

Hope Even in Death

Grace Fellowship | Carlton Weathers | Genesis 22:20-23:20

If you'll take your Bible and turn to Genesis chapter 22 verse 20. Today's text will go through 23 verse 20.

In our modern world, there's an obvious and maybe an implied, both ways, struggle with a Gnostic view of being human. What does it mean to be human? We—we live in a world that really has reverted back to a first-century thought process, a pagan first-century thought process about what it means to be a human. The Bible defines humans as those which God has created in both body and soul. You're not truly human without a body—not fully human without a body—and you would not be fully human without a soul. It's body and soul.

Our day is a strange day, much like that first-century world in which the scriptures were written, where people have become very Gnostic, meaning higher spiritual revelation. They believe they've received this higher spiritual revelation. They did not, Second John says, believe that Christ came actually in a body. He just appeared to be a human. And this led them down the pathways of asceticism, which is the denial of all the physical—the physical realities of God's blessings in this life. They denied food, they denied drink, they denied sexual pleasure, they denied all types of pleasure. Why? Because they were seeking to be free of the flesh suit which was binding up their spirit.

And on the other side of the extreme were Gnostics who said, "What I do in my body doesn't matter." So eat to gluttony, and drink to drunkenness, and have sexual pleasure in orgy. Do you recognize that list of sins? That's the list Paul always is laying before us in his epistles, isn't it? Why? Because the danger in reality is we do not understand what it means to be fully human. We've lost it. We've lost it. This is not new. It's not new. It's old. It's ancient. It even stretches beyond the New Testament into the Old Testament cultures which surrounded Israel. They also struggled with these same kinds of misconceptions and misunderstandings.

But it's not necessary for us to struggle in this way, because God has given us a sure word, a foundational word, in which we can build our belief on in the full humanity which God has given us, in the image—in His own image He has created us. This—in our day, you say, "Well, I'm not sure I—I see this so much in our day," but just think with me for a moment at the amount of time and money and energy spent on making ourselves look like we're not aging and headed towards death.

How much of our lives are consumed with what we eat or what we don't eat? Organic or processed, which shall it be? We are the people who take extreme positions in all of these areas concerning the body, and it makes me question: do we—do we have this problem?

We deal with both the sin of seeing ourselves as never good enough and therefore we're willing to starve ourselves, or never good enough so we're willing to eat ourselves to death, to numb the pain.

We've cleaned up death in our culture. It would be quite possible for you to grow up and spend most of your life never seeing anyone who has deceased. That's a new phenomenon. In ages past when people died, especially in the country, folks laid to rest in their own homes and friends and family gathered. Little children stood and looked at grandparents lying in their bed, deceased. I'll never forget as a young pastor going over into the country of Cleburne County and visiting a family whose mother had passed away, and when I arrived the great-grandchildren were laying in the bed with Great-Grandma.

Yeah, I know, you groaned. It shows how far we've tried to separate ourselves from the reality that is coming for every one of us save Christ come before we die. Death is as much a part of life as birth. It is a reality. And you can spend your time guarding yourself from it, protecting yourself from it, trying to keep your kids from knowing that it happens, and it will find you all the same. And that's why we have texts like we have today, to help us as believers to know: what do we do as we face death?

Some of us are closer than others as far as normal lifespans. It's easy, maybe in your teen years, 20s, 30s, maybe even 40s, to kind of live as if this isn't happening. Somewhere around that 40-year-old range to 50, it starts to set in. I've probably lived more than half of my life at this point. I may be closer to the grave than I am to the cradle. It starts to set in and again, I just throw this out so we can think how deep this runs: we struggle probably more than any generation ever has with the thing called midlife crisis. My—I don't know, my—I didn't ever get to meet my great-great-grandfather, but he worked so hard, I think, probably all of his life that he didn't have any idea what it meant to struggle with midlife. He was just trying to survive in life.

We struggle so deeply and yet God has given us such clear instruction. Our bodies and our souls belong to God. He has granted them to us in our humanness and we should treat them with great respect and honor. The avoidance of talking about or viewing death will not save us from death. It will not. And so, we jump into our text here in Genesis 22:20.

