

Funeral for a Princess

A Christian perspective on death and burial

Text: Gen. 23:1-20

Introduction:

1. We now come to the first recorded burial service/funeral in the Bible with the death of Abraham's wife Sarah. It is therefore a foundational and significant passage of Scripture that informs the Christian view of death, burial and ultimately, resurrection. This is important in a day when few have a Christian perspective on death, dying and burial.
2. The chapter also affords a timely opportunity to reflect on the life of Sarah, a woman who goes down in Biblical history as a woman of great faith and godliness. Sarah is an inspiring example to Christian women concerning the kind of godly ideals they should aim for, in contrast to the ideals of the world.
3. We will consider Sarah's funeral under three headings.

I. THE MEMORY AT SARAH'S FUNERAL (VS. 1)

Verse 1 gives us a brief summation of Sarah's life in terms of its longevity. She lived to be 127 years old and is the only adult woman who had her age recorded in the Bible. Imagine the memories that must have flooded the old Patriarch's heart as he knelt beside the lifeless form of his beloved that day. Sarah had not been a perfect woman. She went along with the lie in Egypt about her relationship with Abraham, urged Abraham to have a child by Hagar, treated Hagar cruelly, laughed in unbelief when God promised a son and joined in with Abraham for a second round of dishonesty in Gerar. And yet, she had many fine, godly qualities and she is preserved in Scripture as a godly woman of faith and an example for Christian women to follow. If we were to write a brief epitaph as a summation of Sarah's life it might read something like this: "Sarah, beloved and faithful wife of Abraham, much loved mother to Isaac, daughter of the Almighty God and forever with the Lord." Let's consider those three facets of Sarah's life:

A. As a Wife – Sarah was a wonderful model of the ideals of a Christian wife in a number of key areas. They are very contrary to the world's concept of what a woman should be but they are very biblical and precious. We could summarize her godly example as a wife in three words:

1. Helper – Sarah was clearly a woman who understood and embraced her biblical role as a helpmeet to Abraham. She was his faithful companion and helper throughout their many years together. She was a Proverbs 31 woman who "did him good and not evil all the days of her life" (Prov. 31:12).
2. Homemaker – Sarah was a good homemaker and this is illustrated for us in the hospitality she extended to the heavenly visitors in Genesis 18. She was not in another man's tent being a helpmeet to someone who was not her husband. She was available when Abraham needed her! She was a "keeper at home" (Titus 2:5). To

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embrace this aspect of your role as a Christian woman takes real courage and conviction in our day when most woman spend the majority of their time working outside the home. Ladies, the world is against you, the government policies are against you, the popular culture is against you, the media is against you, family members will often be against you, many professing Christians are against you but **God and His Word are for you!**

3. Follower – Sarah is held up in Scripture as an example of godly submission. 1 Peter 3:6 “Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord...”
 - a. She obeyed Abraham – “obeyed Abraham”. She followed Abraham when he left Ur of the Chaldeas at the command of God. His call was her call also. She followed him to Egypt, even though it was a wrong decision. She followed him in the land of promise as he moved about in the will of God. We don’t ever read of her bucking against his leadership or usurping his authority.
 - b. She honoured Abraham – “calling him lord”. This would be the equivalent to a title of respect such as ‘sir’. This refers back to the incident in Genesis 18:12 – “Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?”
- B. As a Mother** – Sarah’s example truly demonstrates the high value the Word of God places upon motherhood. Think about how long Sarah waited before she was blessed with a child!
 1. She believed God for her son – Sarah went from scepticism in the promise of God to faith in the promise of God.
 2. She praised God for her son – Sarah acknowledged her son as a gift from God and laughed the laugh of joy.
 3. She protected her son – her response to the Ishmael and Hagar was carnal and wrong but her desire to protect her son was honourable.
 4. She was close to her son – this is evidenced by the heartache which Isaac felt after his mother’s death (See Gen. 24:67).
 5. She trained her son for the Lord – while specific details are not afforded, as we follow Isaac’s life after his mother’s death, we can’t but see evidence she had trained him well.
- C. As a Believer** – Sarah was most importantly a woman of great faith and consecration to God. Her faith was:
 1. A personal faith – she knew God personally and had a living relationship with Him. Do you know Christ as your personal Saviour?
 2. A practical faith – Sarah’s godly faith found expression in a life of practical godliness. 1 Peter 3:1-6 highlights these. She expressed her faith in:
 - a. **Purity** (Vs. 2) – “While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.” (1 Peter 3:2) Sarah was a woman with a purity of heart and lifestyle. How we need such woman in a day when the pressure is to conform woman to the perverted morals, fashions, attitudes and ideals of the strange woman.

