

DEATH, FAITH, AND OPPORTUNITY  
GENESIS 24

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The most significant death and funeral on the world stage that many of us have witnessed in the last few years was that of Queen Elizabeth II. (PROJECTOR ON--- QUEEN ELIZABETH II) She died on September 8, 2022, at age 96. She had the longest reign of any monarch in British history. She came to the throne in 1952. Over the course of many decades she acquired a reputation for calm, steady leadership. She was generally well respected and liked by citizens of the British Commonwealth.

The funeral for Queen Elizabeth was quite a spectacle. The planning for it actually began in 1960. There is a royal official called the earl marshal, part of whose job is planning for the funeral of the current monarch. The funeral service itself was held at Westminster Abbey. (QUEEN ELIZABETH II FUNERAL) There were about 500 dignitaries and heads of state from all over the world who attended. Some 300 staff people were involved in planning the service.

On the day of the service at Westminster Abbey hundreds of thousands of people (QUEEN ELIZABETH II CROWDS) turned out in London to see parts of the funeral procession. One thousand military personnel led the coffin to St. George's Chapel where her body was buried. The official cause of death was listed as "old age."

Queen Elizabeth identified as a Christian woman. She had annual Christmas addresses where she always spoke about Jesus and talked about her faith in Him. She will no doubt go down in history as one of the greatest monarchs of the United Kingdom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The most famous funeral of a woman in the Bible is that of Sarah, wife of Abraham. Like Queen Elizabeth, she was royalty of a sort. Her husband is recognized as the ancestor of both the Jews and the Arabs. We Christians also trace our spiritual heritage to the two of them. Sarah also lived to a ripe old age. Her passing at the time did not garner the attention that Queen Elizabeth received. But I suspect that more people down through history know about Sarah than about Queen Elizabeth.

While the Bible gives some attention to the passing of Sarah, the fascinating thing is that it gives much more attention to the obtaining of a burial site for this woman. Why is that, and what significance does that have for us? We want to consider that today as we look at the story of Sarah's passing in Genesis #23.

Abraham had often been exposed to death. As he grew older, he became aware of the prospect of his own death and the death of Sarah his wife. In our last message on the

life of Abraham we saw that he had contemplated the possibility of the death of Isaac, his special son. The Lord spared Isaac, but now He took Sarah.

I.

In vv. 1 & 2 of Genesis #23 we encounter THE DEATH OF SARAH. (PROJECTOR ON-- I. THE DEATH OF SARAH) The text says, **“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.”**

Sarah is the only woman in the entire Bible whose death is described in any detail. That suggests that her death and life had significance in God’s eyes. Indeed her name is included in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews #11. (1 PETER 3:6) The Apostle Peter speaks about her in 1 Peter #3 v. 1. Speaking to Christian wives he writes, **“... as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.”** In spite of Abraham’s failings as a husband, she maintained respect for her husband. The New Testament writers regard her as a woman of faith and a model of godliness.

If Sarah was 127 when she died, her son Isaac would have been about 37 years old. He apparently lived at home. In the next chapter we are told that he was deeply touched by his mother’s passing.

Abraham was away when it happened. Perhaps he was tending his flock on an extended journey away from home. Their base had again been moved sometime in the previous 25 years. (BEERSHEBA MAP) At last report they were all based in Beersheba. Now the family is back in Hebron. When Abraham got the sad news, he quickly returned and proceeded to mourn for his wife. This was another test of Abraham’s faith. They had a very long marriage. His life partner who shared many experiences with him was now gone.

According to the custom of the time Abraham probably tore his clothes and put on sack cloth. Perhaps he put ashes or dirt on his head. He wept freely. The ancient Jewish custom was that the body of the deceased was to be buried within the day. That was not possible here. Abraham was out of town, and he had not yet made arrangements for a burial site. Figuring that out took at least a little bit of time.

II.

Verses 3-18 describe THE PURCHASE OF A BURIAL SITE. (II. THE PURCHASE OF A BURIAL SITE) The author goes into considerable detail to describe the acquisition of a burial plot. Why? God gave Abraham several promises when He told the patriarch to go to the land of Canaan. He promised that He would make of Abraham a great nation. For years Abraham and Sarah had no children of their own. But now with Isaac we see the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise. The other key promise was that God would give them the land of Canaan. Until now this wandering family of shepherds and cattle raisers did not own one acre of land in Canaan. But with the purchase of a burial

cave we begin to see Abraham and his descendants stake a claim in the land of Canaan.