This is kind of a bridge, literarily, this is a bridge for us, but it serves another purpose. 20 through 24 of chapter 22 is what we might call the back end of an inclusio. An inclusio is like brackets around a section of literature. It helps us, it's a key to know we're coming to the beginning of a new phase or the ending of another. Now what do I mean by that? Hold your place in 22:20 and just flip back a few pages to the beginning of Abraham's story—we won't read it, I just want you to see it—chapter 11, beginning in verse 10: "These are the generations of Shem." And it lists the generations of Shem. Notice in verse 24 it says, "When Nahor lived 29 years, he fathered Terah, and Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years and had other sons and daughters. When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran." Right?

That, now look with me at 22:20. "Now after these things it was told to Abraham, 'Behold, Milcah has borne children to your brother Nahor.'" Nahor has not been mentioned by Moses since chapter 11 verse 24. In this way, he's bracketing in with these lists of names the content of Abram's life. Look what it says: "Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel. Bethuel fathered Rebekah." This note is put in by Moses to tell us Isaac's story is coming. This is Isaac's wife. "These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. Moreover, his concubine whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah."

Now, this list seems meaningless to us but it's so important. Why? Because it brackets in the large part of Abram's life as recorded in the scriptures. We're going to hear about Abram in chapter 23 and chapter 24 and he's going to pass away from the scene soon thereafter. But Abraham's life—the bulk of his life—is between these two brackets. And it's the life of miraculous work of God. Everything we're going to read after 22:24 is really just common information: Abraham buries his wife, Abraham gets his son—his son married, Abraham dies. No more visions, no more words from the Lord. He is coming to the end of his days. He's served his purpose. And Moses wants to make sure we know: he comes from this person Terah; he had two other brothers which are emphasized, and that brother Nahor has now had a daughter who will be his son Isaac's wife.

So we have this bracket situation. But then we move into the body of our text for today and we see in chapter 23 verses 1 through 2 that we must facing death with grief. We're facing death with grief. Look at verse 1. "Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. 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."

Death is a reality, but death is not to be passed over as if it's insignificant. Christian people are not spared from dying physically. We die like lost people die, in the sense that our bodies give up, our heart stops beating, our brainwaves go flat—we've deceased. And it's no small thing. Notice the emphasis of this passage, the repetitiveness of it? "He came to mourn Sarah, he came to weep over her."

This is not stoicism that we're observing—observing here with Abraham. Abraham doesn't come like with his staff and he's all put together and just, the Bible says he has a face like flint and he just looks at his dead wife and says, "Well, let's move on with life." No, Christian people face death with grief. It's painful. I think about, and just this passage makes me think about what it must have been like. I—I couldn't imagine, none of us can. There are some long—long lives represented here in long marriages in this congregation. But no marriage in our congregation has lasted as long as Abraham and Sarah's marriage.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine? I mean, if they married, let's just say in a normal way, think of the decades they've spent together. Nine, ten decades. Abraham loved his wife, and she had loved and served him. What a gift. And so when she dies, he doesn't callously move on to the next event; he comes to mourn and to weep over her. Christian, it is good to

weep and mourn in an event like this. It doesn't show a lack of faith on Abraham's part. It shows a faithfulness to the covenant that he had with his wife, the love that he shared with her, the faith that they had come to know by the grace of God, the family that they had built.

"Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah..." notice again the repetitiveness—I just bring that up because it's so important—Moses is making sure we know he's talking about Sarah. He mentions her name here again and again. Four times he mentions her name in the first two verses. He's going to not mention her name again directly until verse 19. Again, a way of bracketing in his subject matter, or keeping his—his text together.

"After this Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre." That—that's the next time that we see it. But here we see four mentions of the name of Sarah, stressing that this princess has died and Abraham is mourning over her. Facing death means we face grief.

But facing death also means we face death with honor. We face death with honor. Look at verse 3. "And Abraham rose up from before his dead..." That's a very odd way, isn't it, to write that? Again, "rose up before his dead and said to the Hittites, 'I am a sojourner and a foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.'"

