
What about Dying?

Genesis 23

Introduction

A few years ago, on August 31, my mother died. Three days later I came to church and we introduced a new song, "It is Not Death to Die." I am reminded of my mother's death each time we sing that beautiful song. And I am always grateful that the words of that song apply to me. There is great hope and great comfort in death when reminded of those truths.

Death is a common experience of all of us. Many of you know what it means to lose a loved one to death. Death is a part of living in a fallen world. God warned Adam that if they disobeyed Him, they would die. Their disobedience brought suffering and death into the world. That is now passed down to generation after generation. We all expect, short of the Lord's return that we will all die.

Death is a hard time of separation and grief. It is hard sometimes to communicate the sense of loss and emptiness. This sense of separation is designed by a good God to remind us of our separation from Him and how often we are oblivious to it. The sense of loss draws out the depths of our compassion and love for one another.

Dealing with grief is often difficult because of heart issues. God is at work in the midst of this time as well to expose where our hearts are doubting, disobedient and desiring relationships in a way that displeases God. So unresolved grief comes because:

1. We were too close to the person. They were an idol of our hearts. We had put more on the relationship than God designed for it to endure. These kinds of relationships, often with parents or children, leave us despondent and angry, often unwilling to be consoled or comforted.
2. We were too distant from the person. There are unresolved relational difficulties. We have unforgiven words and deeds between us. We said things to them we regret and we can never take back. We never got to know them like we ought. This will often leave us with vain regrets.

Death often leaves us with hard questions.

Why do people have to suffer in dying? We stand by the bedside of someone we love and watch the terrible suffering. Why does God allow this, particularly for Christian people who love Him and have walked with Him?

What about lives seemingly ended too early? Their lives were snuffed out early by accidents and disease. Is this a life incomplete in some way? Or is God really in control and these few years were all that is ordained for them?

What about unfulfilled promises? What do we do with people who have clearly banked their lives on God's promises and die before seeing them fulfilled?

Some of these questions are what Genesis 23 is all about. We are confronted with a problem: someone who has been given a direct promise from God now dies without receiving that promise. Why is this the center of this story? Because this chapter begins with Sarah's death and ends with Sarah's burial. Everything in between is about securing a burial plot for her.

The Terrible Reality of Facing Death (v.1-2)

Despite what some people and groups teach, most of us will face death. Yes, the Lord may come back and rescue us from the experience of death. But death is an almost inescapable reality. Even a long life like Sarah eventually comes to an end.

As Experiences of Loss (v.1-2)

Sarah and Abraham have been married at least 100 years. Imagine having a Centennial Anniversary Celebration. When I looked up wedding anniversary stones, they only go to 80.

They have had a long life together with many challenges and changes. They have walked together with God and sometimes had serious failures. They have trusted God and waited long for Him to keep His promises. They have also run ahead of God and brought trouble and trials into their marriage.

But, Abraham and Sarah were very close. His grief is not just a public performance. This is real searing pain in loss. She has been his wife, lover and friend for longer than any of us have even lived. This is a great loss. Most of you have experienced this in some way. You've lost a loved one – a parent, a child, a close friend. You know the inexpressible emptiness of that loss.

With Expressions of Grief (v.2)

Abraham, the great patriarch and man of obedient faith, expresses his loss in mourning and grief. He is sad and weeps. In his culture, he may have even torn his clothes and poured dust and ashes over his head. He is no stoic. He does not display his manhood with a stiff upper lip. He experiences his loss and expresses his grief. But he does so in a way that does not give into hopelessness. He does not spiral down in long, self-focused depression or despair. His grief is guided by His faith in God.

Paul tells us that Christians grieve too. We just do not grieve like the rest of the world as though we are without hope. We are saddened in our loss. We grieve and weep at the separation. But we must not grieve like the world. There is much grief counseling available from secular sources. The books explaining the stages of grief have been popular. As usual, those books study and speak in the context of unbelievers grieving. While they may tell us what grief is, they cannot tell us what grief ought to be, though most of the books try.

The Bible tells us that people will experience loss and express grief like they do everything else – it will be determined by their hearts. You will feel sorrow in a way that is shaped by what you believe and what you desire. A heart that is poured into the world’s mold will be filled with doubt, anger, frustration, depression, despair and self-focus. But a heart that is shaped by the Word of God and surrendered to the will of God will experience loss, yet will be comforted and find hope.

In other words, Christian funerals ought to look like what all the rest of Christian experience is like. It is mingled sorrow and joy. It is tears and it is singing. The funeral of a Christian should be so focused on God that the hope we have is clear to all who see us grieve.

Sarah’s death raises a very great question. What does it mean when a person has a promise from God and then dies before that promise is fulfilled? Has God lied to Sarah? The way Abraham responds tells us that he understands God’s promises are not limited to only the present moment. God’s promises often have a *beyond death* fulfillment.

The Simple Responsibilities of our Faith (v.3-16)

Isn’t it interesting that the bulk of this chapter is taken up with what seems to us a pointless negotiation for land? Why doesn’t the chapter focus in on what interests us? Why don’t we hear more about how long Abraham grieved? Why do we not see him moving through the so called “stages of grief”? Why doesn’t Moses help us with how we talk to our children about death? Why, is the Bible so concerned with Abraham’s acquiring a burial plot?

Because Abraham is again expressing his faith. He believes so strongly that God will give his descendants this land that he will insist in burying Sarah here.

