

“SEEKING A HOMELAND”

Abraham had just passed a dramatic test of his faith. When the Lord issued a command for him to sacrifice Isaac, he obeyed the word of the Lord. Were it not for God’s intervention at the last possible moment, Abraham would have put his son to death. This showed that he trusted in God to make good on his promise to build his line through Isaac, even if it meant that he would have to bring Isaac back from the dead to do it. And now, in the passage that we have just read, Abraham is confronted with another test of his faith: will he continue to trust in the Lord now that his wife Sarah has died without receiving the things that God had promised them?

We will consider the report of Sarah’s death and Abraham’s response to his loss in just a moment. But first I want to call your attention to the last paragraph of chapter 22. At first glance, this may seem to be unrelated to the surrounding context. How does this report given to Abraham about the children of his brother Nahor relate to the account of how God tested his faith in the previous part of the chapter? And what does it have to do with the account of Sarah’s death and burial, which directly follows it?

First of all, it relates to the near-sacrifice of Isaac because it gives us a clue about what will take place in chapter 24, where Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. Isaac would need to have a wife if the promise that God had just confirmed with an oath were to be fulfilled. How would Abraham’s offspring be like the sand on the seashore if Isaac remained unmarried? As Abraham’s words to his servant in chapter 24 indicate, Isaac’s status as the heir of the covenant meant that he could not intermarry with

the Canaanites. Where then would he find a wife? There were no other covenant people. This is the significance of the report of the children of Nahor to Abraham. Here we have the first mention of Rebekah, the woman who will soon become Isaac's wife. The Lord followed up his oath-sealed promise to Abraham with this piece of information about Nahor's children, because this information would lead Abraham to send his servant back to his brother's household to find a wife for Isaac.

In addition, the mention of Nahor's household functions as an introduction to the account of Sarah's death and burial because it reminds us of the homeland from which Abraham had traveled. It would have been natural for Abraham to return back to that land in order to bury his wife in a family burial ground there. But Abraham refused to do that, just as he will refuse to allow his servant to bring Isaac back to live in that land in the next chapter. He knows that there is no going back, because the Lord has called him out from that land and promised to give him a new home. It is Abraham's faith in this promise that serves as the motivation for all of his actions in chapter 23.

In chapters 21 and 22, we saw clear evidence of the love that Abraham had for his sons Ishmael and Isaac. He was sad to send Ishmael away, and we can only imagine how excruciatingly difficult it was for him to obey the command to sacrifice Isaac. But when it comes to his love for Sarah, we might be tempted to wonder. After all, his cowardice had led to her being taken into the harem of a foreign king on two occasions. But here, in the account of her death and burial, we can clearly see that he did place great value upon his beloved Sarah. She lived to be 127 years old, longer than any of us will live. Yet she

died without receiving the things that God had promised her and Abraham. True, she gave birth to Isaac, and saw him grow up into adulthood. But she never saw him get married. She never saw her grandchildren. She never saw the multitude of descendants that God had promised Abraham. She never saw her children take possession of the land that God had promised them. She died, and the promises remained unfulfilled, at least in large measure. And her death would have served as a reminder to Abraham of his own mortality. Remember, he was ten years older than Sarah. He had every reason to believe that the same fate awaited him. He too would die without seeing the complete fulfillment of the things that God had promised him.

If you stop and think about it - and this is something that people in our culture are loath to do - but if you stop and think about the fact that one day, whether it is sooner or whether it is later, your days on this earth will come to an end, then you begin to realize that your life will be over long before you have received everything you hoped to receive from the Lord. Each one of us will experience the same thing that Abraham experienced at the end of his life. And the question that confronted him confronts us as well: will we have faith when we are faced with the end of our days, or the end of the days of those we love?

Abraham mourned the death of Sarah, as he should have. It is fitting for us to mourn the deaths of those we love. Death is an enemy, not a friend. Human beings were not made to die. Death is an intruder into human experience, an intruder that gained entry through our sin. One of the ways Abraham expressed his grief over Sarah's death was to

seek to find a place where he could provide her with a decent burial. But this posed a problem, because he did not possess any land of his own. He was a sojourner and foreigner among the Hittites, one of the groups of people who lived in the land of Canaan. He was a resident alien, with limited rights, and he did not own any of the land for himself. So he went to the Hittites as said, “give me property among you for a burying place.” The Hebrew term that the ESV translates as “property” could also be translated as “a holding.” It is the same term that is used in two other places in the book of Genesis to refer to God’s promise to give Abraham’s descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting “possession.” [Gen. 17:8; 48:4] Abraham was asking the Hittites to sell him land of his own. He wanted to bury Sarah in his own land in Canaan because he still believed that she would receive the inheritance that God had promised her. As Calvin puts it,

“He saw the half of himself taken away; but because he was certain that his wife was not exiled from the kingdom of God, he hides her dead body in the tomb, until he and she should be gathered together.”

