus wept. Peter wept. The Ephesian elders wept on the neck of the apostle Paul, whose face they thought they would never see again. Christ stands by each mourner, saying, “Weep, my child; weep, for I have wept.”¹

He goes on to write:

Tears relieve the burning brain, as a shower the electric clouds. Tears discharge the insupportable agony of the heart, as an overflow lessens the pressure of the flood against the dam. Tears are the material out of which heaven weaves its brightest rainbows. Tears are transmuted into the jewels of better life, as the wounds in the oyster turn to pearls.²

Tears of grief will come, and we know that often those tears are intensified by the things we should have said or wished we hadn’t said. Many who grieve wish for five more minutes to ask for forgiveness and to extend forgiveness--to impart those final words of love and blessing. Many live with regrets for time wasted. In these things, as in all things, we must give them over to the Lord and trust God to do with them as He will according to His perfect love for us and those who have passed. We must learn to grieve honestly, trusting that our God understands grief, and that He will gently guide us through the shadow of the valley of death. The Lord is our Shepherd, and He understands our pain.

Thankfully, God conquered the power of sin and death through His only beloved Son, so that those who live and believe in Him “shall never die” according to John 11. Death doesn’t win; and we shall rise to be with the Lord forever, amen? Church, trust God, and grieve deeply in your season of loss. Both are biblical; both are faithful.

Let us now turn to our second subheading:

II. Investing in Faith

As is always the case following the devastating loss of a loved one, decisions must be made; and Abraham immediately faces a very difficult decision: where to bury his beloved wife. The ancients, like many in the 21st century, had sacred rituals for honoring their dead. Many of the rituals would include committing the bodies of the dead to rest with “their people.” So, in theory, Abraham would be obliged to return Sarah’s body to Haran or to Ur so that she might be buried beside one or both of her parents. Yet that is not at all what happens. As we pick up the narrative, we read in vss. 3-4 we read: ³ And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, ⁴ “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” Abraham has already determined that he will not return Sarah to the land where she was raised. Their family members are not believers, and the land from whence they were called is no longer their home. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants, so here in the land of Canaan is where Sarah shall be placed to rest. Even so, listen to the words that Abraham uses: “I am a sojourner and a foreigner among you...”

¹ F.B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham* (Lynnwood: Emerald Books, 1996) 174.

² Ibid

Abraham has lived amongst the Canaanites for the better part of 60 years, and he likely lived there in Mamre for decades, but he is still not one of them. Though his flocks have required tremendous land for grazing, God has made a way for Abraham to survive and thrive while never once owning a piece of land that he could call his own. Why? Because God promised to GIVE the land to Abraham's descendants many years from now, and Abraham is believing God for the promise that He made. That said, now that Sarah has passed and Abraham is not long for this world, Abraham will speak to the leaders of the Hittites and request to purchase a property where he can bury his wife. The exchange begins in vss. 4-5 when Abraham states: ⁴“I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” ⁵ The Hittites answered Abraham, ⁶“Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.”

Notice first how respectful the Hittites are to Abraham. They refer to Abraham as “a prince of God among us.” There is nothing disingenuous about this response. Abraham has earned favor with his pagan neighbors; and, like Abimelech, they notice that God's blessing is upon this foreigner who has sojourned amongst them for decades. The response of the Hittite leaders is very kind and genuine when they state, “Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.”

Note that Abraham is not interested in handouts or trying to get something for nothing. He knows exactly what he wants, and he is willing to pay for it. We read in vs. 7ff: ⁷Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. ⁸ And he said to them, “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, ⁹ that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place.”

We know nothing about this man Ephron, so what follows next is open for interpretation. Ephron might be very generous, or he might be incredibly strategic. Either way, being put on the spot in front of all the people, and having already heard the elders commit that “none of us will withhold from you his tomb”, Ephron politely replies, “No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.”