The customary thing to do in this situation of death was to mourn and wrap the body and return it to the tomb of the ancestors of the deceased. (HARAN MAP). Sarah's father Terah was buried in Haran far to the north outside of the land of Canaan. But Abraham insists on burying his wife in Canaan.

So in v. 3 he speaks to the sons of Heth. Verse 10 identifies the leader as Ephron the Hittite. There is debate among Biblical scholars about whether these Hittites are the same as the Hittites who became a powerful empire based in Turkey between 1600 and 1200 BC. (HITTITE MAP) The Biblical chronology indicates that Abraham and Sarah are living around 2000 BC. One possibility is that in this earlier time there were Hittites who were already moving into southern Canaan. Maybe Ephron was from this area of Turkey. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Abraham in v. 4 identifies himself as a stranger and a sojourner. Normally resident aliens like Abraham were not allowed to acquire land. So what Abraham does is to ask the Hittites for an exception to the rule.

In v. 6 the Hittites instead offer Abraham the choice of one of their burial sites to use. Their response indicates that Abraham has had an effective witness to them. They offer him their best grave site, and they call him a "prince of God." They have witnessed the blessings in Abraham's life. They were aware of his significant victory over the northern alliance of city-states. They give credit for these accomplishments to his God. Abraham has had a good relationship with them.

But Abraham desires a burial site that he can call his own. He has a particular location in mind. In v. 9 he asks for the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to Ephron the son of Zohar. He offers to pay for its full value.

According to v. 10 Ephron is among those sitting at the gate of the city where business is transacted. The ruins of ancient Hebron have been partly excavated. The main gate to the city dating to the time of Abraham has been found. So we may know just where this purchase of the grave site happened.

In v. 11 Ephron offers Abraham the cave and throws in the field with it. Hittite law from centuries later required the owner of a complete unit of land to pay taxes on it and to serve in the army in time of war. Some scholars wonder if Ephron wanted to give up the entire parcel of land so that he would no longer be responsible to provide the services to the government that went along with the property. But again we don't know for sure that these Hittites were even connected ethnically with those of the Hittite Empire centuries later.

Verse 11 sounds like Ephron is making a genuine offer to simply give Abraham the entire lot. Some suspect that Ephron is following a customary procedure that involves bargaining over the price of this land. We don't know for sure.

In v. 13 Abraham insists upon paying for the field. Some translations describe it as "the full value." But Ephron responds in v. 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."** Some think that this was just an opening price in an expected bargaining process and that no one really expected that Abraham would pay this much. We don't know how big the piece of land was either.

Abraham had the money with him. So he was prepared to pay this price. His wife had just died. He was a wealthy man. He perhaps was in no mood to negotiate. Maybe he wanted to be overly generous as a stranger and an alien. Maybe he wanted there to be no future doubt among the Hittites about the right that he and his descendants had to this property.

In any case the land was deeded over to him. The text is careful to point out that it was done in the presence of many witnesses. Also v. 17 notes that the field and cave faced Mamre. In an earlier chapter we were told that Abraham lived by the oaks of Mamre. So it seems that Abraham desired this particular cave because it was close to the area where he lived. It becomes the first piece of property that the Hebrews own in Canaan.

Thus the Hebrews establish their first claim to the land. Four thousand years later Abraham's descendants and the descendants of Ishmael are still arguing over who has the right to the land. The struggle continues to be played out today in Hebron. Jews and Arabs today still are arguing over who has the right to the burial site of Abraham.

III.

Verses 19 & 20 describe THE BURIAL OF SARAH. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE BURIAL OF SARAH) **"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 author here stresses that the family of Abraham now has clear title to a piece of property in the land of Canaan. By having a place to bury their family members Abraham is laying claim to this area as the place of his hometown. One day Abraham would also be buried here, along with Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Leah.

The Cave of Machpelah is the place which has been recognized as the burial place of Abraham and Sarah for the last 4000 years. Jews, Muslims, and Christians pay respects to this ancestor of the faith. Two thousand years ago Herod the Great built a monument over the site. (HEBRON TOMB) It still stands today.