Abraham’s determination to purchase land in Canaan for Sarah’s burial was a demonstration of his faith in God’s promise. Here we see that his beliefs determined his behavior, something that should always be true of God’s people.

This explains why Abraham was not content to take the Hittites up on their offer of using one of their own tombs to bury Sarah. And it explains why he did not want to receive the cave from Ephron as a gift, even though it is not entirely clear that Ephron really intended to give it away. As modern-day travelers to the Near East will tell you, such ways of speaking are still common in business transactions. It is a formality, a polite way of bargaining. But even if Ephron really was offering it to Abraham free of charge, Abraham did not want it as a gift. A gift would leave him in debt to the giver. It would have been land on loan.

As far as the price that Ephron names, it is difficult for us to know how much money four hundred shekels really was, but there are good indications that it was probably more than the field was worth. Yet what does Abraham do? He does not negotiate. He does not try to drive a bargain with Ephron. He wanted his rights to the land to be unimpeachable. So he paid the four hundred shekels and obtained the land for Sarah's burial. And it was in that same cave that Abraham himself, along with his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, and their wives, would also be buried. As one commentator writes, "By leaving their bones in Canaan, the patriarchs gave their last witness to the promise." [Kidner, 145]

Now I want us to consider one of the applications that we can draw from this passage. You have heard me speak of this before not too long ago in this same series on Genesis, but it is important enough to bear mention again, especially since it is such a direct application of this account of Abraham's burial of his wife. The application that I have in

mind is the question of how we should bury our dead. That is, should we be open to the idea of cremation, or should we pursue a more traditional burial for ourselves and our deceased loved ones? It is a question that we will all have to address at some point or another. Cremation is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, with 27% of the deceased being cremated in 2001. It is projected that by the year 2025 that number will be at 43%. More and more people are comfortable with this way of disposing of the dead. And the reason why is very clear: it is a lot cheaper than traditional burial. But that should not be the determining factor for a Christian. We have to ask what God would have us think about the practice of cremation, and the only way to try to answer that question is to go to the Scriptures. And what do the Scriptures have to say? They say nothing at all in support of cremation. Even though many of the pagan people living around the Israelites and early Christians practiced cremation, there is not one instance where it is done by God's people, with the exception of a few instances in which people are burned as a sign of God's judgment against them. There is not one biblical example that commends cremation to us. That is significant, especially when we take into account the fact that it records a significant number of burial accounts. God's people do not destroy the dead bodies of their loved ones, they lay them to rest. And why do we do this? Because we believe that our bodies are essential to our personhood. The Bible tells us that to be a human being is to be embodied. And it also tells us that the body that dies is the same body that will be resurrected upon Jesus' return. The way we handle our dead should be reflective of these beliefs, just as Abraham's burial of Sarah reflected his beliefs.

In his classic work *The City of God*, Augustine responded to the pagans who exulted over the fate of the many Christians who were killed in the sack of Rome and were denied burials. Their bodies were left lying in the streets. Augustine said that, though this was a great dishonor, it would certainly not prevent God from fulfilling his gracious purposes for those Christians on the day of resurrection. God is not hampered by such things. The martyrs who were burned at the stake will enjoy the same bodily resurrection that is the hope of all of God's people. But Augustine wanted to make sure that this truth was not taken as a license for Christians to be careless about how they buried their dead. He writes,

“Nevertheless the bodies of the dead are not on this account to be despised and left unburied; least of all the righteous and faithful, which have been used by the Holy Ghost as His organs and instruments for all good works. For if the dress of a father, or his ring, or anything he wore, be precious to his children, in proportion to the love they bore him, with how much more reason ought we to care for the bodies of those we love, which they wore far more closely and intimately than any clothing? For the body is not an extraneous ornament or aid, but a part of man's very nature...Our Lord Himself, too, though He was to rise again the third day, applauds, and commends to our applause, the good work of the religious woman who poured precious ointment over His limbs, and did it against His burial. And the Gospel speaks with commendation of those who were careful to

take down His body from the cross, and wrap it lovingly...and see to its burial.

These instances certainly do not prove that corpses have any feeling; but they show that God's providence extends even to the bodies of the dead, and that such pious offices are pleasing to Him, as cherishing faith in the resurrection." [I.13]

God was pleased with Abraham's determined efforts to bury his wife Sarah in the land of Canaan. It demonstrated that he was looking forward to the eventual fulfillment of what God had promised him. In the words of Hebrews 11:13-16,

"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. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 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."

Abraham and Sarah died in faith. They lived as pilgrims. Canaan was the sign and seal of the heavenly country that God had promised them. And Abraham demonstrated his faith that God would bring them into that country by burying Sarah in the land of promise. Brothers and sisters, we are pilgrims too. We desire a better country, a

heavenly one. And the way we face death, the way we bury our loved ones when they die, these things demonstrate what we believe about life and death, and about the God who is Lord over both.