The Hittites answered Abraham, "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 this tomb—his tomb—to hinder you from burying your dead." Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land, 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, 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."

Abraham shows great honor here. He is honored by the Hittites. These are the descendants—they are Cain—they are Cain's descendants. These are not godly people. He is sojourning in a land that is filled with people who are pagan and lost. And we're going to see a bit of his shrewdness here in this passage. Abraham is a—is trusting in God, but Abraham is no fool. And we're going to get into that in a moment.

But in this passage, the Hittites come with great honor for Abraham. "Oh, you—you are like a prince of God before us, lord." This might be their actual feeling—we're not—we're not sure, but I think regardless, Abraham's not bought into the flattery. Abraham's not interested in getting something for nothing. Abraham couldn't care less about receiving something free that he can put his wife's bones in. He desires to buy the place. Why? Because he has great honor. This passage—this—this passage points us to property ownership. The importance of owning the land.

Why do I keep stressing the owning of the land, the buying of the land? Is this not the land which God has already promised to be his? How many of us walk with such ignorance in our world, not like sojourners like our father Abraham, but rather like we deserve something? Nowhere in this speech will you see Abraham say, pull the trump card and say, "Well, it's my land anyway. The God most high of heaven said I would have this land, so I'll just take it." No. He has great honor. He bows before them as is customary, a lesser to a greater, and he says to the Hittites, the descendants of Cain, "Let me buy it. At the full price I will buy it."

He shows great honor to Sarah in buying it. He wants his bride to have a place of resting for her body, and he doesn't want to receive it like—like the bonus gift at the end of a—of a great adventure. No, he—he says, "I will buy it. I will purchase it for a plot to bury my dead." We see in this great honor in how he is treating the Hittites. He specifically—he already knows where he wants to—to bury her—he specifically addresses Ephron the son of Zohar in his speech.

He doesn't become undignified in his grief, he doesn't lose all hope in his grief, but rather he maintains Christian character all the way. He's going to these people who don't love his God, hate him most likely, and see him as a complete outsider and yet he will not pull even the trump card of "this land belongs to me because God said so." He goes to the length of purchasing the land.

Notice how he sees himself in verse 4: "I am a sojourner and a foreigner." It—it's not just that I'm not a Hittite, but I am not even the owner of a home. I live in tents. I've moved around about the place. Abraham here takes the position of the lower looking up to the leaders of the Hittites in honor, not just of them, not just of Sarah, but I think it's because he sees himself rightly in the eyes of God. He doesn't deserve anything. He doesn't deserve kindness. He doesn't deserve a gift, even in his time of grief. He doesn't have that type of mentality.

He faces death with grief, and he faces death with honor, but he faces death with extravagance. He faces death with extravagance and if you thought the first two points were, you know, difficult, this one will probably get in your kitchen a little. So I'm just going to tell you up front, it'll probably bother you a little, some of you.

"Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, the Hit—and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city." Abraham is dealing with this business transaction in the place of business. He's at the gate of the city. He's not trying to do some secret side deal. He wants everyone to see it. He's doing it by the customs of those people. He's sitting in the gate where all the important men are. Ephron is there. Abraham said these things in the gate of the city.

"No, my lord, hear me," Ephron said this, "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." Isn't it interesting

he brings up the next generation here? It's just a tip of the hand, I think, to what Abraham was wise to understand was probably the case. You see, if they just give him the land and he buries Sarah, and then what about the sons and the grandsons when they decide, "You know, our father's long gone; he gave that land to that sojourner who moved around by tents, but that's really our land. I think we'll have it back now."

No, Abraham's wise to see that he needs this to be a final transaction. He needs this to be a legal giving of the land. He needs to pay full price for it. Ephron seems to be carrying on his business with respect, calling Abraham lord and offering it to him for free. Most likely this is the way transactions were carried out in that day. You've all been there, haven't you, when the person has something and you say, "Hey, could I purchase that?" And they say, "Oh man, don't worry about it, just take it," and you kind of know they're leaning forward like, "Don't—don't just take it. Make me an offer. Make me an offer."