In a Request for a Burial Plot (v.3-9)

Abraham approaches the rulers of this portion of Palestine, the Hittites, seeking to purchase property around Hebron to bury his precious wife. He refuses their offer of the use of one of their tombs. He knows that in order to stake his claim in the land, he must own it. He is not simply looking for a place to put her. He intends to bury her on land he owns. He wants that ownership to be acknowledged by their descendants. The notion of burial indicates permanency. That Abraham secures a family plot in Canaan rather than returning to Haran conveys the man’s commitment to the land promised him. Ancient peoples cherished their ancestral burial ground; burial in the ancestral grave indicated honor and continuity with the family.”¹

¹ K. A. Mathews, Genesis 11:27–50:26, vol. 1B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 310.

This is in contrast to the Lord Jesus who was buried in a borrowed tomb. He needed no tomb on land his own. He was already Lord of all. He would not need some permanent place for He rose from the dead. His promised land is all the universe beginning with heaven!

Abraham restates his request to purchase a piece of land. He identifies the piece he wants and its owner. He asks the Hittite rulers to appeal to the owner on his behalf.

In a Negotiation for Ownership (v.10-15)

Apparently, Abraham did not know the owner personally. Ephron was sitting around the council table. At first glance, it appears that Ephron is being generous in offering to give the land to Abraham. However, according to the custom and law of the day, that ground would be Abraham's only as long as Ephron lived. Upon Ephron's death, it would be returned to Ephron's descendants. It may be that Ephron was being generous, not realizing that Abraham is looking away from the present to a long distant, by faith seen, reality.

Abraham then enters into an intense negotiation to actually purchase and own the land for Sarah's burial plot. He will not allow Ephron to simply give it to him. He wants to own it outright. So he argues for a price to be set so that he can pay Ephron and have the title to the land in his own name.

In a Finalization of the Purchase (v.16)

This paragraph brings this purchase to a close. It leaves no question that Abraham has staked out a further claim on the promised land. He has paid the full price for the land where he will bury his cherished wife. He is confident in God's promise. He knows that this will be a permanent place for his descendants.

This sense of returning to the land as a confidence in God's promises causes both Jacob and Joseph to desire the return of their own caskets to the land. They require an oath from their children that when they return from Egypt, they will not leave their remains in Egypt. Following Abraham's lead, they know that the Promised Land is theirs and their people's. So they want to finally be buried there. They plan and prepare for it.

On January 28 of this year, just a month ago, in a speech regarding President Trump's Middle East Peace Plan, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reference this burial spot. Quote, "These are places carved into the bedrock of our common civilization, the sacred tomb in Hebron, where the fathers and mothers of the Jewish people are buried..."

Prime Minister Netanyahu was referring to what is today known as the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Buried there are:

- Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 23:1-20; Genesis 49:31)
- Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 35:29; Genesis 49:31)
- Jacob and Leah (Genesis 49:28-33; Genesis 50:4-5; Genesis 50:12-13)

And so, to this day, the land purchased by Abraham belongs to his people.

The Glorious Anticipation of Future Fulfillments (v.17-20)

In this concluding paragraph, Abraham takes possession of what will not yet be fully his. The death of Sarah is heat in his life. The good fruit of buying the burial plot arises from faith in God's promises and a desire surrendered to God's providence. The land is signed over to him. He buries his beloved Sarah in anticipation of God doing what He said He would.

Reflect and Respond

How do you handle the death of a loved one?

If they are a Christian, then we know that the separation is temporary. We know that the glory awaiting them from the other side of the valley of the shadow of death is so wonderfully great. And we know that we will see them again when Jesus comes and all believers are reunited with Him.

If they are not a Christian, then we know that the separation is permanent. This realization ought to fuel great gratitude for the salvation God has given you. It ought to spur a greater effort in giving the good news of the gospel to your family and friends.

How do you help Christians who are grieving?

You comfort them with truth (1 Thessalonians 4:13,18). Quiet, loving, comforting words of truth about their present state and our future blessedness will encourage them. We can remind one another that death is not an end, but an entry. While the passing is painful, the arrival is glad and glorious.

You care for them in love. Your being there to share with them, to listen to them, to reminisce with them – just send across your relationship the depths of your care and compassion.

You confront them when necessary. I know this sounds odd. But a Christian whose grief is overwhelming them must be both consoled and confronted by God's Word. If you are helping someone who has lost someone they idolized, help them surrender their wants and will to God. They must acknowledge that God is their all in all. If you are helping someone who has lost someone they have a broken relationship with, help them to repent of the sins they committed against that person. Help to acknowledge and receive the forgiveness of God, even when they cannot restore the human relationship.

What about dying? It is the way to go home!

The Jewish people look at Abraham's tomb as a sacred place (as do the Muslim people). The father of their faith is buried there. But for us as Christians... it's not the tomb of Abraham that we look to. Our faith recalls a different tomb.

You see; everyone knows where Abraham's tomb is. It's in Hebron. But they can't tell you for certain where Jesus was buried. And the reason for that is because He didn't stay buried. He arose from the dead, so it really didn't matter in which tomb He was laid.

I don't need to go to a tomb, I'm going to go where Jesus is today, not a tomb. Our faith doesn't rest in a tomb where the dead are buried, instead we look to a tomb where the dead rose.

And I think that if you were able to talk to Abraham on the day that he buried his wife, he would tell you that he didn't mourn like those who have no hope. He trusted in God. He knew that Sarah was going to be with the Lord, and that someday he would too.