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- b. **Modesty** (Vs. 3-4) – “Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.” (1 Peter 3:3-4). Sarah was a stunningly beautiful woman but she adorned herself appropriately and modestly. She was beautiful but not sensual and seductive.
- c. **Beauty** (Vs. 4-6) – “But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.” The point in view here is one of emphasis. Some Christian women have wrongly understood these verses to mean that to be a godly woman, you have to make yourself look ugly. Sarah was a woman of great natural beauty but most importantly the Bible highlights that she was a woman of inner beauty. Her spiritual ornaments of a meek and quiet spirit (the heart) were the emphasis rather than a gaudy, excessive external adornment. Godly Christian women possess a beauty the world knows nothing of.

II. THE MOURNING AT SARAH’S FUNERAL (VS. 2)

A. Sarah died (Vs. 2a)

- 1. Sarah was blessed to live to an age most will never attain (127 years), her death is a reminder of the reality of the fact all will face death, saint or sinner.
- 2. Hebrews 9:27 “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:”
- 3. Sarah died in the Lord and would spend eternity in heavenly bliss but what about you? Are you ready to die? If you died today, would you go to heaven or hell?

B. Abraham mourned (Vs. 2b)

- 1. This is a natural and appropriate response to the death of a loved one. The Bible knows nothing of a cold-hearted stoicism where in the face of heart break no tear is ever shed.
- 2. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 “(1) To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: (2) A time to be born, and a time to die... (4) A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance... (11) He hath made everything beautiful in his time.”
- 3. F. B. Meyer writes, “There are some who chide tears as unmanly, un-submissive, unchristian. They would comfort us with chill and pious stoicism, bidding us meet the most agitating passages of our history with rigid and tearless countenance. With such the spirit of the Gospel, and of the Bible has little sympathy. We have no sympathy with a morbid sentimentality; but we may well question

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whether the man who cannot weep can really love; for sorrow is love, widowed and bereaved – and where that is present, its most natural expression is in tears. Religion does not come 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 converts wept on the neck of the Apostle whose face they thought they were never to see again. Christ stands by each mourner, saying, “Weep, my child; weep, for I have wept.”

4. Ecclesiastes 7:3 “Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.”

III. THE METHOD OF SARAH’S FUNERAL (VS. 3-20)

This is the first record of a burial in the Bible and is therefore a foundational passage that informs our understanding of Christian burial.

A. The Place for the Burial Site (Vs. 3-14)

1. Abraham’s Request for a Burial Site (3-4)
2. Abraham’s Negotiations for a Burial Site (Vs. 5-15)
 - a. The faith behind his negotiations. Abraham’s desire to bury Sarah in the land of Canaan was a testament to his faith. He was fully assured that Canaan was the place for him and his descendants as promised by God. The only piece of land Abraham actually owned in Canaan was a burial site for his family! Apart from that, by his own confession, he was “a stranger and a sojourner” (Vs. 4). This same “sojourner” attitude was carried on in the life of Israel (See Lev. 25:23; 1 Chr. 29:14-15; Ps. 39:12).
 - b. The humility of his negotiations. Abraham bows himself on two occasions which was a great act of humility considering the fact he was a mighty and powerful man.

B. The Price of the Burial Site (Vs. 15-16)

C. The Particulars of the Burial Site (Vs. 17-18)

1. We get a sense that Abraham’s private cemetery was a place tranquil and beautiful place. There was:
 - a. A field.
 - b. A cave.
 - c. A border of trees.
2. It was also located “before Mamre” which was the home of Abraham and Sarah so the burial site appears to have been within sight of their home.
3. Other famous patriarchs would go on to be buried there. There Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham; there they buried Isaac, and Rebecca his wife; there Jacob buried Leah; and there Joseph buried Jacob his father.

D. The Practice of the Burial (Vs. 19-20)

In a day when cremation is an increasingly popular choice even among Christians, it is a good opportunity to re-affirm the Christian view of burial from this and other passages. Consider 7 reasons why we believe in burial rather than cremation:

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1. Cremation is a pagan practice that has its origins in eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.
 - a. "In Hindu religion, fire is considered a sacred gateway to the spiritual world. Cremation of the body has to occur within six hours of the person's death in the simplest ceremonial way. We don't have open fires in Australia but we use the consecrated fire as we do back home. Using clarified butter, the eldest son kindles a fire in a terracotta pot at home. The fire is then taken to the crematorium and put on top of the coffin as it is pushed into the chamber. We chant sets of mantras to cleanse the body and indicate to the soul that it can proceed to the spiritual world. We then release the ashes into flowing water." Purohit Rama Chandra Athreiya, Domestic Hindu Priest ¹
 - b. David Cloud, who ministers in the predominantly Hindu country of Nepal, recounts one of his personal experiences with cremation in his book "Cremation: What does God think?"

