

DEATH AND BURIAL OF SARAH

GENESIS 23:1-20

This chapter stands in stark contrast to the previous chapter. There we saw Abraham’s ultimate test of faith as, in obedience to the divine command, he took his own son and prepared to offer him up as a sacrifice to God. In this chapter, his beloved wife, Sarah, dies and is buried.

Genesis 22	Genesis 23
Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his son.	Abraham is faced with the death of his wife.
The angel of the Lord stops Abraham from completing the sacrifice.	God is not mentioned in this chapter.

This chapter seems at first glance to be filled with rather mundane and trivial details of life and of death. It begins with a funeral and then moves to a real estate transaction. Yet when we examine these details against the backdrop of God’s promises, they will be seen to have great significance.

MOURNING FOR A LOST SPOUSE

Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. 2 Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. (Genesis 23:1-2).

Sarah lived a long life, but then she died. This is a regular reoccurring theme in the book of Genesis. It reminds us of the fall that took place in the Garden of Eden and the resulting curse of death that comes upon all men and women.

1. The Significance of Hebron: *Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan (23:2).*

Hebron is located in the southern part of the land in the middle of the territory that would eventually belong to Judah. Abraham had first come to this area, building an altar to the Lord by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 13:18, following his separation from Lot. It will continue to be the place where both Isaac and Jacob pitch their tents (Genesis 35:27). It will also be the place where David will be first recognized as King over Judah (2 Samuel 2:11).

The old name for the place was *Kiriath-arba*, meaning “Village of Four.” It was named after an ancient Canaanite leader who had gone on to become the father of the Anakim, those giants in the land who would terrify the Israelite spies in the days of Moses (Joshua 15:13).

The epistle to the Hebrews speaks of Abraham and Sarah and how *all these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance* (Hebrews 11:13). Sarah died in a place that had been promised to her and to her husband and to their descendants, but, as we shall see in this chapter, she died without owning any of the land. She died in a city of which she was not a citizen, but God has nevertheless prepared a city for her and for all who believe (Hebrews 11:16).

2. The Legitimacy of Mourning: *Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her* (23:2).

This is the first reference to mourning and weeping in the book of Genesis. This is not to say that mourning or weeping had never taken place, but it is here that it becomes a part of the Genesis record. Mourning and weeping are an appropriate reaction to death. It is true that we do not grieve in the same way as those who have no hope of a resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We look forward to a life after death, but that does not change the fact that death is an enemy that robs us of our loved ones and whose ultimate defeat we await with eager anticipation.

REQUEST FOR A BURIAL SITE

Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴ "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight." ⁵ 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 graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." (Genesis 23:3-6).

Abraham is living in the land, but he does not actually own any of the land. He is a stranger and a sojourner among the people of the land and he is highly respected. He has a small force of shepherds and servants who are associated with him and the word has spread that he is the prophet of a mighty God. He is considered a mighty prince among the people of the land.

1. The Request: *Give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight* (23:4).

The tradition of burial likely goes back to the words of Genesis 3:19 where God pointed to man's creation from the dust of the earth. Accordingly, Abraham wishes to bury the body of his beloved Sarah, but he does not own a parcel of land in which he can bury her. His request, therefore, will be for such a resting place.

2. The Offer.

The people of the land offer to him the choicest of their graves. He has lived among them and now they invite him to bury his dead with their own dead.

THE CAVE OF MACHPELAH

So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. 8 And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, 9 that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site." 10 Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, 11 "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." 12 And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. (Genesis 23:7-12).

Abraham makes his request that the people of the land might approach on his behalf a particular Hittite named Ephron who owns a parcel of land on which there is a cave that makes for a suitable tomb. Ephron is himself sitting among the gathering of the elders in the gate of the city and he offers to give Abraham the use of his property as a burial place for Sarah.

A PURCHASED PROPERTY

He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me that I may bury my dead there." 14 Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, 15 "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." 16 Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. 17 So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over 18 to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, 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 at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. 20 So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth. (Genesis 23:13-20).

This extended dialogue over the purchase of a parcel of land must be seen against the backdrop of the promise that God has made and repeated throughout the life of Abraham. It is a promise of a land. Brueggemann underscores this point that "it is possible that securing the grave with a clear legal title is a symbolic but concrete example of possession of the whole land" (1982:196). At the same time, we must point out that there has been throughout the life of Abraham a great contrast between that which was promised versus that which has been fulfilled.

Promise	Fulfillment
A multitude of descendants that would be innumerable	A single son in the person of Isaac
A land stretching in every direction	A single parcel of land used as a burial plot

1. *A Proper Purchase: Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard (23:16).*

There have been some who have wondered whether this price was grossly overinflated. The Scriptures make no mention as to the equability of the price. Abraham pays it in any case because he sees its worth in the eternal perspective.

2. *A Legal Deed.*

We are given a legal description of the property, the cave, and even the trees which were located in the field. There is also mention made that this was done in the presence of legal witnesses.

3. *A Lasting Possession: So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth (23:20).*

The purchase of this land is going to serve as a forerunner and a firstfruit of what is to come. Abraham purchases this funeral plot in which to bury Sarah, but there will be coming a day when his descendants are able to take possession of the entirety of the land.

What is true of Abraham is also true of us. In the New Testament, we are told that those who are of faith have become children of Abraham. We have also been given promises and a guarantee for those promises whose fulfillment are still in the future.

The fulfillment of this promise to Abraham is going to be bigger than a little plot of land in Hebron. It is going to be bigger than a little country in the Middle East It is going to encompass a new heaven and a new earth.