

XXXIX. Genesis in Biblical Perspective

The Gospel of Christ from Genesis
“Faith’s Lessons in Life and Death”

Genesis 23

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We come to a text of Scripture where one’s life-race was over, Sarah. Here is the account of the death of the matriarch, Sarah. This is the Word of God. It’s the truth. Genesis 23:1–20 says **1** *Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.* **2** *And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.* **3** *And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites,* **4** *“I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”* **5** *The Hittites answered Abraham,* **6** *“Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.”* **7** *Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land.* **8** *And he said to them, “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar,* **9** *that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place.”*

10 *Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city,* **11** *“No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.”* **12** *Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land.* **13** *And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, “But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”* **14** *Ephron answered Abraham,* **15** *“My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.”* **16** *Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.*

17 *So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over* **18** *to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city.* **19** *After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.* **20** *The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may this His Word be preached for you.

This text is setting us up for a transition. We have been studying the life of Abraham and we’re about to study the life of Isaac. So we will get Sarah buried, Isaac married and then Abraham married in Genesis 23, 24, and 25. In Genesis 22 it tells us where Isaac’s wife will come from, the brother of Abraham, Nahor. We’ll be looking at that later. So where do we start?

Charles Spurgeon was a great Baptist preacher from the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England. One day after the worship service one of his deacon's came up to him and said "Can I ask you a question? Pastor, this is a great day for me. There is a man who has been addicted to strong drink his whole life. He finally came to church with me today. After the service he came to the mourner's bench and prayed to commit his life to Christ." Charles Spurgeon said, "Praise the Lord, what's your question?" He said "Do you think it took? Do you think it was real? Do you think he really became a Christian today?" Spurgeon replied "How can you expect me to ascertain in a moment what it takes a lifetime to reveal?"

Let me tell you what Spurgeon was not saying. Spurgeon was not saying we need to wait and see if he lives a good enough life to get to heaven. He was saying that saving faith is not the fleeting act of a moment but it is the acquisition of a life. Saving faith is not the fleeting act of a moment when I sign the register of a church or go forward in a meeting, while that may be part of saving faith's work, saving faith is not the act of a moment. It is the acquisition of a life.

That's why the book of James is in our Bible. The Bible tells us Abraham was saved by faith. How do I know Abraham believed? James tells us we know he believed because of his works. It's not his works that saved him and it's not his works plus faith that saved him. When there is real faith works are always in the wake of that life. A saving faith has works attached to it, not as the ground our salvation but as the evidence of the fact and authenticity of our faith. I want you to be thinking about that as we go through this text of saving faith in death and in life.

This is an interesting text of Scripture. The first matriarch dies, the wife of Abraham. This is the only time in the Bible that a woman's age at death is given. The Bible is giving us all a little hint here. Sarah is 127 years old when she dies. If she dies at 127, how old is Abraham? He is 137 years old. That means that Isaac is 37 when his mother dies because Abraham was 100 when he was born. It will be three years after Sarah's death that Isaac will get married. Sarah was Abraham's soul mate, wife of his youth and have been through so much together. She by faith walked with his faith. They came to a land in which they had never owned anything until they finally buried her in something. They lived there, saw Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed, saw the hand of God at work in the life of Lot and his family and Sarah saw her husband go out and rescue five kings and defeat four other kings. She saw the hand of the Lord upon her husband and saw the frailties and sinfulness of her husband as he would lie about his wife twice in order to save himself.

She will even become somewhat complicit because she herself will show her faltering faith as she laughed at the promise of the child that would be given. She tried to fulfill the promise by means of a concubine, Hagar, her handmaiden. The Bible doesn't whitewash anybody. We get to see them just as they are. Here Sarah and Abraham both saved by grace through faith, growing in their faith, yet no perfection could ever be attributed to them, yet growing as the Lord worked with them and by grace through the darkest hours kept bringing them to Himself and kept working His purposes in them. Now, she dies.