"Some years ago, I stood three or so feet from a burning corpse with a missionary pastor from Singapore and his wife who were visiting us. The head was already burnt beyond recognition and the skull was split open due to internal expansion from the heat of the fire. The lower legs and feet were unscorched, as they were protruding from the pile of burning wood and stubble upon which the man's body lay. The professional Hindu burners were poking the body from time to time to keep the members in the fire and adding stubble and wood as needed. The bones were contracting and popping; the bodily organs were frying and the juices sizzling in the intense heat. My wife, a nurse with experience working with lepers in a hospital in a very remote part of Asia and in an intensive care ward in the United States, stood with another friend observing the ghastly sight from a distance, unwilling to come closer. The air for a hundred yards or more was filled with the unmistakable, stomach-turning stench of burning human flesh. When the fire had burnt most of the body, the ashes and remaining members were shoved into the river. This is cremation as has been practiced by heathen religions for centuries, but without the sanitization adopted in more technically advanced areas. Would you treat your loved ones so? Is this an acceptable Christian practice? No sir, cremation is a heathen practice. It is of heathen origin and serves heathen purposes. Why do the Hindus and those of other heathen religions cremate? It has a connection with their belief in reincarnation. There is nothing Christian about cremation. We were standing that day, as I have many other times, observing cremation in the surroundings from which the practice arose--idolatrous, Christless heathenism."

2. Believers were buried in the Bible. The following are a few examples:
 - a. Sarah was buried (Genesis 23:1-4)
 - b. Abraham was buried (Genesis 25:8-10)
 - c. Rachel was buried (Genesis 35:19-20)
 - d. Isaac was buried (Genesis 35:29)
 - e. Jacob was buried (Genesis 49:33; 50:1-13)
 - f. Joseph was buried (Genesis 50:26). Joseph's body was kept for over 400 years in Egypt and then carried through the 40 years of wilderness wanderings before being buried in Palestine, the Promised Land. We read of this in Genesis 50:24-25; Exodus

¹ <https://australian.museum/about/history/exhibitions/death-the-last-taboo/disposing-of-the-dead-cremation/> Viewed 21/10/22.

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13:19 and Joshua 24:32. Such was the importance the people of God placed on burial!

- g. Joshua was buried (Joshua 24:29-30)
 - h. Eleazar was buried (Joshua 24:33)
 - i. Samuel was buried (1 Samuel 25:1)
 - j. David was buried (1 Kings 2:10)
 - k. John the Baptist was buried (Matthew 14:10-12)
 - l. Ananias and Sapphira were buried (Acts 5:5-10)
 - m. Stephen was buried (Acts 8:2)
 - n. Christ Himself was buried (1 Cor. 15:1-4)
3. God Himself Practiced Burial with the body of Moses (Deut. 34:5-6, Jude 1:9).
 4. Lack of a proper burial viewed as dishonourable in the Bible. A key example of this is Jezebel who, because of her wickedness, was eaten of dogs (1 Kings 21:23-24). Again, we read of the Midianites “which perished at Endor: they became as dung for the earth” (Psalm 83:9-10).
 5. Burial honours the body and memory of the deceased. This is demonstrated in the account before us where Abraham went to great lengths and great expense to ensure he had a place to give his wife an honourable burial. W. H. Griffith Thomas notes, “The possessive pronouns “his dead” (Vs. 3), “my dead” (Vs. 4) and “thy dead” (Vs. 6) are very noteworthy in this connection. The body of his beloved wife was precious to him and was regarded by him and by others as his own property of which he was about to take special and loving care.”
 6. The believer’s body is not his own (1 Cor. 6:19-20). God has purchased our whole person – spirit, soul and body by his precious blood. Romans 14:8 reminds us that “...whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” The body is not ours to desecrate and destroy. If God as Lord and Master chooses an unusual death for one of his children (e.g., perishing in a fire), that is His sovereign prerogative but we are not authorised to dishonour and desecrate the body of a deceased saint.
 7. Burial anticipates the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35-44; Rom. 8:22-23) “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:22-23)
 - a. The physical body is called the seed for the resurrection body. When planted, a seed decomposes, and the new plant comes forth. The Bible uses this to illustrate resurrection. See 1 Cor. 15:35-44