Today Hebron is part of what is called the West Bank. It is occupied by 200,000 Palestinians. Yet there are also 700 Jewish settlers, protected by the Israel Defense Force, who claim land next to the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Muslims and Jews share access to the site. The Jews regained access to the site as a result of the Six Day War in 1967.

IV. A.

(IV. THE LESSONS) We come then to a consideration of THE LESSONS that we may derive from this passage. The first is that DEATH IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE FAITH IN GOD. (IV. THE LESSONS A. DEATH IS AN OPPORTUNITY...) The normal custom in the culture would have been to return the body of Sarah to Haran to the land of her ancestors. But Abraham trusted in the promises of God. God had promised to make of Abraham a great nation, and He had promised to settle that nation in the land of Canaan. Abraham as yet had only one descendant in the line of promise, and he did not yet own one acre of land. But he believed that if those promises were not going to be fulfilled in his lifetime, they would be fulfilled through his descendants.

So Abraham marked out his claim upon the land of Canaan by purchasing a burial plot. That grave site would be the only land in Canaan that he would ever own. But it would be a testimony to future generations about his faith in God and His promises. By burying Sarah in the land of Canaan he was demonstrating his faith in the promise of God that this land would one day belong to his descendants.

Death is also an opportunity for us Christians to demonstrate our faith in God. Funerals afford an opportunity to make a statement about what we truly believe. Sometimes these may be statements about our status in the community. Affection for the deceased can be measured in terms of dollars spent on caskets and grave liners and extra amenities.

The Bible says that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Once we die, it becomes an empty shell. We see that these early God followers did treat the body with respect. Burial was the method chosen by the people of God throughout the Bible to deal with the deceased.

At the same time a gold casket isn't going to be of any benefit to us in the afterlife. Directions that we have left concerning our funeral that have a focus on Jesus and our hope for heaven, statements which we have made about our faith in God, and expressions of concern for others can leave a positive legacy. Our faith is directed toward heaven, not toward preserving or glorifying the empty shell of a departed saint.

Unfortunately an increasing number of people, even Christians, are foregoing funerals. The reasons I have been given are that the dying want to avoid the financial costs of a funeral, and they don't want to bring attention to themselves. I think that this is a misguided perspective. Funerals are not for the benefit of the deceased but for the

benefit of family and friends. They can also be a statement of Christian faith to the broader community.

The statements which we leave on gravestones can also be an ongoing expression of our Christian faith. I often end my runs in the Boulder City Cemetery. I experience a certain kind of encouragement as I look at those gravestones and recognize the testimonies of many people whom I have had a part in burying.

B.

The first lesson is about faith. The second lesson is about hope. THERE IS HOPE FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISES BEYOND THE GRAVE. (IV. A. B. THERE IS HOPE FOR THE...) Abraham had hope that the promises of God would be fulfilled in his future descendants. The Jewish people did indeed become a great nation. Today they occupy much of the land promised to Abraham, but not all of it. The complete fulfillment of the land promise is still future. The site that marks the beginning of that occupation still stands today.

Abraham had another hope--- a hope apart from the promises of a great nation and a specific land. He had a personal hope about life beyond the grave. (HEBREWS 11:10) In Hebrews #11 v. 10 we are told, **“For he [Abraham] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”** Then he adds in vv. 13-16 (HEBREWS 11:13), **“These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (HEBREWS 11:14-15) For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. (HEBREWS 11:16) But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”** These people, including Abraham, were looking forward to heaven. They had a hope for life beyond the grave. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The information available to us today about heaven is considerably greater than what was available to those Old Testament saints. We have more revelation from God. We know that death for us believers means release from our sin natures. We know that death means release from the frailties and pains of our earthly bodies. We know that death means immediate entrance into the presence of God. We know that there will be a resurrection from the dead. We know that our ultimate eternal home will be the new Jerusalem described in Revelations #21. Thus there is hope for the fulfillment of God's promises beyond the grave.

On this side of heaven we yearn for acceptance and significance and peace and joy and fulfillment and security. We don't always find those things. We never find them completely in this life. But if we have trusted in Jesus, our hope and confidence is that we will find them beyond the grave. We will.