We know she is a woman of faith not only from the text we have studied but also she is also found in Hebrews 11:11 which says [11] *By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful*

who had promised. She is there in the hall of faith. She dies and then Abraham mourns her. Then this interesting account begins to occur. Why is this in our Bible?

Abraham rises up after mourning over his wife and he goes into the city of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron). I went there in 1980 and had to go in under armed guard. I was able to visit the cave of Machpelah that holds the remains of the patriarchs and their families. Built over that cave today is an Islamic shrine but it is still there today at Hebron and the field that's around it. I want to share with you some thoughts from this text but first we'll walk through it together.

When Abraham gets to Hebron he says "I'd like to get a piece of property to bury my wife. I need a burial place." He calls himself a "ger" in Hebrew which means a sojourner and an alien. Basically he was saying he was a resident alien. In our language today that would mean he would not be a citizen of our country but a sojourner with a green card. So here he was a resident alien in the midst of the Hittites. They call him a prince of God (Yahweh, which they did not worship themselves). Abraham's witness had been very clear to the Hittites. Then out of esteem for him they told him he could choose any of their tombs and use them, but Abraham was not looking for a burial spot, he was looking for a burial plot. He wasn't looking for a space to use but a place to own.

It says three times that Abraham bowed and that's the only time he ever bowed except to God and worship. In kindness and proper respect he bows to these people and then he goes to the gates of the city which is very important because he enters into negotiations with the Ephron the Hittite. The reason it is with Ephron is because he is the one that owns the cave of Machpelah which is what Abraham wants to purchase. If you could study Ancient Near East culture in Hebrew you'd see how this text really comes alive.

We think after reading here about Ephron that he's a nice guy for doing this. Three times here Ephron tells Abraham "I will give..." but he is far from giving anything. Ephron says "I'll give you the cave but there is some land that will go with it." Have you ever had a deal like that before where someone shows up and says "Do you know what you want"? Now, to get what you want you have to buy these five things. Abraham says to Ephron, "No, I don't want something that will be contested later. In the presence of all, I'll give you the full price." Ephron says "Four hundred shekels? What's that between me and you?" David hundreds of years later will buy the site to put the temple on for fifty shekels. Ephron is sticking it to him.

Most of the time when we think of a shekel we think of a single coin but in this text it is before the coin. A shekel here was a weight. In other words, this piece of land and the cave costs Abraham 7.5 pounds of pure silver. Ephron is making all kinds of money off of Abraham but Abraham doesn't even negotiate. He weighs it out and gives it to him. Then Abraham brings the remains of his wife and respectfully and appropriately lays them aside in the cave of Machpelah, in Hebron. This negotiation was fully witnessed at the gates of the city. It was legal and his. It was property that the text says Abraham now possessed.

What is the Lord showing us here? We have the documentation of Sarah's death but in this text we don't really talk much about Sarah in this text. It's all about Abraham, burial places and negotiations. Everything in this text is revealing something to us about the faith of Sarah and Abraham. I'm going to paraphrase something here from John Calvin. Calvin says about this text "We are at the death of a matriarch. She is silent but

from her tomb, Abraham is shouting ‘I believe.’” I’d like to look a little bit closer at the text here and let’s glean three life takeaways from this text.

When we get to the point of looking at Abraham, Abraham makes a statement about himself that reveals the distinction in the lifestyle of faith or what I call the distinctive in the lifestyle of faith. The distinctive in the lifestyle of faith is the believer lives this life fully but lives this life for the life to come. Abraham is a sojourner and an alien. Everything God calls him to do he is ready to do. He’ll glorify the Lord. When he falters and fails his sins are confessed and he begins to grow but in the midst of all of this his roots don’t go down in this life. They don’t sink in this life.

