

# The God of the Living

Genesis 23

Go ahead and be turning to Genesis 23...



We'll be wrapping up our series, The God of Abraham, tonight, and what a beautifully challenging series it's been! Abraham was such a flawed man, but as he continued to lean on the LORD, especially when the things God told him to do made no earthly sense, God proved Himself faithful, and Abraham's faith GREW. We've been reminded time and again that God's glory is seen as He works in and through messed up people, and I don't know about you, but that's encouraging to me. Someone who struggled in the way Abraham did could still exhibit extraordinary faith and even become known as God's friend.

Abraham's life, at least the portion we're acquainted with, was filled with ups and downs, we end on a low note but NOT without a great sense of hope. King Solomon wrote that there was "**a time for every matter under heaven**" (**Ecclesiastes 3:1**), including...

## **Ecclesiastes 3:4**

**a time to weep, and a time to laugh;**

**a time to mourn, and a time to dance;**

When Isaac was born, Abraham's household actually experienced BOTH. There was laughter as God fulfilled His promise to the elderly couple, allowing them to conceive and bear a son into the world. There was weeping when that birth resulted in Abraham having to let go of Ishmael, the son born of his impatience, along with his mother, Hagar. In today's passage, we see mourning and weeping, but also HOPEFULNESS, as Abraham buries his wife. In verse one we read...

## **Genesis 23:1-2**

**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.**

Have you ever given any thought to the fact that, if Sarah married Abraham at the typical age of those in the ancient near east, around the age of fifteen, she was married to Abraham for about 112 years?! Talk about a marriage for the ages! Rachael and I will have been married 15 years in May, and while that time is dwarfed by the length of time many of you here have been married, even as a 37 year old, I'm rapidly approaching that point where I will have been with her longer than without her, that point at which I remember less and less vividly a time I didn't have her.

When I considered that this moment in Abraham's life was the first time in a century that he wasn't greeted by his wife with a hug or a kiss, or a *"Good morning, love,"* I admit I just wept at my desk. The one with whom he had been one was gone, and along with her, a part of him. To say that Abraham "mourned" and "wept" for his Sarah, his "Princess," I'm sure, is a gross understatement. In oriental cultures like the one Abraham was from, people mourned by tearing out their hair and beating their chest in agony. It was a LOUD lament, and a tearful one. Abraham wept for Sarah.

For whatever reason, people sometimes associate tears and being tore up over the death of a loved one as somehow "less than spiritual." I don't know why. God Himself wept at the death of Lazarus. Death was never a part of God's plan. Contrary to what many have said, death is NOT a part of life. Life and its Author have been enthroned in glory from eternity past, perfect in meaning before death's inception. Because of sin, death is now a part of natural EXISTENCE, a part of REALITY, you might say, but it is NOT a part of life. ***"We weren't made to die,"*** as Pastor Kevin has quoted Becky Lynn Black of saying. Therefore, ***"We don't know HOW to die."*** As such, I can think of no more reasonable response to death, ESPECIALLY the death of a loved one than tears. These are the first recorded tears in the Bible. I know many were shed prior to this moment in history, but the Holy Spirit saw fit to draw our attention to them for the first time here as a righteous man mourned the death of his wife. As Matthew Henry said, ***"When a body is sown, it must be watered."*** Our tears are a tribute to our deceased loved ones; they're nothing to be ashamed of. The difference for followers of Christ is that our mourning isn't without hope.

As we continue on with this topic, know that I'm fully aware that I haven't experienced the agony of being separated from a loved one by death in the same way that many of you have. I've buried all but one of my grandparents, and while that has been difficult, I know that that isn't the same as a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or a child. I'll quote several people this evening, drawing upon their godly response to death, but more than that, my goal will be lean upon the precepts of scripture more than anything for encouragement on handling death, and beyond that, THE HOPEFULNESS THAT OUTLASTS THE GRAVE.

