

BFFs FOREVER

Studies in the Life of Abraham

Text

Genesis 23:1-20

Topic

When his wife, Sarah, dies, Abraham secures a cemetery plot where she, he, and their descendants after them, can be buried

Title

"A Happily Buried Couple"

Introduction

I'd rather attend a wedding than a funeral, but I'd much rather officiate a funeral than a wedding.

A funeral provides the single most powerful context for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Solomon put it into perspective when he said,

Ecclesiastes 7:2 [It is] Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart.

Death is "the end of all men," but only with regard to the life we are currently living on the earth. All men will live on after death; all men will live forever. Where we will live, and the quality of that life, is determined before we die.

If a person dies having never received Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of their sins, the Bible explains that, "it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). The "judgment" is described in the last book of the Bible.

Revelation 20:12 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.

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Revelation 20:13 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.

Revelation 20:14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Revelation 20:15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

What about the believer in Jesus Christ? What happens when a Christian dies?

2 Corinthians 5:1 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens...

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 you see the contrasting destinations you can understand why the psalmist was inspired to write, "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15).

Our text records the precious death of Abraham's beloved wife, Sarah. Abraham's reaction to her death and the actions he takes to bury her reveal the hope of the eternal life with God every believer can and should hold on to.

With hope despite death as our theme, I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Can Shed Tears Of Hope At The Death Of A Believer, and #2 You Can Share A Testimony Of Hope At The Death Of A Believer.

#1 You Can Shed Tears Of Hope At The Death Of A Believer

(v1-2)

"Do no harm" is an important ethical consideration for anyone dealing with a sensitive subject. In my work as a law enforcement and fire chaplain I am sometimes asked to give a presentation describing what a chaplain does. Since one of the things I do is deliver death notifications, I always ask if anyone in my audience has ever received a notification. I do it to try to mitigate any possible reaction to the material I am presenting. Just

talking about a hypothetical death can bring a person back to their emotions to an actual death in their own experience.

Since probably all of us have some experience with the death of a loved one, I want to “do no harm” by reminding you it is normal to have an emotional reaction to our subject. With that in mind, let’s take a look at death - especially the death of a believer - and about the supernatural hope God provides through His Son and in the Scriptures.

Genesis 23:1 Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.

And what years they were! Author John Phillips writes of Sarah, almost as a eulogy,

She had begun her days in far off Ur, a... pagan... a worshipper of the moon. She was born a poor, lost sinner the same as anyone else. She grew up a pretty little thing with a saucy tongue, and she met and married an energetic young man well on his way to making his fortune in Ur. Abraham had been a pagan, too, but with a restless, unsatisfied soul. Well he knew in his heart that the moon, the queen of heaven, was no true god. But out there, behind all those shining orbs and stars, behind the black velvet of the night, there must be a true and living God. His secret doubts and heresies he had perhaps whispered to Sarah in the quiet security of their urban home in Ur. Then came the blinding revelation of that true and living God and the long pilgrimage with all its ups and downs. Sarah had shared it all. Now she was dead, but she had died "in fellowship." She had died at Hebron. To die in the place of fellowship is the next best thing to never dying at all.

Genesis 23:2 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.

“Kirjath Arba” means something like the *suburb of four*. According to an ancient Jewish tradition this name was given because four couples were buried there: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Leah, and Isaac and Rebecca. It later came to be called “Hebron.”

Interestingly, the present Arabic name of Hebron is Al Khalil, meaning *the friend*, referring to Abraham as the friend of God.

When the text says that Abraham "came to mourn for Sarah" it doesn't necessarily mean that he was away from her when she died. It means he came to have a specific time of mourning and weeping for her. We might call it a wake today.

There is nothing wrong with a believer shedding tears over the tragedies and heartaches of this life. Jesus Himself, you remember, wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus - **even though He knew that He would momentarily raise him from the dead!**

Your tears are precious to God. *He saves them!* Psalms 56:8 reads, "You number my wanderings; Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book?" God records your tears in a book and He reserves them in a special bottle.