The song we used to sing in Alliance Youth Fellowship was “This world is not my home. I’m just passing through. My treasure is laid up somewhere beyond the blue.” It’s interesting that Abraham is in the land that is promised to him and this land will not be possessed by Abraham’s descendants for another six hundred years yet Abraham when he is in this land does not connive to sink his roots there. This land has been promised to him and is his but not yet is it realized. Therefore he doesn’t sink his allegiance and affection there. His allegiance and affections go beyond there.

The reason I know this, is because that is what the Holy Spirit inspired an author of the New Testament to tell us about this moment and about the life of Abraham. I’d like to look at Hebrews 11 where there are multiple verses talking about the life of Abraham. I want to show you in Hebrews 11 what Abraham is referring to in Genesis 23. Hebrews 11:8–10 says **8** *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9* *By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land (He lived in it as if in a foreign land.), living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. (Why did he do this?) 10* *For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.* There is where the believer is looking.

Now today, we don’t do a lot of sermons on heaven or the life to come but we talk about what Christianity means for now and surely Christianity impacts now and now is a full life sustained by the grace and power of God but the fact is, the best for the believer is always in front of them. It’s never now or behind us. It is always in front of us. It is always before us. That’s why the older lady said to the pastor when they did her funeral, “Put the Bible and the fork in my hand. When they come by the casket and see that tell them the Lord is my foundation and the fork is in my hand because when you save your fork the best is yet to come.” I have loved this life but the best is yet to come. So Abraham, while he was experiencing the promises, the call and blessings of God, his heart, affections and allegiance did not sink into that land, but it was in the land to come whose designer and builder is God Himself. That is where ultimately his heart was rooted.

Does that apply to me? Oh yes, for you have been given the promise of a Kingdom and a new heavens and a new earth. It’s yours but not yet do you have it. How do you live between now and then? This world is not my home. It’s not this world’s values that are mine. I am a pilgrim, a sojourner, making progress by the grace of God, to the glory of God, until I hear Him say “Come, I will sing over you.” There is where our heart is rooted, there in eternity. This is not just Abraham, old language. It applies to us today. Let’s look at I Peter 2.

Peter says to believers in I Peter 2:11, ***II Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*** He says you're in the world but not of the world. I want you to be distinctive. How are you distinctive? You don't sink the roots here. Hold everything loosely. I cannot say it better than A.W. Tozer but I will paraphrase it, "O the blessedness of living this life, possessing nothing."

You might be thinking, "I have a house, a car, etc." No, you may have a title there, but the Christian says "Hold it, I'm just watching over it. I'm a steward. God owns my house. He owns me. He owns my family. He owns my bank account. Actually I hold all of this very loosely. I want to know the joy of possessing nothing." Sometimes we look at this legalistically thinking 'that man is poor so he must be holy' or 'that man is rich so he must be evil.' No, the Bible does say it is harder for a rich man to get into the Kingdom than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24), but why is that? It is because money and the love of it can pervert you where you begin to turn to money and money becomes your answer instead of turning to the Lord. Money can insulate and isolate and can become an idol but it's not the money.

We can't legalistically say if you have \$20,000 a year then you're holy and anything over \$20,000, then you must be a sinner. I have met people who have available extraordinary amounts of money and they possess none of it and walk in obedience and humility before the Lord. I have met people with just a very little but their life is wrapped up in it. I have met people who have very little and their heart is like Paul when he says "I have learned to be content in everything." The question is not how much do you have, but the question is, does it have you? So let me add to what Tozer said and say "O the blessedness of possessing nothing so that nothing possesses me but Jesus."

The second takeaway from this text is to see Sarah dying in faith and Abraham living by faith. Abraham's actions in the life and death of Sarah reveal the authenticity of the profession of his faith. Look at how he deals with it and what he does. You can almost see him working his theology through this. God called him out to a land and made him two promises, "I'll give you a seed and I'll give you land. Then I will give that land to your seed and their seed. I will remember this covenant from generation to generation to generation." Thirty seven years ago the hand of God came down and a hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman had a child. The child was Isaac. The promise of the seed had been fulfilled. For 37 years Abraham had laughter, Isaac, right in front of him. Now his wife was dying and they owned not one piece of the land that God had promised to give them as a possession and to give to their children.