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- b. “Such is burial and the resurrection. When we bury a Christian loved one, we are planting the seed for the resurrection body! It is a powerful testimony of our unwavering faith in God’s Word regarding the promise of bodily resurrection.” (Cloud)
- c. The Old Testament saints clearly had this hope and hence their practice of burial. Job, commonly considered to be the oldest Book in the Bible, reveals that Job had a very good knowledge and hope of bodily resurrection (See Job 19:25-27).
- d. Contrast this with the lack of hope and meaning in unsaved funerals! Take for example the Mornington Green (Melbourne), a group that vigorously promotes cremation as the better environmental choice, treats your ashes and plants them with a tree, encouraging a reincarnation idea of death. Consider the below drawn from their website as an illustration of the hopelessness and lack of meaning often espoused by the pro cremation crowd.
 - i. On the front page of the website, you will find the words “Continue Your Legacy and Become a Tree”. How hopeless and ridiculous! <https://morningtongreen.com.au/>
 - ii. **Why is cremation a popular choice?** It might not surprise you to know that up to 70% of Australians are choosing cremation over traditional burials. The growing popularity in choosing cremation ashes is due to a number of reasons, including the environmental impact, the lower costs associated with cremation but perhaps more relevant is the changing view around death.
 - iii. There is an introductory video on the website with an interview with Warren Roberts, the founder.

“Basically, we transform a person’s ashes to become a beautiful tree and then that person is a part of a community that’s creating a profoundly beautiful forest for people to visit and enjoy and this way we’re basically creating these botanic garden-like situations and people can connect to the beauty that that person’s life literally created.”

The interviewer then asks “So the person’s remains are literally a part of the tree, is that right, how does it work?”

“Yeah, so the person’s ashes get transformed into a nutrient that can be taken up by the tree and then that means you become the tree, you become the trees flowers, you become that trees thousands of seedlings and seeds that get perpetuated beyond the life of the tree and that’s the circle of life.”

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Pointing to the metal plaque at the base of the tree, he goes on to say, “Every day when the sun sets it passes through this plaque and it projects this symbol of the person, spirit and the earth and the tree and the circle of life on to the tree showing its connection to creation as a whole and that’s how we give back to the earth.”

E. The Practical Suggestions for a Christian Funeral

Let me conclude with some pastoral advice that might help you think through how to ensure your funeral honours the Lord.

1. Make sure you have a Christian funeral that honours Christ. The aim of a Christian funeral is **firstly** to honour the Lord for His faithfulness to the departed saint and **secondly** to honour the memory of the deceased.
2. Make sure the Gospel is presented at the funeral by a Bible believing man of God rather than the empty words of a pagan celebrant! Include the Gospel in the order of service with a Gospel tract. Many who will not attend church will attend for a funeral and while they are thinking about death, what better thing than to give them the message of salvation!
3. For seniors, write down your funeral wishes, sign it and make sure your pastor and each of your children are given a copy. Strange things can happen amongst family members after you have checked out to heaven and you want to do all that is possible to make sure your burial is not a wasted opportunity. It only happens once in your life so make it a good one! Think through the details. E.g., no rock music backing for photo slides, no rock music for the graveside! If you have a living spouse, talk it over with them and make sure they understand your wishes. When you go, it will be hard for them to think clearly through all the emotion and can buckle under pressure. If you don't have a living spouse, make it clear to the family as a part of your funeral plan who you have nominated to oversee and organise the funeral on your behalf (e.g., one of your saved children you trust to uphold your wishes).
4. For children and family members burying a loved one, remember that the funeral is NOT first and foremost about you. It is not your moment to shine but a moment to give glory to God, proclaim the Gospel clearly and reflect on the life and testimony of the deceased. Of course, the sharing of personal memories and thoughts is normal but don't be too big in the picture.

F. Advice from W.H. Griffith Thomas on how to behave in times of bereavement. From this simple and touching story of death in the home we may learn how we should behave in times of bereavement. The true attitude at such times is threefold:

1. Sorrowing love – this expression of love in sorrow is as natural as it is inevitable and beautiful. A consciousness of loss cannot fail to produce sorrow, and no one is to be blamed for feeling and expressing a sense of bereavement. It would be utterly unnatural if death were to come without eliciting sorrow.
2. Faithful service – At the same time, in order that the soul may not be swallowed up with over-much sorrow, there comes to us all at such occasions the call to and opportunity for definite service. The

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memory of a loved one is best treasured by doing what that loved one would wish were she here. Service always prevents sorrow from becoming dissipated in idle regrets and mere remembrance.

3. Blessed hope – Abraham laid Sarah's body to rest in sure and certain hope of a joyful resurrection. It was this above all things that upheld and strengthened him as he bid farewell to the wife who had shared his joys and sorrows for so many years.

Conclusion:

1. Death is an inescapable reality. Are you ready to die? If you died today, where would you spend eternity?
2. What will you be remembered for as a Christian woman when it's your turn to go home to heaven? How will you be remembered as a believer? What spiritual legacy are you leaving behind?
3. Do you have a Christian perspective of death and burial?