Ephron's offer is generous. Ephron offers not only the cave, but the entire field, and he emphasizes that he will freely give both to Abraham. Even so, Abraham knows that long after he is gone, there will be no way of keeping this cave as a sacred place of burial for his family if he does not acquire the piece of property through a fair sale of the land. He also knows that Ephron is feeling the pressure from all the people present at the city gate, and he does not want to acquire this land through a feigned “favor” that Ephron feels pressured into offering.

So, once again, in an act of incredible humility, Abraham bows before Ephron and asks him to accept full payment for the property. ¹² Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. ¹³ And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, “But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”

In classic Eastern deference, Ephron reveals the non-negotiable value of the land when he replies, “My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” Note: Ephron is saving face by still offering the land for free, yet he casually throws the purchase price out there for all to hear. And that’s all Abraham needs to hear.

Abraham promptly weighs out the silver on the scales used there for commerce in the city center, and he pays Ephron for the full market value of the land with no haggling whatsoever. Because “the people of the land” were present for this dialogue and the ensuing payment, the contract is official, and the transfer of ownership is permanent. Furthermore, each man has shown kindness, deference, and honor to the other in a sensitive situation that required clarity and thoughtful courtesy.

Church, we would do well to learn from Abraham’s example when it comes to doing business with the unbelieving world. Christians should be the most courteous people in any room, and our business transactions should be fair, honorable, and trustworthy. We should not expect to get something for nothing, nor should we ever take advantage of people. We must always remember that how we handle ourselves, including our business transactions, will set the tone for those who come after us.

Even in the midst of his grief, Abraham demonstrates a level of humility, courtesy, and integrity that will be long remembered by those who come after him. I’ll get to that in a minute as we close, but I want you to know that Sarah will not be the only one buried in this cave. In the years to come, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah and Jacob will also be buried there. Joseph will also request to be buried along with his fathers in the land of Canaan. Now why is that significant?

It is significant because, once again, Abraham believed God. He believed that in future generations to come, God would honor His promise to give all the land of Canaan to his descendants, and thus Abraham and Sarah would be laid to the rest in the land of their people...a people who will not inherit the land for another 400 years! Abraham made an investment in faith; and God delivered what He promised in part, and one day that promise will be delivered in full, once and for all.

Let us quickly close now with my third subheading:

III. A Better Country

You may be interested to learn that one of the most quoted lines from Abraham comes from this story in Genesis 23. Remember that early on in vs. 4 Abraham states, “I am a sojourner and a foreigner among you...”

When the patriarch of the faith makes such a statement long into his life, and particularly in the midst of grieving his deceased wife, it makes an impact, as did the way he handled himself with such grace and humility in the purchase of the land. Abraham, though wildly successful and blessed in every way, reveals his heart on this day when Sarah dies. Abraham understands himself to be a sojourner and a foreigner...this land is not his home.

Later in Leviticus 25:23, God will remind the people through Moses: “The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.”

When David and his people made preparations to build the temple, David spoke as a representative of the people when he said (1 Chronicles 29:14-15: “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.”

In Psalm 39:12 David writes: “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! For I am a sojourner with you, a stranger, like all my fathers.”

So deeply embedded into the memory of God’s people were these words of Abraham that the writer of Hebrews inscribes them above the memorial of those who lived by faith. He writes in Hebrews 11:13ff:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city.

Church, I hope you understand the significance of those words. To live by faith is to accept that we will never be fully home in this world. We are strangers and exiles, and that is never more strongly felt than when we have experienced loss and grief. We will not find our permanent residence in this fallen age of death; our hearts will constantly long for a home that is not of this world. The ache within our believing hearts is for a better country, a heavenly country—a place where every tear is wiped from our eyes, and there is no more death. This is the city that God has prepared for the redeemed; and soon, very soon, we shall be with the Lamb, and the former things shall pass away. Until then, as we walk as foreigners and sojourners through this life which unavoidably goes through the valley of death, let us fear no evil; for our Shepherd is with us, and He will never forsake us, amen?

Church, trust God, and never forget that the days of our grief will end. These days will pale and soon be forgotten in the City of Light, when we at last are home...truly home.

Will you pray with me?