

Acts 8: “1 Now Saul was consenting to [Stephen’s] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, & made great lamentation over him.”

Genesis 23: “1 Sarah lived 127 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.

"Death is swallowed up in victory"

I suspect that you can tell from our reading and sermon title that we are not moving on to consider Phillip’s work in Samaria until next week! We have been making good progress on our journey through the Book of Acts, but this morning I want to pause and consider again one verse that we talked about briefly last week:

In verse two Luke tells us, “devout men carried Stephen to his burial, & made great lamentation over him.” I want to expand on this because it came up in our lunch discussion last week and later in other discussions about how we often have no proper lamentations in our age.

As shepherds of the flock we often need to be sensitive to the needs of the flock and thus I occasionally preach a topical sermon or take some time to focus on a particular verse. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, death is not a subject that we like to discuss here in America. Many times we shield our young people from its reality *[tell story of no death until 32]*

Ironically, this may be why we have such a focus on death & destruction in games and the media today, which can be another whole set of discussions!

So this morning, I want to consider again the question of death:

- **How it came into our world and how it will be defeated**
- **How we must face death and how we are to respond.**

Luke in a single verse gives us wisdom on how we are to face death and how to properly respond. Luke also gives us the answers to the BIG question as he tells the story of God's great salvation in his orderly account for his friend Theophilus. Adam's sin in the garden has brought forth death and destruction for the human race and for all of creation.

- **Jesus, the eternal Son of God has entered history as a man to save His people from their sins!**
- **Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin and set us free.**

As Saints who have been set free, we are empowered by the Spirit and prepared to be an acceptable Bride for Jesus. The mission of the Spirit is to bring glory to the Son by filling the earth with the Son's Kingdom.

- **This is what we are called to believe and what we are called to celebrate each and every week as we gather at the Lord's Table!**

This is why the Spirit devoted almost a third of the New Testament to Luke's telling of this grand story! In the telling of this account Luke gives us several key reminders that death is a REAL problem. Such is the case here in Acts chapter eight. As we considered last week, Luke goes rapidly back and forth between calm and conflict in this important time of transition for the Church at Jerusalem. The Spirit is ready to take the Gospel to Judea and all of Samaria as we shall consider at length next week.

- **But in the midst of the chaos and change, we read that devout men came and buried Stephen with great lamentation!**

So one of the questions we must ask is this:

- **If Christ has conquered death, then why the focus on burial and lamentation?**

First, we know that death is with us until the end as Paul so aptly explained in his great teaching he gave the Corinthians regarding the importance and the power of the resurrection: 15:20 "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death..."

So again we have a tension that must be held in our Christian lives:

- **We know that death has been defeated on the cross and that it also will be the final enemy to be defeated after the Kingdom of Jesus has filled the earth.**
- **We know that we have victory over death and yet each of us will face death: In our own physical death and the death of others, until Jesus returns!**

I believe Luke gives us some very wise & comforting teachings about how we are to handle deaths:

- **We are to face the reality of death and not be afraid to lament the loss of those who suffer death.**

And as with most true paths in our Christian walk, we have ditches or cliffs on either side to avoid: On the one side is simply avoiding death as I have already mentioned or pretending it is not as serious as it is. On the other side are those who are fixated on death, being overwhelmed by it or simply putting on a show.

- **When we face death in our congregation or with our extended families and friends, we are to be the devout people who come to bury the dead and make proper lamentation.**

We are not to avoid death or act as if it is no big deal: Think of all the ways the Hollywood tries to tell us nothing has really changed after death or those silly poems about how we live on in the thoughts of others or some pretty flowers. We are also to avoid what was common in the days of Jesus: What I would call putting on a show... They would actually hire professional mourners to wail and carry on so everyone would know you were making great lamentations

So as we consider how to be faithful to our short text, let me first address the question of burial... Burial of the dead is the pattern that we see in the Scriptures, as we clearly saw in the reading from Genesis 23 this morning. We are living in an age where this focus has been largely lost. Gone for the most part are the family or even church gravesites. *[tell the story of my visit to Norway]*

With all of our moves and travels in this country it is difficult to even picture a family being buried together in any cemetery.