God's Word says that Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah, which many take to mean that SHE DIED SUDDENLY, perhaps while Abraham was away working or otherwise engaged in business. This would also make sense given Sarah's astounding youthfulness. Despite being only ten years younger than Abraham, she was still turning heads, enough so that kings desired to have her as a wife (King Abimelech wanted her when she was 90!). Perhaps her extraordinarily youthful appearance concealed the actual

toll that the years had taken on her. Abraham was notified of Sarah's death, he went in to mourn her passing, and then the Bible says...

### **Genesis 23:3-4**

**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.**

"Abraham rose up from before his dead." He ceased to mourn. Though it may be difficult to hear when the pain of death is still fresh, Matthew Henry rejoices in the truth that, ***"Thanks be to God, our happiness is not bound up in the life of any creature."*** Ultimately, we look not to others or even ourselves for wholeness and perfect comfort; our comfort, joy, and peace are found perfectly in the LORD. It's through Him, His power, love, and grace that we find all we need to live after someone's passing. As we'll see, death isn't the end for the believer, and his grave is actually a monument of hope.

King David arose from mourning the death of the child born as a result of his violating Bathsheba. True, he prayed and wept for his child while the child was still alive, not after his death, but it's arguable that as he wept, it was partly in mourning over what he understood to be the imminent death of his child. At some point, Jesus arose from mourning the death of his earthly father, Joseph. No, we don't see that scene anywhere in scripture, but many scholars agree that Joseph is suddenly and mysteriously absent because he died. I say that Joseph's disappearance is "mysterious" because we don't hear another word about him after 12-year-old Jesus was found teaching in the Temple, which is indicative that His life and ministry was in no way defined by a loved one's death as are the lives of many who ceaselessly mourn the death of someone they love.

Now, hear my heart on this. I know death is hard, and as I've already stated, some here tonight know that better than me. I'm not unflinchingly saying, "Get over it." After his wife passed, C.S. Lewis recorded his grief in a journal that was later published under the title A Grief Observed, and he wrestled with the ambiguous notion of "getting over it." He said...

***"To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he's had his leg off is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce, continuous pain will stop. Presently he'll get back his strength and be able to stump about on his wooden leg. He has 'got over it.' But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones; and he will always be a one-legged man. There will be hardly any moment when he forgets it. Bathing, dressing, sitting down and getting up again, even lying in bed, will all be different. His whole way of life will be changed. All sorts of pleasures and activities that he once took for granted will have to be simply written off. Duties too. At present I am learning to get about on crutches. Perhaps I shall presently be given a wooden leg. But I shall never be a biped again."***

No, we don't necessarily "get over death," but as we see with Abraham, there comes an eventual end to mourning and the intentional continuation of living. Such a time MUST come for the health and sanity of the mourner, and God gives us the strength and grace for this as we continue to fix our eyes on Him. Busyness often aids in this, at least initially, and it's likely that the task of securing a burial plot provided

that needed diversion for Abraham. For this, the ESV says that Abraham went to the Hittites to acquire land; the Hebrew literally says that he went to "**the sons of Heth**," Heth being named in Genesis 10 as a son of Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah.



Just to give us some context of WHERE WE ARE, like one of those "You are here" mall signs, we're in Hebron, which is that lone name to the left of the Dead Sea. If you go seven o'clock from Hebron, you'll see Beersheba, where we were last time I taught, and eight o'clock from Hebron is Gerar, from which King Abimelech ruled.

Abraham was a *foreign resident and immigrant* in this region. This was a declaration of HUMILITY. "*I have nothing and no standing here.*" You know he had to be feeling pretty low. He had just said goodbye to his bride. Now he needed to bury her, but he had no land in which to do so. The LORD had promised to give Abraham the land of his sojournings, but as of yet, He hadn't seen fit to do so, and to Abraham's credit, he hadn't attempted to secure any of it for himself either. To have no land to call your own tells you that that region is not your home, but when we bury our loved ones, the more deeply we understand that THIS WORLD IS NOT OUR HOME. As Abraham was keenly aware, "we're just a passin' through." Even now, as he was entering into negotiations with the locals, he wasn't seeking to make this world his home; he was just seeking a burial plot.