Death brings grief to us Christians, We grieve, but not as those who have no hope, as the Apostle Paul tells us. We have hope in the fulfillment of God's promises beyond the grave.

C.

There is faith. There is hope. And finally there is love. LOVE FOR GOD AND FOR OTHERS MEANS PREPARING FOR OUR OWN DEATH AND FOR THE DEATHS OF OUR LOVED ONES. (IV. A. B. C. LOVE FOR GOD AND FOR OTHERS...) It is difficult for us to understand the circumstances that surrounded Abraham four thousand years ago. But it might seem to us that he would have been better off if he had arranged a burial site for himself and Sarah before either of them died. The circumstances might have been less stressful for Abraham and his family if he had talked to Ephron the Hittite prior to Sarah's death.

Malcolm Forbes (MALCOMB FORBES) was a wealthy man. He was perhaps best known for his role as publisher of *Forbes Magazine*. He was an adventurous guy. He liked motorcycles. He was a balloonist. For his seventieth birthday he chartered a 747 jet, a DC 8, and a Concorde to bring 800 of his friends from the US and Europe to a weekend in his place in Morocco. (MALCOMB FORBES 70TH BIRTHDAY) His guests included Elizabeth Taylor, Walter Cronkite, Calvin Klein, Bill Buckley, Barbara Walters, Henry Kissinger, and twelve US governors. A custom engraved Rolex was provided for each guest. A lot of time and money were spent in planning this event. Six months later Malcomb Forbes died suddenly of a heart attack.

His son Steve Forbes (STEVE FORBES), who has also become well known and wealthy, commented at the time: **"Death is inevitable for everyone.... But I guess we never thought he would really die. He always defied all the odds."** This was a brilliant successful family. They were good at building bigger barns. Yet they seemed to be unprepared for death.

Our recognition of the inevitability of death and our love for God and others should prompt us to prepare for death. The most important preparation is spiritual preparation. We need to make sure that we know where we are going after death. And we can know. (1 JOHN 5:11-12) The Apostle John writes in vv. 11-13 of 1 John #5: **"And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."** Eternal life becomes ours, not when we die, but at the moment that we place our faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

How sad it is to participate in a funeral and not know where the deceased stood in his or her relationship with Christ. How important it is to make sure that we have been born again and that we have made that decision known to others. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Besides spiritual preparation, there is also practical preparation that needs to be made. Most of us ought to have a will. If we have younger kids and something happens to us, and we have no will, the state would decide what happens to our kids.

In Nevada it is generally wise if we have an estate of any size to see about establishing a living trust. Practical preparation for death and love for our family also means having some kind of life insurance for the chief wage earner. Then as we get older, we need to make our wishes concerning funeral arrangements and burial known. Death should not catch us unprepared.

Death is an opportunity to demonstrate faith. There is hope for the fulfillment of God's promises beyond the grave. And love for God and for others means making preparations for death.

In our study of the life of Abraham we have been looking at the life of William Carey, the first western missionary to India who acquired the reputation as "The Father of Modern Missions." We have looked at his life to find illustrations of principles of faith that we have found in Abraham.

Carey lived to be seventy-two. The year before he died in 1834 he began experiencing a series of strokes. One of the last people to visit him was Alexander Duff, who talked about plans for a Christian college in India. After a brief visit with Carey, Alexander Duff turned to leave. William sat up in bed and called after him, "**Mr. Duff,**" he said in a feeble voice, "**You have been speaking about William Carey, When I am gone, say nothing about William Carey--- speak only about William Carey's Savior.**"

A few days later he passed away. He left a will in which he asked to be buried next to his second wife, Charlotte. He directed that a simple headstone be placed on his grave. There was no thought of having his body returned to England. He had staked out his claim to India. Besides including his name and age (WILLIAM CAREY GRAVE) Carey asked that the words be inscribed, "**A wretched poor, and helpless worm. On Thy kind arms I fall.**" William Carey made adequate preparations for his death.

In 125 AD the pagan Greek philosopher Aristeides (PROJECTOR OFF) wrote, "**If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby.**" That is an appropriate description for what death is for Christians. Like Abraham we are but strangers passing through this world on our way to our home in heaven. Death is a loss for us who remain. But it is also an opportunity--- an opportunity to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God.