More and more people are choosing cremation with the ashes being scattered as was done with my father and brother. Now you can even go “green” opting to have your body dissolved in an environmentally sensitive way!

Now first and foremost I need to stress that what happens to the body has nothing to do with what will happen at the end of time when the trumpet sounds and the dead are raised... John clearly teaches us in Revelation chapter 20 that ALL will stand before Jesus in resurrected bodies no matter where they died or how their bodies were disposed of:

“11 Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. 14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

As Paul teaches, it is appointed to men once to die and then judgment. And we will be called into the presence of God in resurrected bodies, no matter how we died or what was done with our body.

So why does the Bible put a focus on burial and lamentation?

- **I believe they are both related to understanding and facing the reality of death.**
- **They bring us both wisdom and comfort!**

Consider the 23rd chapter of Genesis that we read this morning...

Think about how much detail we have about how Abraham came to bury and lament over his wife Sarah *[discuss it being an entire chapter in the Word]*

Verse two of Acts chapter eight could be easily passed over, and yet the Spirit expects us to know ALL of our Bibles...

When we read that devout men came and buried Stephen with great lamentation it should bring to mind at least this Scripture from Genesis that we read this morning. In the midst of all the change and chaos, these men could have been forgiven if they wanted a quick burial with no attention drawn to it. But they understood that burial and lamentation reminds us that death is our enemy and that the resurrection of Jesus from the grave gives us great hope as we wait for the day of our resurrection! This is what we saw in our reading from Genesis this morning:

Abraham came to mourn and bury his wife Sarah!

- **Verse two tells us that Abraham came to mourn and to weep for his wife Sarah!**
- **Even though we know that death has been defeated we must not be afraid or hesitant to lament and mourn over our dead!**

One of the most powerful verses in all of the Scriptures is also the shortest and brings great comfort to those who feel the loss of a loved one in the time of death: “Jesus weep!” John chapter ten tells the account of Jesus raising His friend Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was dead and buried four days and yet Jesus knew that He would bring Him back to life demonstrating the Father’s power...

BUT, as Jesus stood before the grave which contained the body of His friend, the Bible tells us in very strong terms, “Jesus weep.”

Death is the last enemy to be defeated because it is the greatest enemy which has brought pain and agony to the lives of all who have lived, and to the creation itself. Jesus, as He stands in its presence is moved to tears and quite honestly, we must do no less. There is no such thing as a good death: Death is always the enemy. Knowing and understanding this, we lament over the loss of the one who has died and we bury their body as a symbol of our hope for the resurrection!

- **Just as Jesus called Lazarus to ‘come forth’ so at the end of time, Jesus will command ALL those who have died to come forth!**

The account in Genesis tells us that Abraham went to great length to purchase a burial place giving us many, many details. Now I don’t want to put anyone on a guilt trip here this morning, but this passage has certainly been convicting for me...

- **Are we prepared for the day of our death or the death of those close to us?**

I think one of the lessons for us to learn from this account in Genesis is that we can certainly make all the arrangements that are necessary after someone has died, but it can also serve as a reminder that we can make such preparations before hand as well!

- **So the devout men came and buried Stephen with great lamentation & we must do the same!**

Brothers & sisters, this is part of our being witnesses for Jesus: We are those who know that the great enemy death has been defeated. We are those who can bury and lament over those we have lost and yet know the hope of the resurrection. We certainly have a better truth & testimony than anything Hollywood has come up with!

- **But it must be lived and demonstrated in our lives before a watching world, just as Abraham did for the men and women of Hebron.**

We are to be those who rightly know the pain and agony of death, those who rightly lament the loss of our loved ones

- **And we are to be those who know the hope of the resurrection!**

In closing I want to return to I Corinthians 15 where Paul continues to instruct us about the power of the resurrection and the final defeat of death at the end of history:

“51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed-- 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

- **Wise words for all of life, but certainly wise words when we face the time where we must bury and lament over a friend or family member!**
- **In properly doing so, we will remember that death will be swallowed up in victory!**

Communion Meditation: John 5:21-24

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. 22 For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, 23 that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. 24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”