

## Introduction

Sarah died.

She died as far as her flesh was concerned, but she also died in faith. This is a crucial distinction. While all are appointed to die in their flesh, not all die in faith. Not all die having trusted Jesus Christ for salvation.

The Bible teaches that human beings are more than physical creatures; they are spiritual beings. Physical death in your flesh does *not* mean the end of your existence but only the end of life as you know it and the transition to another dimension in which your conscious existence continues for all eternity. Your personal decision to receive or to reject Jesus Christ in this life determines your destination in the next.

The Bible describes death in a threefold way - Physical, Spiritual, and Eternal:

^ Physical death has to do with your fleshly body. It is the termination of physical life as you know it. Your body decays in the grave and returns to dust. But you are not annihilated, nor do you cease to exist. Your soul is eternal and you are consciously alive and active even though physically dead.

^ Spiritual death is a description of your life between conception and physical death. While you are alive and active physically, you are nevertheless actually spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. You are born spiritually dead as far as your relationship with God is concerned. Men, women, and children who are born spiritually dead can be born-again and made spiritually alive by grace through personal faith in Jesus Christ. These will physically die in faith and, as the Apostle Paul proclaims, "be absent from the body and...be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8) for all eternity in heaven.

^ Eternal death is also called the "Second Death." It is the everlasting separation of human beings from God in Hell, or more properly, in the Lake of Fire. It is the final and lasting destination of all human beings whose decision was to reject rather than receive Jesus Christ by faith while their physical life on earth continued. They remained spiritually dead and will be committed to eternal torment in Hell rather than eternal bliss in Heaven.

So, you see, while all are appointed to die in their flesh, not all die in faith.

Sarah did die in faith, as do all who have trusted Jesus as Savior. Genesis Twenty-three is the record of her death in faith. In it you are greatly encouraged about the death of believers. How should you respond to the death of a Christian? Look at Abraham's example. Since Heaven, and not Hell, is their final destination, you can respond with hope!

At The Death Of A Believer  
(v1-2)

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

#1 You Can Shed Tears Of Hope  
When A Believer Dies  
(v1-2)

It may seem insensitive of me to suggest that you might not know how to respond to the death of a believer. I have found, though, that many times there is a tension between your very real and natural grief and God's very real and supernatural grace. You know that the deceased believer is absent from the body and present with the Lord; for that you *rejoice!* But they are also absent from the body and no longer present with you; for that you have *regret*.

The answer is to shed tears *of hope*. The Apostle Paul puts it best when, writing to Christians in Thessalonica who were grieving over the death of fellow believers, he said,

1 Thessalonians 4:13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

Go ahead and express your grief, Paul said, but do so in the context of your hope in God's grace.

That's what Abraham did when Sarah died.

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

Many times you find that women are naturally sensitive about their age. God the Holy Spirit records Sarah's age many times in Genesis. Physical age had the effect of making Sarah more and more beautiful spiritually. Sarah is every woman's example of how to become more beautiful to the Lord, and to her husband. There is no place in the Bible where you are told to look to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an example of what a godly woman should be. But in two different passages - one in the Old Testament and one in the New - you are told to look to Sarah. Jot down these references and look them up later: Isaiah 51:1-2, and 1 Peter 3:3-6.

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.

Sarah died in the place of blessing, "Canaan," and she died in the place of fellowship, for that is what "Hebron" means. Author John Phillips writes of Sarah,

"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."<sup>1</sup>

Genesis 23:2 ...and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

When the text says that Abraham "came" 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.

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 shortly raise him from the dead! Your tears are precious to God - and they will be your precious possession one day in heaven! Psalms 56:8 reads, "You number my wanderings; Put my tears into Your bottle; *Are they* not in Your book?" God records your tears and reserves them in a

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<sup>1</sup>John Phillips, Exploring Genesis, p. 185

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

So you see Abraham's tears...But you see them in Canaan, in Hebron. He sorrowed, 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. Abraham, his eyes wet with tears, nevertheless looked up through the heavens and, with the eyes of faith, saw that city where sorrow and the shedding of tears are no more. He knew he would see Sarah again.

Make hope the context of your tears when a believer dies!

#2 You Can Share A Testimony Of Hope  
When A Believer Dies  
(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, funeral, or graveside service for a believer is essentially a rare and powerful opportunity to share a testimony about Jesus Christ. It is a time to "stand up" before the dead saint and "speak" about eternal issues. It is what the departed believer would want...And it is what many in the gathering need to hear!

I want to look at several points in 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."

He was *God's* foreigner, *God's* pilgrim, *God's* sojourner, *God's* stranger. As we said, Abraham was looking for the "city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." At the death of a believer you are able to share a testimony about the temporary nature of this life and your 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. It has a spiritual implication: Abraham can't see Sarah again in this life, she will be out of his sight - but only temporarily!

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, he 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!

At any rate, the resurrection of Jesus *is* a testimony to proclaim at the death of a believer.

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."

Abraham would not bury Sarah alongside the unbelievers of this world. They had lived separated from the world and from worldliness. He desired she remain separated in her burial.

The Christian life is a very different life, with different values, different evaluations, different motives, and different motivations. At the death of a believer you can share the wonder of what the Christian *life* is.

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;

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 we are studying business was conducted openly in the gates of the city, where the chief men and elders gathered each day. Abraham now conducts these funeral arrangements in the hearing of all. Notice that he is not overly influenced by their suggestions, but presses forward with his own designs to purchase the land.

Here is an important insight from Abraham's example: Don't be overly influenced by the traditions of the unbelievers at the believer's funeral! The services can and should be somewhat solemn, but they are first and foremost a celebration!

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.

All the land of Canaan had been given to Abraham by God, yet his only visible possession was a burial ground. His life was bound up with God's future promises.

Prophecy is a valuable subject at the death of a believer. Death is the one time when those gathered to pay their respects are actually forced to think of the future - to think of *their* future! *You* know what the future holds for every man, woman, and child. Some books of theology call this "Personal Eschatology." "Eschatology" is the big word intellectuals use to describe the study of future things. That study is both general and personal. General eschatology refers to those things you normally consider when you think of future events: the Rapture of the Church, the Great Tribulation, the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, the Return of Jesus Christ, etc. Personal eschatology relates to the individual from the time of his or her physical death until the resurrection. It tells people what the Bible says with absolute authority about their personal future.

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.

The place is described as "the cave of the field." What a provocative summary that is of your time on earth. Whatever "field" your life is lived in, there is a cave in it at the end...The death of a believer is a time to share with others the fast approaching end of their own physical life. No matter how pleasant the field, the darkness of the cave looms

at its end. The Bible is the only light that can illuminate the experience of the cave that all men are appointed to.

If you are a Christian, you alone have a testimony of hope to share at the death of God's saint. It isn't a ritual or a rite; it is a relationship with the living God.

### Conclusion

I earlier mentioned Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. He shed tears of hope; He also shared a testimony of hope!

John 11:20 Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house.

John 11:21 Then Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

John 11:22 "But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

John 11:23 Jesus said to her, "**Your brother will rise again.**"

John 11:24 Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.**

John 11:26 "**And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?**"

John 11:27 She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

I know that many of you are troubled this morning because of loved ones who have died without Jesus Christ. This study isn't about how you are to deal with the death of unbelievers. For that I am sorry...It is not my intention to cause any pain. I can only tell you what the Apostle Peter says in 2 Peter 3:9, that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

Our emphasis has been upon the death of the believer, a death that the Psalmist says is precious in the sight of the Lord. I want to encourage you to hold it as precious, too, as you shed your tears and share your testimony in the context of your certain hope.