I wonder if, in your heavenly mansion, there will not be on the bookshelf your book of tears? If it is there for you to peruse, you'll be able to see the faithfulness of God through every difficulty you experienced. Since in Heaven every tear is wiped away, your book of recorded tears will tend to increase your joy.

Today you put perfume and precious ointments and fragrances in expensive bottles. Some people even wear them around their necks. I like to think you and I will be given our tears in God's bottle as our own unique fragrance to grace us for all eternity.

Abraham wept, *but not without hope!* He was looking for "that city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Sarah had died in faith believing the promises of God. Abraham, his eyes wet with tears, nevertheless could look up through the heavens and, with the eyes of faith, see that city where sorrow and the shedding of tears are no more. **He knew he would see Sarah again.**

#2 You Can Share A Testimony Of Hope
At The Death Of A Believer
(v3-20)

The opening phrase of verse three sets the theme for the remaining verses of chapter twenty-three. "Then Abraham stood up before his dead, and spoke..." A memorial, a funeral, or a graveside service for a believer is a time to "stand up" before the dead saint and "speak" about eternal issues. It is a rare and special opportunity to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I want to look at this dialogue between Abraham and the sons of Heth with an eye towards the testimony he was able to share with them as he "stood before his dead."

Genesis 23:3 Then Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying,
Genesis 23:4 "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."

Abraham and Sarah were God's "foreigner[s]," God's "visitor[s]." In other places they are called "pilgrims" and "strangers."

It may sound obvious, but at the death of a believer you are able to share a testimony about the temporary nature of this life and our certain hope in the next.

Notice Abraham also says, "...that I may bury my dead out of my sight." He repeats this in verse eight. "Out of my sight" gives a sense that the person is still there, still alive - *just not where you can see them.*

C.S. Lewis once said, "You don't have a soul. **You are a soul.** You have a body."

Abraham could no longer see Sarah in this life, she would be out of his sight - *but only temporarily!* How did he know? How could he be sure?

In Chapter twenty-two Abraham had come to the understanding that there would be a resurrection from the dead. Abraham, on his way to offer his only son, reasoned that God would raise him from the dead. God prevented the actual sacrifice of Isaac, substituting a ram that was nearby, caught in a thicket. Abraham had told Isaac, "God will provide Himself the lamb." But, on Moriah, God had provided not a lamb, but a ram. Perhaps, in

contemplating this, Abraham came to understand that on some future day on that same mountain, God would not spare His own Son - the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world - and that He would raise Jesus from the dead!

The resurrection of Jesus is a testimony to proclaim at the death of a believer. It's what Jesus did outside the tomb of Lazarus, proclaiming that He was and is the resurrection and the life.

Genesis 23:5 And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him,

Genesis 23:6 "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."

Genesis 23:7 Then Abraham stood up and bowed himself to the people of the land, the sons of Heth.

Genesis 23:8 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,

Genesis 23:9 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."

They had lived separated from the world and from worldliness. He desired Sarah reflect separation in her burial, identifying with the promises of God and with the people of God. He wanted her interment in death to preach about her choices in life.

Your choices in life are writing your eulogy. Eulogies are notoriously false as people struggle to say only good and superlative things about a person. Think about the honest eulogy that would be given at your funeral. Would your walk with the Lord - your separated, pilgrim, stranger, sojourner walk - be the theme? Or would it be something a little more worldly?

There's still time for a rewrite or editing!

Genesis 23:10 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,

Genesis 23:11 "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!"

Genesis 23:12 Then Abraham bowed himself down before the people of the land;

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Genesis 23:13 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."

Genesis 23:14 And Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him,

Genesis 23:15 "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."

Genesis 23:16 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.

