

Text: Genesis 23:1-20

Title: The Death and Burial of Sarah

Truth: Abraham exemplifies proper treatment of the dead.

Date/Location: Sunday March 12, 2023 at FBC

Introduction

You could read this passage like you read a news article about a tragic event, with little to no empathy about the situation or even sympathy for the people involved. Alternatively, you could read the passage as if it happened in your own family...because it did really happen to a family, a biblically important family.

I. Sarah's Death, v. 1-2

- A. The history recorded in the passage is not the most exciting or happy. It deals with Sarah's death, the procurement of a burial plot, and her burial. It is the earliest detailed account given of the death of a Biblical character. Many deaths are simply recorded in Scripture like this: "and he died." But a great amount of detail is given here. Why is that?
- B. The account of the death itself is not elaborate. The text tells how old she was—127 years—and that she died in Hebron, also known as Kirjath Arba. Do you sometimes think that an obituary leaves you with the feeling that you want to know more? This account has a similar effect. What disease did she have? How long did she suffer with it? But it is not important for us to know such details about Sarah, nor about people we read in the obits. In fact, it is a manifestation of our bad desire to stick our nose into other people's business. It is none of our business all the details of someone's death. That is private information. My guess is that most people do not want to share their "worst" moments with the world. We do not want people to remember how we died; rather we want to be known for how we lived, our accomplishments, and our trust in God.
- C. As we would expect, Abraham mourned and wept for her. These two were very attached. They had been together for 37 years after the birth of Isaac. We know that Abraham was 75 when he

departed from Haran (Gen. 12:4) and had already been married to Sarah (Sarai) for some time. She was 10 years younger (Gen. 17:17), so 65 at that time. $127 - 65 = 62$ years they had been married *after moving* out of Haran. Because they lived in Haran for a while, and in Ur of the Chaldees before that, it is conceivable that they were together for up to 100 years. Even if it were only 70 or 80 or 90 years, *that* is a long marriage.

- D. “Sarah is the only woman in Scripture whose age, death, and burial are mentioned, probably to do honor to the venerable mother of the Hebrew people.”¹ We might also recall Anna, who in Luke 2:36-37 is mentioned to be a widow who is 84 years old. Besides these two, there is Naomi who is described as old (Ruth 4:15), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:7, 36). But Sarah appears to be the oldest one whose age is given. Otherwise, we do not ask the women’s ages! However, the truth is that age is a badge of honor, not of dishonor.

II. Abraham Seeks a Family Burial Plot, v. 3-18

- A. Abraham needed a burial plot for his wife, and eventually the family would use that same place for Abraham (25:9), Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob (49:29-32, 50:13, Acts 7:15-16). Joseph’s bones were buried in a different location. Joshua 24:32 says this happened at “Shechem, in the plot of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of silver.” Abraham’s burial plot was a different one—purchased from Ephron the son of Zohar the of Heth (Hittites), for 400 shekels of silver—clearly a different plot of land. It is repeatedly identified as a cave in the field of Machpelah, before Mamre in Canaan. Acts 7:15-16 identifies the general location as Shechem. Perhaps Joseph purchased an expansion on the family burial plot.
- B. The account is quite detailed in how it describes the haggling over the soon-to-be cemetery property. I wonder if that detail is meant

¹ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, [*Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*](#), vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 29.

not only as an historical reminder but also to buttress the certainty of sale and make it absolutely clear that the property belongs to the Jewish nation.

Abraham was a “foreigner” among the sons of Heth (v. 4), so he had to request to purchase a burial plot from them. The tribal leaders in vv. 5-6 tell Abraham that because of his reputation, they will simply give him any property he desires. It appears that Ephron was making a generous offer to Abraham, but some might question that this is a negotiating tactic or that he is glad to get rid of the property for other reasons like taxes. I cannot be certain based on the text which of those is the case. What we *can* determine is that a negotiation took place, and a sales price was determined. It seems most likely to me that the interaction in verses 10-16 was the friendly, “indirect” way of negotiating a sale price.

