

**Genesis 23: 1-20; “Abraham Burying His Sarah” Sermon # 66 in the series –
“Beginnings”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on April 23rd, 2006,
in the Morning Worship Service.**

Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose complete age of life was written down for us. She is held in high esteem in the Scriptures for her inward beauty of soul and spirit. She is known for her gentle and quiet spirit, and her submission to her husband. Christian women are called her daughters if they will do what is right and do not give way to any fear. (1st Peter 3:6) And in Isaiah 51: 1 and 2 those who seek the Lord and follow after righteousness are exhorted to “look to the rock from which you are hewn, and to the pit from which you were dug.” “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you...” “For the Lord will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places.”

This is what Abraham needed at this time. He needed the comfort of the Lord in the loss of Sarah his dear wife. They were married for more than 60 years. But Abraham also knew that he needed to act quickly in order to make the arrangements for her burial. I believe that what Abraham did for his wife Sarah, after she died, sets a good example for all believers, as to why we should bury our own loved ones after they die. It is because it is the practice of the thoughtful and the godly. These verses give us 3 things that Abraham did after Sarah died, that showed that he was a thoughtful and a godly man.

1st of all – He came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. (verses 1 and 2)

We are living in a day where people do not want to mourn for their dead. They want to celebrate the supposed fact that everyone who dies goes to heaven. They want to believe in justification by death alone. Death is such an awful thing, such a troubling separation, that most people in our society do not want to believe that a loving God would permit such a thing unless everyone goes to a better place. Therefore they falsely believe that everyone who dies is justified, or declared righteous by God, on the basis of their death.

Those who died not think that they needed Christ. They only thought that they needed to die in order to go to heaven. That, supposedly, was their atonement for their sins; their having to die. The people that they leave behind love to use the expression – They are no longer suffering. That is the statement that is so often said to us who are Christians. And we know better if they have not trusted in the Lord Jesus. We know that the Bible is the only true revelation of God’s mind and will. We know that if they have not believed in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, and if they have not received Christ’s perfect righteousness by faith alone, they have not entered the eternal kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven must be entered in this life, before we die, by faith in the Savior, or it will not be entered at all. Oh how we need to lovingly state this to our relatives and friends. But there is another witness that is born to unbelievers at the time of the death of our loved ones. And that is the witness of our mourning for them. It says in verse 2 of our text that Abraham came to mourn and to weep for Sarah. And he did this in front of other people who were his neighbors and friends.

Certainly this speaks to us of the reality of some very important truth that you and I should remember at the time, when those who are closest to us die. Abraham portrayed the truth of the gospel to others around him when Sarah died. Abraham mourned over Sarah because they had been joined together as man and wife for over 60 years. God had made them one flesh, and that meant that they had shared all things together for that long a period of time. I think that few of us understand, just how much a part of one another a couple becomes, especially when they are both Christians.

You become best friends if it is a good marriage. You share together much pleasant conversation. You spend much time talking over everything related to your life together, and your life of faith in God together. You pray together, you think together, you plan together, and you

spend much time together. You laugh together, you cry together, you raise children together. And you talk many things over together concerning the family, and your walk with God. And then one day they get sick and you care for them, watch over them and pray for them. But it is their time to die. And you face that together, and then they are gone.

They are not there. And it brings a tremendous sense of loss. It brings grief and the pain of separation. Abraham came to mourn and to weep for his Sarah. This is the Christian thing to do. Mourning and weeping for those whom we love, who have died, is a normal part of life itself. We mourn and we weep as Christians because we feel the loss and the departure of the one whom we love who has died. This is because Christians are those who truly feel the loss that death brings.

You will recall that Jesus Himself wept at the grave of Lazarus in John 11: 35. In verse 32 it says – “Then when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, ‘Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.’” “Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled.” “And He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’” “They said to Him, ‘Lord come and see.’” Then it says – “Jesus wept”. “Then the Jews said, ‘See how He loved him!’” So, here we find in Jesus, the One who was a perfectly sinless man, true and deep and real emotions.

He showed forth His sorrow, and He mourned, because of His love for Lazarus. And I want you to see, that this emotion was present in Him even though He knew that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus knew that it was Adam’s sin, which brings death to every one of our race. He recognized that the separation of soul from the body is an unnatural thing in God’s creation. He knew that the feelings of sorrow and loss were appropriate to experience at the death of one who He loved.

God helping us, we too will exhibit our grief appropriately. We need to recognize death for what it is. Death is an enemy. Death is a judgment. And death does bring a real sense of sorrow and loss, that others who may not understand, need to see in us. It is not necessarily a more manly thing to be able to do, to hold in your feelings of sorrow and loss, as though nothing has happened, and life will go on. And it certainly is not the appropriate thing in God’s sight to celebrate the loss of a loved one who has not come to know Jesus Christ.

It is appropriate to thank God for the life that He gave in regard to our loved one. But we should not fool ourselves with sentimental notions, of their being in a better place, if they had no place for God’s Son in their life. But Abraham had no such fears in regard to Sarah. He knew her faith, and the work of God’s grace in her heart and life. He could mourn and weep as one who loved her. He had loved her deeply. He could weep as one who had a great and sure hope in God that he would most certainly see Sarah again.

He believed in the resurrection of the dead. He believed in the reward of the righteous. He was looking forward, and he was straining by faith to see Christ, and His day. This is where his hope for Sarah lay. He understood that, because of the promised Seed who would come through his and Sarah’s line of descendants, that she was indeed in a better place. And he was comforted. Listen to 1st Thessalonians 4: 13. This will tell us the right way for a Christian to face the sorrows related to the loss of a loved one.