In the culture of the times business was conducted openly in the gates of the city where the chief men and elders gathered each day. Abraham and Ephron reached an agreement in the negotiating fashion of the day.

Abraham shocked everyone by agreeing to Ephron's initial price. It doesn't mean Christians shouldn't shop for bargains or haggle prices when possible. In the context of Sarah's funeral, Abraham's lack of haggling over the price of the land indicated that his focus was on eternal things. This world's goods and resources were, in his mind, something that could be turned into ministry.

How does his agreeing to a higher price minister to Ephron? One thing that comes to mind is that while Ephron was approaching the situation in the usual worldly sense, Abraham's focus was on eternal rewards and in investing his monies for God's purposes.

Let me ask you this. Are you getting ready for retirement? Or for your eternal rest and rewards? Are you Ephron... Or Abraham?

Genesis 23:17 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

Genesis 23:18 to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit all of Canaan. The only real estate he ever possessed (other than some water rights he acquired) was a wooded cemetery.

Earth can be thought of as a massive graveyard. I don't know how this figure was arrived at, or if it is accurate, but according to one source at least 12 billion people have lived and died in the history of mankind.

Whatever you and I think we own, in the end it's all really a cemetery. Our real inheritance is waiting for us in Heaven.

Genesis 23:19 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.

Genesis 23:20 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.

Since we're talking about death and funerals, let me address a question you might have. Is it wrong to cremate a body?

Cremation was practiced in biblical times but it was not commonly practiced by the Israelites or by New Testament believers. In the cultures of Bible times, burial in a tomb, cave, or in the ground was the common way to dispose of a human body.

Jewish burial customs in the first century included primary burials in burial caves followed by secondary burials in ossuaries placed in smaller niches of the burial caves. An ossuary is a chest, building, well, or site made to serve as the final resting place of human skeletal remains. They are frequently used where burial space is scarce. A body is first buried in a temporary grave, then after some years the skeletal remains are removed and placed in an ossuary.

While burial was a common practice, the Bible nowhere commands burial as the preferred method of handling the remains of a body. In all the very specific laws governing every aspect of life, there is simply no direct teaching about burial versus cremation.

Some argue that because the body will be resurrected, we ought to treat it with respect and bury it as opposed to cremating it. Listen, the body is going to break down in burial - just not as fast as in cremation. God will have no problem raising from the dead any person no matter the final disposition of their body.

It's a personal decision. Whatever you decide, the real issue is standing up before your dead and speaking to those who have gathered about Jesus Christ.

In reviewing Sarah's death and burial you may be wondering, "Where was Isaac?" He's not mentioned in the text. Did he miss his mom's funeral?

We don't know if he missed it or not. We can't build an argument from silence. But we *can* see a type.

- The last time we saw Isaac he was being offered to God by his father as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah.
- The first time we see Isaac after his experience on Mount Moriah is when he goes out to meet the woman chosen to be his wife, Rebekah.

It's a type of the relationship between Jesus Christ and New Testament Christians. We are sometimes called the Bride of Jesus Christ. It's interesting to note that Isaac is the only patriarch to have one wife.

Jesus died on the Cross in the same vicinity as Isaac's near-sacrifice, only in His case God did not spare His only Son but offered Him up for our salvation.

The first time we will see the Savior after His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension is when He returns to claim His chosen bride at the resurrection and rapture of the church!

There are some people, some believers, who will never physically die.

1 Corinthians 15:51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed -

1 Corinthians 15:52 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.

Every week I say, in the Prophecy Update, "Get ready, stay ready, keep looking up. Ready or not, Jesus is coming!"

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It might be better to say, "I don't have to get ready because I stay ready!"

Are you "ready?"

- If you are a believer, it means to be in a state in which you will not be ashamed before Jesus at His coming. It means you are in first-love with the Lord and can't wait to see Him.
- If you are a nonbeliever... There is only one way to get ready. It is to receive the Lord as your Savior from sin. Have you done that?