So what did Abraham do? He knew God was faithful and he knew God's promises were sure. So Abraham went and bought a piece of that land. He put the remains of his wife there because he knew his people would be there. He wasn't going to send her remains back from where they came from, Er and he wasn't just going to dispose of them like they would in the Ancient near East. He wanted to set her aside reverently because he believed in the resurrection. In the midst of his mourning, outshined his joy and hope and it is there that they will keep coming back for this is the land that He promised him. Abraham believed His promises and in the silence of that tomb came the shout of Abraham's confession "I believe." He knew this land was the

land God had given him and his descendants. God gave him the seed and he knew God would give him the land.

By him buying that land and owning it so that it is not contested, legally affirming every piece of it, Abraham is putting the stake in the ground. In that stake in the ground he is proclaiming “I believe the Lord.” What a wonderful opportunity at each and every funeral to do that, where at each and every death the gravesite becomes a stake in the ground when the believer goes to be with the Lord. What benefits do they receive? They receive the presence of the Lord. Absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8). What about we who are living? Does the shout “I believe” come through? That doesn’t mean we don’t mourn for Abraham mourns for Sarah but this Abraham, because he has the love of the Lord and the fear of the Lord, has been liberated from the fears of this world. Even at the graveside of his wife, Abraham is chained to something for he is the prisoner of hope – God will fulfill His Word! Abraham believed God for he was captured by the grace of God, even in the death of his wife. The death itself becomes the opportunity for Abraham to say “I believe.”

My grandfather said to me years ago “Son, I want you to do my funeral.” At the time I couldn’t even think of it, a young man in the ministry. I said, “Granddaddy, I don’t think I can do that.” He said, “I don’t remember asking you if you could do my funeral, I said ‘do it.’ I want you to do it and I want to be very clear. You don’t need to say a word about me.” He was a lay minister in a denomination and his home church from which he worked out of for a number of years had abandoned the Gospel and believing in the truth of God’s Word. He looked at me and said “The Gospel of Jesus Christ has not been preached in that pulpit for years and if I have to die to get it preached one more time then that’s what we’re going to do. So you preach the Gospel and son, on my tombstone I want it to have my name, my birthdate, a death date and nothing else. I’m trusting you with this and nothing else but one word which is ‘forgiven’ and you tell everybody at my funeral why I’m forgiven.” His tombstone became a stake in the ground.

Sarah’s death became a stake in the ground. This is not the moment of despair. This is not the moment that God hasn’t fulfilled His Word. This is the moment for Abraham to shout “I believe! I believe the truth of what God has said in His Word.” By purchasing that plot of land he declared to all that the promises of God are sure and ‘yes.’ The sacred remains of Sarah became the stake in the ground that declared to the world, not only Sarah but Abraham believed.

That is how I was converted. I was converted by those who lived by faith and died in faith. My wife Cindy and I went to this little Presbyterian Church where I would slip in and out because Cindy wouldn’t marry anyone who wasn’t a Christian so I thought going to church would work. All of a sudden this elder’s wife had a cerebral hemorrhage on Christmas Day and their four little girls called us. They wanted me and my wife to stay with them while their dad, Jimmy went to be with his wife. She died that Christmas Day and at the funeral I remember saying to Jimmy “I don’t know what to say or how to say it but I’m here for you. What can I do?” He said, “You’ve done enough for me but I want to tell you three things. If I could bring my wife back now I would not because what she has is more than I could give her and it would be purely selfish on my part. Secondly, I want you to know that I trust the Lord. God is sovereign. He never tells me all things are good but all things work together for good. He has a plan in this. I have

these four daughters, I don't know what I'm going to do but He's got a plan. The third thing is it will not be that long until I'm with her."