Abraham bowed down before the people of the land, again showing respect. This isn't a worshipful bowing, this is a respect. 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."

Ephron answered Abraham, "My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth 400..." Oh, he was going to give it to him, but he knows what he's going to charge. "400 shekels of silver? What is that between you and me?" Well, it's 400 shekels of silver is what it is.

Abraham listened to Ephron and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, 400 shekels of silver according to the weights current among the merchants. I say that we face death—he faced death with extravagance because of this.

Abraham goes and says, "I would like to purchase the field," or the cave at the back of the field that Ephron owns. Ephron says, "Oh lord, you can have the field, bury your dead." No, I'll pay full price. I want to pay for the land. "Oh, I mean my goodness, what is 400 pieces of silver between me and you? Just bury your dead." Abraham doesn't come back with, "Well how about 200?"

Abraham's not interested in bartering with Ephron. Abraham seems to have the same attitude that David had when he bought the threshing floor that would soon be the home of the temple: "Far be it from me to give to the Lord that which costs me nothing." Abraham in a sense is saying similarly, "Far be it from me to have the first title deed in the promised land bought on the cheap."

This land was promised to be my—by my God. This land is the land that flows with milk and honey. It belongs to us and our people, but I will not cut corners; I will pay the full price. He's extravagant in it and—and I do think it's a show of how valuable, not in human sense

but in spiritual sense, the land is. It's tied to the blood of Abraham by God in the covenant. He values those specks of dirt.

I think it also shows a husband's love for his wife. It's as if he's saying, "No expense is too much for my bride. I'll pay it." He doesn't negotiate, he doesn't try to barter; he just pays the price named in the hearing of all the Hittites. The full price. And I say it's extravagant because in the scriptures, we—we don't know what common land prices were in that—in this day, right? We don't really know. But every other purchase—the—the largest purchase price I can find recorded in scripture in the Old Covenant is 50 shekels of silver.

So it seems like he's at least willing to pay four times that for this land. He honors God and his wife—the humanness of his wife—by caring about where her body goes to lay to rest. And this isn't just any cave, by the way. We're not going to jump too far ahead in the story, but this cave is the burial place for Sarah first and then Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. Joseph is buried there also.

This land, this cemetery plot, is the first land owned by the patriarch. Isn't it interesting that the first land owned by the patriarch is land for burying the dead? What are we to make about this extravagance that he's willing to go to?

Well, I—I think that we can apply it into our lives. I really do. This is a clear sign of Christian attitude towards the body. I know there may be many of you here who are thinking about how much it costs to have a burial in our day. And—and I'm not here to scold you about that. But I would say, give it thought. You say, "Well it's just the body, they're—they're with the Lord."

But listen, the Christian tradition has always, stretching back to the days of Abraham, been to place the body of our deceased loved ones who are, especially those who are in the Lord, to plant them in the ground. Why? Because they're going to be raised from the dead. The kernel, Paul says, of grain or wheat or some other type of grain, it falls into the ground and dies and it bears fruit.

What was sown is corruptible, what is raised from the dead is incorruptible. What is sown is mortal and what is raised from the dead is immortal. What is sown in weeping will be raised up in great trib—great triumph and joy. That which held the sign and the seal of Adam's life will one day hold the sign and seal of the New Adam, Christ.

There has always been a significance to this. And I just tell you, like, it's passing away in our day, this very thought, but I want to encourage you to give it a lot of thought. Our forefathers gave it a lot of thought. I was telling some people this week: if you go to an old church cemetery, the graves face towards the east. Why? Because the scripture says the Lord Jesus will return from the east and when He raises them from the dead, they wanted to be looking into the face of their Savior.

Interesting fact—not—some of you might not have known this—I'm going to get you right here. I like to get you. The pastors of those churches were not buried facing east. They were base—they were buried facing west. Why? Because as shepherds of the flock on the day of resurrection, their people would be raised looking at Jesus and they would be raised up looking at their people. Still shepherding their souls all the way through death.