### **Genesis 23:5-6**

**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.**

So, now we get to observe some of the bartering and business practices of the ancient near east. When Abraham requested that the locals "give" him a piece of land, he was asking that they "grant him

ownership" of it, not give it away. Still, because of his testimony among them, they were willing to do just that. They called him a "prince of God" or a "mighty prince," which communicates a couple of things. One, because of his wealth and the blessings God had brought into his life (like Isaac), they recognized what King Abimelech recognized, that God was with him in everything he did. His life was so remarkable that the only explanation for it was God.

It also communicated that Abraham had a good reputation in the land. They invited him to bury Sarah in any tomb he liked, telling him that NO ONE WOULD REFUSE HIM their tomb. No one would mind having Abraham as a neighbor because he had proven himself to be a righteous man. Concerning our testimonies, King Solomon wrote...

### **Ecclesiastes 7:1**

**A good name is better than precious ointment,  
and the day of death than the day of birth.**

One interpretation of this passage is that, upon entering the world, each person is given a good name, unsullied by the bad decisions of life. However, to arrive at the end of your life with your name still good (not sinless, but in pursuit of righteousness) was even better. You would have finished well, and it's clear from the high praise of the sons of Heth that Abraham was finishing well.

The sons of Heth gave Abraham his choice of a burial site, and while this seems like a grand gesture, it was actually JUST an offer of a BORROWED tomb. That worked for Jesus, but Jesus only needed His tomb for three days. The problem that a GIFTED PROPERTY posed for Abraham was that, after the one who gifted the property died, his heirs had the right to reclaim it. So, you see, that's why it was just an offer of a borrowed tomb.

### **Genesis 23:7-9**

**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.**

Despite his grand reputation among the sons of Heth as a "prince of God," Abraham humbled himself before them REPEATEDLY. He regarded himself merely as a sojourner in the land, someone with ZERO standing, much less land. Now this elderly, wealthy, man of God GOT ON HIS FACE before them as he APPEALED TO THEM TO INTERCEDE on his behalf with Ephron. That's what this usage of the Hebrew word translated "entreat" means. You see, in the next verse, we find out that Ephron is there in the group. It wasn't that Abraham didn't see him. No, ABRAHAM DOESN'T PRETEND TO HAVE ANY STANDING or favor with him, so he asks those in Ephron's circle to speak with him on his behalf.

It's always better to regard others as better than yourself. Many have been utterly humiliated because of their INFLATED sense of self worth, like the guy in Jesus' teaching who took the seat of honor at the banquet and was told to MOVE. Jesus said...

#### **Luke 14:10-11**

**10 But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, Friend, move up higher. Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.**

No one ever regretted living humbly, and Abraham was seeking to be humble at every step of this transaction. Abraham had already refused the offer to be GIFTED the tomb because that would've enabled Ephron's heirs to reclaim it after his death. He didn't wish to purchase it for anything less than FULL PRICE (literally, "full silver") either. You see, if at some point, down the road, Ephron's descendants fell upon hard times, their financial troubles could be traced back to the sale of a property that was sold for less than it was worth, which would also be grounds for the family repossessing it. Abraham's ownership of this cave needed to be SECURE. After all, this wouldn't just be a tomb in which he would bury his wife; this was to be a FAMILY burial plot. Eventually, he would be buried there along with Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah. Therefore, he INSISTED upon PAYING FULL PRICE for it...

#### **Genesis 23:10-16**

**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.**

There's Ephron sitting in the gate of his city, where legal and business transactions were made. Abraham was just looking to purchase the cave of Machpelah, but Ephron wants to sell him the field with the cave. Abraham agrees to purchase the field. This is where things get interesting. Almost every commentary and Bible handbook I've read on this passage say that the value Ephron attached to the land was HIGHLY INFLATED. Ephron's in a good position for selling. The sons of Heth had already offered to GIVE Abraham the land. While the word translated "give" can also mean to SELL, given Abraham's insistence on knowing the land's PRICE, I believe the ESV rightly translates the word "give" when Ephron is negotiating with Abraham. Bottom line: Ephron and the sons of Heth have been quite gracious.