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.” “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.” “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.” “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.” “And the dead in Christ will rise first.” “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” “And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” “Therefore comfort one another with these words.” So Abraham came to mourn and to weep because he was a godly and thoughtful man. He was a man who rested his faith completely on the Christ who was to come.

And you, if you are wise you will rest your faith and your hope for yourself and your loved ones, completely on the Lord Jesus Christ who has alone purchased salvation. It is He alone who died and rose again so that we might live. We come to live spiritually and eternally in the New Birth. And because of Christ's resurrection, even though we die, we shall yet live physically one day, forever, when Christ returns, and raises the righteous dead on the day of the resurrection.

2nd – Abraham showed that he was a thoughtful and godly man in that he sought for a suitable burial place for Sarah. (verses 3-15)

It says in verse 3 – “Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth saying, ‘I am a foreigner and a visitor among you.’ “Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” “And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ‘Hear us my lord: 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 may bury your dead.” “Then Abraham stood up and bowed himself to the people of the land, the sons of Heth.”

This is the first time in the Bible that we read of the practice of the burial of the dead. And we should take notice of the fact that it is in connection with the man's wife who is called the “father” of all the faithful. We should take notice of the fact that burial was the common custom not only for Abraham, but also for his neighbors. We should also take notice of the fact that extreme politeness and courtesy were exercised in this whole matter. And this was because of the fact that these men, the sons of Heth, thought very highly of Abraham and Sarah. They consider him a mighty prince among them.

They thought this way, even though Abraham owned no land in the land of Canaan. The title “a mighty prince” literally means, “a prince of God”. (Nesi Elohim) He was to them, “a prince of God” among them. Does this mean that Abraham had preached to them the gospel of the promised Seed? Perhaps they had come to embrace this promise as well for themselves? The text does not say. And these men do not call God Jehovah. But we can surmise that many aspects of Abraham's faith, and his practice of the one true religion, had been taught to them, either by his words or by his example.

It is evident that they had a very high regard for Abraham as a prophet and a man of God. They also believed in the burial of the dead because each of their families had a sepulcher. Now the point that I want to bring out here is very simple. And it relates to our faith in Christ, and the resurrection. I believe that burial of our loved ones, and not cremation, is the appropriate procedure in dealing with their dead body.

I know that it has become very popular in our day to cremate the bodies of the dead. Even among some Christians, it has become so. And a great deal of money is saved by the family of those who do so, because burial is much more expensive. But I believe that burial is the best way to represent the hope of the believer before God, and before a watching world. Listen to Matthew Poole's commentary on this passage. “The privilege of burial hath been always sought and prized by all nations, whom nature and humanity teaches to preserve the bodies of men, which have been the temples of reasonable and immortal souls, from contempt and violation; so especially by Christians, as a testimony and pledge of their future resurrection.” (end of quote)

In burial we see a picture of the body respectfully laid to rest, to await the future resurrection. This is confirmed by our Lord's referring to the physical death of the body as a sleep in a number of places. (John 11: 11) “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” But the cremation of the body by fire, turning it into ashes does not show the proper respect for the body or the hope of the resurrection that Christ will bring to it. It seems more appropriate to a person anticipating the fires of hell, rather than the glories of heaven, and the resurrection. It appears that burial is the better way to honor God's truth, and the way that He has designed things, that we might think of the life to come, and have regard to the benefits of the gospel to every believer.

Jesus Christ Himself was buried. And we identify with His burial after we believe, in baptism, which symbolizes our sins being buried with Him in the tomb. Then we come to realize that we are

raised with Him to a new life. It is a new life where our hearts are changed, and our lives are changed, and our sins are separated from us, as far as the east is from the west. And we have the sure hope of our being raised from the dead when Christ returns. Cremation does not present this kind of a hopeful picture at all.

3rd – Abraham listened carefully to Ephron’s assessment of what the burial plot was worth and he paid him the full price for it. (verses 16-20)

It is wonderful to see the great lengths to which Abraham went in order to do the right thing, the righteous thing, in the sight of God and these Hittite men. They consider him a mighty prince among them. And when Abraham asks them for property to bury his dead, they respond by saying that none of them will withhold from him a burial site. And when Abraham specifically asks for the cave of Machpelah which was at the end of one of Ephron’s fields, Ephron is willing to give him not only the cave, but also the field and all the trees in it.

But Abraham gently refuses his kind offer because he knew that the land was worth something to Ephron. I believe that he thought that those relatives descended from him might want to retain some of this land in the future, and they might contest his title to it. Abraham knew that he had been given the whole land of Canaan. And yet he is unwilling to receive from Ephron even this one field without paying for it. He speaks to Ephron in the hearing of the rest of the people and he pleads to give him money for the field.

Ephron protests with this worthy saying – “My lord, listen to me; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver.” “What is that between you and me?” “So bury you your dead.” But notice that Abraham still persisted here. What a great temptation to let them give him the land and the cave. But in verse 16 it says – “And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, currency of the merchants.” “So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, were deeded to Abraham as a possession in the presence of all went in at the gate of his city.”

Isn’t it interesting that this is the first recorded purchase of land in the Bible, and it is for a burial site? It is the first land that Abraham has owned in the land of Canaan in the sight of men. It was the only piece of land that God would have him to own in his lifetime, even though by faith he knew that he possessed it all. You and I should not scruple to pay the money necessary to buy a burial plot and to pay the expenses of a funeral. It will be a good testimony of where our faith and our hope lie.

Our faith and our hope do not lie in the grave. Our faith and our hope are in the resurrected Christ who said – “A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me.” “Because I live, you shall live also.” (John 14: 19) So let us pay what we must for a decent burial. It will give us a clear conscience that we have born a good witness to the truth, that there is a life to come, and an eternal inheritance for those who have trusted in Jesus Christ.