- C. Abraham already knew a particular plot of ground that had a cave on it and responded in verses 7-9 that he wanted to pay the full price for it. He was not going to take benevolence from these foreigners but instead was going to pay full market price for the property. This echoes Genesis 14:23. The land would then belong to his family in perpetuity. Note that “give” in 23:4 really means “sell.”
- D. Burying the dead “out of sight” is a statement which initially may seem strange, but when death visits your family, it will seem very natural. It is time to put the beloved’s body into the earth, to return it to the dust from whence it came at the first creation. Burial of the dead body ties each and every person directly back to Adam and Eve and God’s curse because of sin. Sin did enter the world, and death through sin, and death spread to all (Rom. 5:12). Also, because of decay, what was once beloved and a delight to the eyes becomes unpleasant. It must be put away. Once out of sight, it feels better—not wonderful, but better, with closure.
- E. The owner of that piece of property, Ephron the Hittite, again offered the property for free (vv. 10-11) but Abraham refused (vv. 12-13). Ephron answered that it was worth 400 shekels of silver, but that this amount was nothing between them. This apparently

was the way that bartering was accomplished because the next verse says that Abraham “listened” to Ephron and paid the purchase price. It seems like beating around the bush to me!

- F. The legal side of the deal was then sealed at the gate of Ephron’s city, the place where all official business was carried out. This was so that the sale could be ratified with witnesses, like when we go to the title company and record everything with the county.

III. Sarah is Buried, v. 19-20

- A. Abraham buried Sarah’s body in the cave. We do not know anything from the text about what kind of preparation was done to the body, whether little or extensive. Today embalming is quite an extensive process. If you a bit weak in the stomach, it is better not to ask too many questions about it. More people in the United States are opting for “natural burial” to reduce “processing” of the body and putting chemicals into the ground, and the like.
- B. In the final verse of the chapter, the Bible notes that the property was deeded to Abraham as a gravesite for his family. This passage indicates the validity of long-term property purchases. Property ownership was known and practiced even in these days, about 4,000 years ago. The property was held for at least three long generations.
- C. Another importance of this passage is that it indicates the priority of burial, which I believe to show respect both to God and to the deceased. Some are buried at sea and others on land and I do not have a case to make against the latter. In either case, we believe it is important to treat the human body with respect for it is part of God’s creation of man in His image. I believe that our bodies are part of the image of God. God made man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him the breath of life, and I take it that the whole package is made in the image of God. After all, Jesus lived in a body like ours. Or, can we look at that in reverse? God made our human bodies so that they would be like what He already pre-planned Jesus to look like. Furthermore, we will live in similar, though glorified, bodies for all eternity. Scripture does not

suggest that a body-less existence is a good state—it is not. Paul refers to it as a “naked” state (2 Cor. 5:3)—it is missing something.

- D. In my teaching series about death and dying I refer to this passage, along with many others, to show that the Biblical pattern for handling a person’s dead body is burial—again, because of the connection to the dust from which we came. Jesus was buried; Sarah was buried; Abraham was buried; and God buried Moses, just to name a few. Sometimes I get questions about cremation, or about the extent to which embalming occurs, and that series answers those questions.² It is of some interest to me that several of the examples of burial cited above are in caves or tombs hewn out of rock. We do not use that method, perhaps due to a lack of readily available caves or above-ground tombs. There are Bible examples of burial by lowering someone down into a hole in the ground (2 Kings 13:21).
- E. Modern cremation practice is generally done for financial reasons (in the U.S.) but may also be done in other countries because of lack of cemetery space. The practice of cremation is not endorsed by the Scriptures, though if one is cremated or dies in a terrible fire, this does not prevent almighty God from resurrecting that person. Note that burning of bodies, as in the trash dump in the Valley of Hinnom, is a sign of reproach and shame. Bodies left out for the dogs and vultures (2 Kings 9:36-37, Jer. 34:20), or even hung on a tree, indicated a curse on such people (Deut. 21:23, Joshua 8:29; cf. Acts 5:30, 10:39, Gal. 3:13).

Conclusion

The account of Sarah’s death is significant even at the end of the next chapter (24:67) where Isaac was comforted by his new wife after his mother’s death. These Bible characters were real people, and Isaac loved his mother very much.

This text does raise some practical matters, like preparing for your own passing so that you have a place to be buried, a church service to comfort those who survive, and final arrangements for the disposition of your property. It may be unpleasant to think about

² <https://www.fbcaa.org/BibleStudies/topical/DeathAndDyingSeminar.pdf>

it, but death is *real*. We want to live well, we want to die well, and we need to treat the dead well.

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