THEN Ephron slips this HUGE number into the conversation, knowing Abraham had already committed himself to paying full price for the land (so as not to lose the land to Ephron's heirs after Ephron died). Abraham would've looked bad if he had attempted to haggle with Ephron for a more reasonable amount. He was making Ephron a RICH man, paying him the equivalent of years, possibly even decades worth of wages.

Thankfully, by asking for so much from Abraham, and Abraham publicly agreeing to pay it, the sell would be TOO MEMORABLE for anyone to ever question it at some point down the road. *"Oh, believe me, Abraham owns that land AND THEN SOME. 400 SHEKELS OF SILVER?! I've NEVER seen land sell for so much!"* Buy paying Ephron's price, Abraham got the land and maintained his upright testimony.

### **Genesis 23:17-18**

**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.**

Yet again, Abraham's life evidenced FAITH, and herein lies the message of HOPE in tonight's passage. You bury loved ones at home; Abraham's purchase was made in faith that God would fulfill His promise and give him ALL the land. This was the only piece of the land God promised to Abraham as a possession that he actually owned. It wasn't the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise, BUT IT WAS A START! To this day, Israel has never possessed of all the land God promised to Abraham...



Currently, they only possess that tiny blue sliver by the gulf, but the day is coming when Christ will sit on the throne of his father David, and Israel will possess everything that's green on this map, perhaps even more (that bottom line is pretty arbitrary). In that day, though, Abraham's family will never again bury anyone.

### **Genesis 23:19-20**

**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.**

After the business of acquiring the property, Abraham finally got to bury his wife, and in that moment, she became the first of his household to occupy the Promised Land. While they lived, they merely sojourned in the Land. It was only in death that they took hold of the promise and OCCUPIED the Land.

For believers, BECAUSE OF THE CROSS, the grave is a SYMBOL OF HOPE. The burial plot purchased by Abraham was a step toward the fulfillment of God's promise that ALL the land would be given to him, an "earnest of his inheritance," if you will. For the follower of Christ, the grave is a place where God does NOT abandon His holy ones to corruption as David said in Psalm 16 (Psalm 16:10). Instead, it's something to COME OUT OF and ENTER ETERNAL LIFE. As the writer of Hebrews teaches, death does not inhibit the fulfillment of God's promises. He writes...

#### **Hebrews 11:39-40**

**39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.**

The faithful dead recorded in Hebrews 11 didn't receive what God promised. Does this mean that God leaves some of His promises unfulfilled? NO, it just means that, as one commentator said, "**God's promises demand resurrection!**" Abraham knew that; last week we studied how, in his heart, mind, and spirit, Abraham fully committed to sacrificing his son Isaac as a burnt offering, knowing that it was only through him that God intended to keep His promise to make him into a Nation. God would have to RAISE Isaac. Abraham buried his wife as a believer in the God of the LIVING. Remember, Jesus taught...

#### **Matthew 22:31-33**

**31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 32 I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. 33 And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.**

He didn't say He USED TO BE their God. When they walked this earth, He was their God, and as He told Moses from the bush, HE STILL IS. I'll wrap up by pointing out, and you may have noticed already, that I've really tried to avoid describing the death of a saved loved one as a "loss," and that's because it isn't. Everything that scripture tells us about those who die in faith says as much. I love how Dr. Vance Havner put it. After someone shared their condolences with him for the "LOSS" of his wife, Dr. Havner just smiled and replied...

***"Son, when you know where something is, you haven't lost it."***

That's the simple yet profound, beautiful confidence of those who are in Christ. If our beloved dead were followers of Christ, we know where they are, and as Christ's followers, we WILL see them again. If



there's anyone you love, someone for whom you feel you could have a flash of panic concerning where their soul is after their death, let your love compel you to have that challenging conversation with them and MAKE SURE of their salvation. Push in and be thoroughly satisfied. Don't take the easy way out now and resign yourself to HOPING they were saved until the day you enter eternity and find out. MAKE SURE because, once they're His, you can have peace. They'll be His forever, and you'll never have to fear losing them because Jesus said...

**John 6:37-40**

**37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.**

Jesus will never lose those who are His. He'll never throw them away, but will raise them up because, as Abraham knew, his God and ours is the "God of the Living."