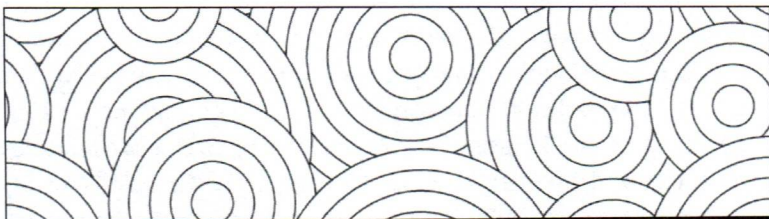


LESSON 3

SARAH'S DEATH

GENESIS 23:1-20



OPEN IT UP

One of the saddest occasions in human experience is the death of someone you love. Almost all cultures recognize the emotional burden death brings to the living and therefore have formal closure customs in which the body is symbolically “released” from this life. The Egyptians famously developed an embalming process, wrapping the body in linen strips and laying it to rest in sarcophagi. The Greeks elevated the body onto a huge funeral pyre and looked on as the flames incinerated the body. We today put the body in a casket and lower it into the ground (although some are cremated and have the ashes placed in an urn). Two of the world’s “wonders”—the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Taj Mahal of India—were built as mausoleums for dead royalty. With such importance attached to burials in ancient cultures, it is no surprise that the Bible spends an entire chapter explaining the circumstances surrounding Sarah’s burial.

BURIAL PLACE SOUGHT • GENESIS 23:1-6

Sarah has not been mentioned since the banishment of Hagar in Genesis 21:12. Here we learn that she lived thirty-seven years after

the birth of Isaac, although nothing is known of her life during the intervening years. The notice that Abraham “came to mourn for Sarah” (23:2) does not imply he was somewhere else when Sarah died; rather, the Hebrew word for “came” is probably better translated “entered,” implying Sarah was in a separate tent.

Among the biblical customs of mourning are the following: (1) After receiving the news (if unexpected), one would tear his garments (Genesis 37:34; Job 1:20). (2) After stripping himself, one would clothe himself with sackcloth, a rough material worn around the waist and below the chest (Genesis 37:34; 2 Samuel 3:31). (3) One would remove his shoes and ornamental items (2 Samuel 15:30; Ezekiel 24:17). (4) A veil could be worn by both men and women over the head and/or face (Ezekiel 24:17, 23; 2 Samuel 19:5). (5) The mourner may also heap dirt on his head (Joshua 7:6; 1 Samuel 4:12; Job 2:12) and sit in dirt and/or ashes (Isaiah 58:5; Ezekiel 27:30). (6) The mourner would refuse to bathe or anoint himself with perfumes (2 Samuel 12:20; 14:2). The disruption of normal activity would give the mourner license to embrace his grief much more intensely than the modern American funeral custom today.

At this time, the “sons of Heth” (that is, the Hittites) were in Canaan, and Abraham had no land of his own. The words *I am a foreigner and a visitor among you* imply that Abraham had no legal right to property (Genesis 23:4). He thus requests a permanent place for the burial of his wife. Little did Abraham know when God promised him land for his descendants that the property in question would begin with a field and a tomb (12:7). Still, the Hittites declare in respect for Abraham, “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” (23:6). Abraham’s honorable conduct for many years had evidently earned him the respect of the locals. Kindness is always rewarded with honor.

A SITE REQUESTED • GENESIS 23:7-11

Abraham is in a vulnerable position. He wishes to purchase something that really isn’t for sale. And, as a sojourner, he is attempting to negotiate from a position of weakness. If the Hittites or “Ephron the

son of Zohar” (Genesis 23:8) simply say no, then Abraham is out of luck. So Abraham requests the Hittite commission entreat Ephron to sell “the cave of Machpelah which he has, which is at the end of his field” (verse 9). Lest they think Abraham is trying to cheat them or get a bargain, he says, “Let him give it to me at the full price, as property for a burial place among you” (verse 9). Abraham does not wish to take over the land or push out its current inhabitants. He simply wants a place to bury his wife. This subtle negotiation makes clear that Abraham shows the utmost respect for his foreign neighbors. Ephron, therefore, responds, “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!” (verse 11).

One of the challenges of human life is learning how to talk to strangers. We are taught from a young age *not* to talk to strangers, and therefore we are trained to be suspicious of anyone we don’t know. This leads us to either isolation—quarantining ourselves from strangers—or antagonism—a deliberate attempt to rid ourselves of strangers. Even today, you will hear Christians (Christians!) say things such as, “They should just go back to where they came from!” in reference to immigrants (legal or not). Or you will hear Christians scoff at the notion of racial prejudice for the simple reason that “I have never experienced it myself; therefore, it doesn’t exist.” These are words and feelings motivated more by fear than understanding. An implicit lesson is found in Abraham’s life that his foreign friends, strangers different from himself, instantly accede to his requests, even going above and beyond anything he requested. May we all cultivate such a relationship with our neighbors!

AN AGREEMENT • GENESIS 23:12-20

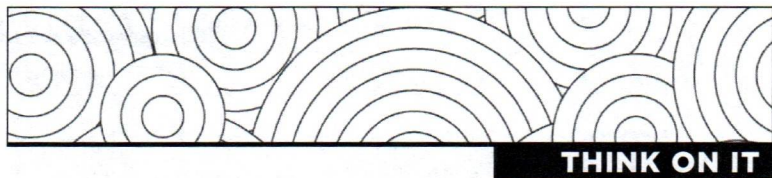
Abraham felt it inappropriate to take the land for nothing, so he insisted on paying for it. So Ephron again responded, “My lord, listen to me; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead” (Genesis 23:15). Four hundred shekels seems to be an exorbitant price. By comparison, Jeremiah paid “seventeen shekels” for his field (Jeremiah 32:9). It may be that Ephron sought to dissuade Abraham from purchasing

the land and just to take it for free, or perhaps he cunningly sought to enrich himself well above market value. Whatever the reason, “Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron” with no questions asked (Genesis 23:16). Whenever we pledge to make a deal, we must be willing to uphold our promise.

The formal negotiation with the Hittites resulted in Abraham’s finally receiving property in the promised land at the age of 137. “Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. 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” (Genesis 23:19–20). This cave will continue to serve the needs of the family, receiving the bodies of Abraham (25:9–10), Isaac (49:29–30), and Jacob (50:13). Abraham not only left a legacy of faith for his family; he also left them property that would give them a right to the promised land throughout their generations.

WRAP IT UP

The faith of Abraham gets most of the New Testament's attention. But we cannot neglect the example of Sarah. Hebrews states that Sarah's faith in God was equally great: "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11). Sarah trusted God just as Abraham did, and she rightly deserves a place among the great faithful figures of Scripture.



1. Why do you think funeral customs are so vastly different from one culture to the next?
2. List the common mourning customs found in Scripture. Do you think the biblical mourning customs are better or worse at helping people handle their grief?
3. Why do you think we find it difficult to “talk to strangers”? How can we become more respectful of people who are different from us while maintaining a reasonable degree of commonsense awareness?
4. Why is the cave of Machpelah important in Scripture?
5. Review the life of Sarah. How is she an example of faith?