There's something significant about the way we treat the bodies of our dead. It's extravagant, it's costly, but it's meaningful. I tell you there's—there is no more serious note for me than when I stand over open graves and I look at a casket stay—sitting over the grave and I'm given the privilege to say, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust; we sow this mortal body into the ground with the great hope that Christ on the resurrection day will raise it immortal."

If you don't bury for any other reason than to give somebody like me the chance to say that to your loved ones, do it for that reason alone. Abraham wanted to bury Sarah so appropriately, at what—whatever price, extravagant it might have been, it didn't matter to him. It didn't matter.

He faced death with grief, he faced death with honor, he faced death with extravagance, he faced death with hope. He faced death with hope. "So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was at—to the east of Mamre..." That "east," the word east is not in the Hebrew, I get it, but the direction the people would have known: that Machpelah, looking at a map, was east of Mamre.

I think it's significant. Why? Well because when—I think it ties back to the beginning: when God put Adam and Eve out of the garden, He put them out of the garden to the east. They forever came from the east to worship God. Here, our father Abraham is saying, "My deceased one will be buried to the east. She may be dead in this life, but she will live forever and I will bury her as a memorial to God that He is a keeper of His word."

If you're looking for the way you're going to survive in the day of death, it's by the promise of God alone, in Christ Jesus alone. That's when you will inherit—begin to inherit the promise, the fullness of the promise. "The field, the cave that was in it, and all the trees that were in the field throughout the whole area was made over—was literally given over or raised up to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites before all who went in at the gate of the city."

"After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east—he emphasized again—of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over—they were lifted up to—Abraham as property for a burial place by the Hittites."

With great hope, Abraham sowed Sarah's body. With great hope. Why? Because the promise of God is as true in the day of death as it is in the day of birth. He knew just as

surely on this day when he's burying his long-beloved wife—he knew just as surely on that day as he did when Isaac was born that God's word stands. God's word stands.

Sarah is honored in such a great way here in the scriptures. Her death and her burial are expansive in the scripture, really—a whole chapter dedicated to it to give us instruction. There are some of you who have already lost your spouse and, in truth be known, you live a lonely life missing—missing that spouse.

But in a text like today's text, as sad and hard as this life is at this moment, you can have full assurance that on the day of resurrection, your spouse will be raised from the dead. They will be given a body immortal, incorruptible, eternal in the image of Jesus.

I think about it, church, those who have died from our congregation. I think about it because in Hebrews 11, a lot of space is given to Abraham and his story—you don't have to turn there, but in Hebrews 11 this whole—we've been reading the story of Abraham from the writer of Hebrews and he talks about this reality that Abraham lived by faith all of his life.

At the end of that great chapter, listen to these words. After talking about Sarah and Abraham and all the others, this is what he says in verse 39: "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

I want to close by challenging you to think of the fact that those who have died before us died—the Old Covenant saints died—waiting for what was promised. They didn't receive it. We have received the promise of Christ and yet we still wait for the coming of Christ.

All of those who have died through the years are gathered before His throne waiting for the resurrection of their body. And they are a great cloud before God of witnesses that we too must walk by faith until the very end.

I think about it. You know, you go through the hall of faith in chapter 11 and it's, you know, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph and Moses. And then he throws this whole random list of guys together at the end like, "Man, I ain't got time to talk about all these great guys." They too had faith.

But you know where my mind goes at the end of the chapter? My mind goes to all the saints of Grace Fellowship who have died. I think about them and I—and I try to think what they must be experiencing right now in the presence of Christ.

And it brings hope to me. It brings—but—but there's still that tinge of sadness, isn't there, as we wait for the day of the Lord or the day of our death, when we will go to Him spiritually and wait for the day of the resurrection of our bodies?

Hope in death. Hope in death. Not because death is the gateway—Christ is the gateway—but death is the river we cross to get to the golden shore. And I'm so thankful that as I look across this congregation, in a sermon like this, I trust that so many of you will be with me and I with you as we cross over that river. His promise is good even on the day of death.

Let's pray.