I had only been to one funeral in my life in which is what so bizarre and now I'm seeing all these people mourning but they are prisoners of hope, not prisoners of tears. There is the shout of anticipation. I heard it from him and I didn't know what to do so I went to this man, Harold who I had been talking to and said "What kind of drugs is this man on?" He said "Harry, he's not on any drugs. It's the Gospel of truth. Right here we lift the flag. Christ saves and every promise is true. The world cannot deliver anything but disappointment and death but Christ gives you the victory." I was so moved that I went into the hallway and committed my life to Christ right then. I'll never forget that. Last Friday I got a word from Jimmy who had lost his wife and he was right. It wasn't that long and he is not with her. Harold, who I talked with, is now with the Lord. I've been right beside those graves and those have been staked with the glory of God. When you live by faith and die in faith, then the living announce "We believe" and it becomes clear the statement of the truth of God's Word.

I have one final thought about visiting graves and remembering. Notice how they set the body aside in this text. They didn't burn it up or throw it away. They set it aside. There was mourning yet there was hope. So what about visiting graves? Every time I go back to Charlotte, North Carolina I go to my dad and mom's grave. I know they are not there but I go there to remember. Do you know what will happen next in the text? Not too long later Isaac will bring Abraham back here and bury him right here at the cave of Machpelah. Then Rebekah will bring Isaac and Jacob will superintend at the death of his father Isaac right here. Then Jacob will be down in Egypt and Jacob will tell his sons not to leave him down there. So when he did die, they embalmed him, brought him back and put him right there in that cave. Joseph, Jacob's son will die in Egypt and he'll say "The Lord is going to give you the land and when He does, take my bones up and put them with my father's." Four hundred plus years later, Moses will lead them out and they will carry the bones of Joseph out. For forty years they will carry those bones in the wilderness. Moses will die, Joshua will take over and they will win the victory at Jericho and then Joshua will take Joseph's bones and put them in the cave at Machpelah. For hundreds of years they remembered and then they receive the land.

When I go I remember what God did in my life through my parents. When I go to Augusta, Georgia there are four generations with my grandfather's plot there. I know he's not there. I'm not getting morbid. If you go there and pull up the corner of the grave, in the sand there are 42 pennies, because every time I go I leave a penny. I'll sit, think and remember. Do you know what the opposite of remember, is? The answer we normally give is forget, but that's not the answer. Those of you who are etymologists can check me out on this, but the opposite of remember is to dismember. When you remember you put the members back together, to dismember you tear them apart. When you remember you go back and connect the dots.

Every Lord's Day we get to come here and remember He has risen. Every time we sit at the Lord's Supper we remember. Every time God did something in the Old Testament, he piled up stones and said "Bring your children back here and remember." Connect the dots for them. We are not a people who live in midair. As C.S. Lewis has said we have to get away from this chronological snobbery. It is the snobbery of the old that live in the past and the snobbery of the modernity that dismisses the past. We have

to learn to remember we are a people with a history and the history is so that we'll move into the future with a sure and certain hope God is the same yesterday, today and forever. So remember but I have great news. You don't need any pennies when you get to the Lord's grave for its empty. He is risen. He lives and He will remember you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for the privilege and time to be in this Word and the opportunity to walk our way through this passage. Would You speak to our hearts? You may be reading this today and you need to connect the dots, you need to connect to Jesus Christ. He died on the cross for your sins and He rose again and now He invites you, "Come. I will sing the song of redemption and salvation over you." If you have prayed that prayer confessing you're a sinner and you want to pray with someone, please contact us at Briarwood at 205-776-5200. We'd love to talk with you and help you get started in your walk with Christ. Brothers and sisters, we are a people of faith. Our faith is not the act of a moment. It's the acquisition of a lifestyle. It's not the fleeting emotion of a second. It's a way of life – intentional in the power of God's grace for His glory. We live by it, we die in it and it anchors our soul. Ask the Lord, "Lord, may our faith in Jesus Christ shout in life and in death 'I believe', for we live forever in Him." I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.