

TALKS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS TRANSCRIPT

Talk Genesis 23:1-20: The Death and Burial of Sarah

Lesson 50

"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. In order to give Sarah a proper burial in the land, Abraham bought a field containing a cave known as the field and cave of Machpelah. He bought the burial site from Ephron the Hittite. The Hittites were a non-Semitic people, whose primary location was 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 as well as the 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. That was where the bargaining was expected to begin. We know that this was an inflated price from Jeremiah 32:9, where Jeremiah bought a field for 17 shekels of silver.

Ephron may have been trying to take advantage of Abraham, knowing that Abraham was in a state of grief, but 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 any kind of bargaining process, or perhaps he didn't want to be indebted to Ephron in any way. In any case, Abraham bought the field and the cave of Machpelah, and there he buried Sarah. Later Abraham himself was buried there. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah were also buried here. You can visit the cave of Machpelah today in Hebron.

Doctrinal Points

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

In Hebrews 11:13, we read: "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"? If you look back at the passage, we find that it means all faithful believers, from Abel on down, including Sarah. Look at Hebrews 11:11: "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 -- do you remember that Sarah laughed at the promise of God, and had to be rebuked by the Lord Himself? Yet, overall, Sarah was a woman of faith. Hebrews 11 says that she lived by faith, and she died in faith.

Now what does it mean, "to die in faith"? It means to face death without wavering in your faith. To die in faith means to trust the Lord fully right to the end. This was true of Sarah, and it should be true of us as well. The believer's death should be a demonstration of great faith. It is one thing to demonstrate your 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.

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

How will you face death? How will I face death? Let's pray that it will be a demonstration 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 what way was it a witness? In that day and in that culture, the custom was to bury your dead in the land of your fathers, the land where your relatives live, your homeland. Abraham came from Ur, and those 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 Abraham the land of Canaan. 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 return to Haran or Ur, it was a great witness to his faith in God, and the people of the land would have recognized his faith. Abraham was acknowledged 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 great witness? Every Christian funeral should be a witness. In the way we as Christians handle ourselves, we demonstrate that our grief is not like other people's grief, 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. For example, 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. The believer's death should be a time of great witness.

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, and they held a memorial service in a large church that would hold many people. Thus all the unbelieving friends and neighbors were "forced," out of respect, to come to the service -- and hear the message of Christ! It was a great time of witness.

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

Practical Application

1. It's not wrong to grieve.

In verse 2 we read that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. But why, you may say, was Abraham mourning? Wasn't Abraham a great man of 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 sense of loss!

It was not a lack of faith that caused Abraham to grieve, and the same is true in our lives. We do not sorrow as others sorrow. We read in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, "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." However, we do sorrow, because we will greatly miss our friend or our loved one who has gone to heaven before us! We don't grieve as those who have no hope of eternal life, 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 but a stepping-stone to glory. When we die, we are "absent from the body and present with the Lord." Take a look at 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." When the believer dies, the body goes into the ground to await the resurrection. The body of the believer is an "earthly tent," 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).

I believe that Christians may distort this truth by excessive emphasis on the body at the time of death -- on elaborate and costly caskets, on 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, and our "earthly tents" will quietly be folded up and put away to await resurrection.

Let's not distort the biblical concept of death.