

Faith at a Graveside

Genesis 23

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: In 1974, a hippie kid hiked deep into the Philippine jungles in search of a living legend — Lieutenant Hiro Onoda — a Japanese soldier rumored to still be fighting World War II.

Now, Onoda had been deployed in 1944, in his twenties, ordered to sabotage Allied operations and to *never surrender* until given direct orders by his commanding officer. The problem? No one told him the war ended.

So, for 29 years, he kept fighting — living off bananas, coconuts, and pure stubbornness. He shot at locals, sabotaged island farms, and outlasted *five* Japanese prime ministers.

When they finally found him, he was still in full uniform, rifle polished, ammo stockpiled, grenades ready. The poor guy thought newspapers announcing Japan's surrender were Allied propaganda.

The Japanese government had to fly in his old commanding officer — who, by that point, was working as a bookstore clerk in Tokyo — just to tell him personally, "Lieutenant... It's over."

Can you imagine stepping out of the jungle in 1974, thinking you're at war, and the first thing you hear is disco?

He left behind the sound of gunfire and emerged to the sound of *The Bee Gees*.
He traded jungle humidity for polyester leisure suits.
Last time he saw Tokyo, people bowed to the Emperor — now they were doing the Hustle.
Japan had gone from kamikaze pilots to kamikaze cocktails.
He came home expecting a parade... and got a lava lamp.

Nearly three decades of isolation, and the world had completely changed. The war was long over, but he had never gotten the memo.

Change is an inevitable part of life - we change personally, and the world around us is constantly changing.

That's why the wisest man who ever lived, Solomon, compared life to a series of Seasons. ***Learning to embrace a new season and celebrate it is one of the keys to a happy life.*** Rather than like Hiro Onoda, who climbed into a jungle and waited for it to pass.

Today, we are looking at one of life's most challenging seasons - the season of loss. David compared it to a shadowy valley through which the Shepherd sometimes leads

His flock. Many of you have walked through that valley; some of you are walking through it today. Nothing reveals what you truly believe more than death, and nothing develops your faith more than death.

How do you face life when someone you love passes from this world?

The statistics on death are staggering, one out of every one person that lives dies.

2 people die every second.

120–130 people die every minute.

7,500–8,000 people die every hour.

185,000 people die every day.

~68 million people die every year.

By the time I finish this sermon, 5,200 people will step into eternity to one of only two destinations.

Death is the Great Equalizer - Death visits the elderly, the youth, the strong, the weak, the rich, and the poor. Strong young men die, and occasionally small children drop their toys to wrestle with the strong arm of death.

- I've buried little babies
- 5-year-old boys
- Teenagers
- Young mother
- Middle-aged men
- Senior adults

I've buried people who have died in a drunken stupor, and I have buried preachers of the Gospel. I've buried saintly senior adults and a war veteran who died an atheist.

But nothing is as sad as ministering to a man who is burying his wife.

Our Lord has Sovereignly arranged it so women will generally outlive men by 5 years. It has been my observation that this was a great kindness He has shown to the men of our species. I trust that you need us, but not nearly as much as we need you.

CONTEXT: Yet, in our text this morning, we see one of the exceptions to the statistics on life expectancy. Sarah is called home before Abraham, and through this loss, Abraham once again teaches us great lessons regarding the walk of faith, when that walk must be taken in the valley of the shadow of death.

At this point in our story, **Sarah is 127 and Abraham is 137**. She and Abraham had been married ***well over a hundred years***.

*BTW, "What do you get someone at their 100th wedding anniversary?"
25 years = silver anniversary*

*50 years = golden anniversary
100 years = diamond anniversary, so now you know...*

It had been exactly 62 years since they had left Ur of the Chaldeans to follow God on their Journey of Faith. Sarah and Abraham were the parents of a 37-year-old son named Isaac.

It was then that, before the foundation of the world, God had set an appointment with Sarah that she was bound to keep.

- **Hebrews 9:27 that we all have an appointment with death - ²⁷And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:**

THOUGHT - We know of only two people who never tasted death – **Elijah and Enoch**. Quite possibly, they are the two witnesses who will stand and prophecy in the last days, as recorded in the book of Revelation. Then, they too will have an appointment with death.

- **David writes in Psalm 139:16 16 Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.**

It's important that you realize that there is a certain **number of days ordained** for you. When those days are complete, there isn't a doctor on the planet who can extend them.

ILLUSTRATION: Kind of kills any motivation for **dieting**, doesn't it? We take care of ourselves to improve the **quality** of our lives, but the **quantity** is already determined.

Moses, our human author, and the Holy Spirit, our Divine author, give one verse to the death of this great woman of faith.

TEXT:Genesis 23:1 (ESV)

¹ Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.

One verse – then the remainder of the chapter focuses on how Abraham dealt with Sarah's death. I find that interesting. You see, her story was over. Nothing could be added or taken away from the account of her earthly life. Her story continues in Heaven.

Paul speaking of the believer's death in 2 Corinthians 5:8 (NAS) ⁸ we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

Sarah is at home with the Lord. But Abraham isn't. **What are we to learn from the Patriarch's example?**

1. Faith Weeps Honestly

Genesis 23:2 (ESV)

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.

I've heard **preachers rebuke families for mourning**, reminding them that this is to be the celebration of a homegoing. But friend, that's all well and good, but it's sad just the same, and it's ok to weep. I believe the ability to weep is a gift that helps us cope with the pain of loss.

ILLUSTRATION: Carly space camp: *I remember when my daughter Carly went to her first Summer Camp – Space Camp here in H'ville. I remember watching her walk away with the counselor with her little pink backpack on. Thinking that at any minute she was going to turn around and run back to me and call the whole thing off. But she didn't, she never even looked back. Well, I knew she would be fine. I just didn't like the separation. I knew the house would be a little quieter now without her. Love never learns to enjoy separation - even when we know it is temporary.*

Soon, Caitlyn may move off to college. I don't like that. Cole will move to Nashville to pursue a career. I know these things are meant to be, but I don't look forward to the separation.

In the same way, when you lose someone who is a Christian, you know they are safer than ever. But it still hurts.

- Our Lord **Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus**. It's the shortest verse in the Bible. Now, if anyone knew the fact that his friend was in Heaven, it's Jesus. If anyone understood the power of the resurrection, it was Jesus. Just the same, he cried.
- **King David wept over the loss of his son Absalom.**
- Jesus cried at death, David cried at death, Abraham cried at death, and friend, it's ok if you cry at death.

1 Corinthians 15:26 (NAS) ²⁶ The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

I hope to live the kind of life that people will mourn my death.

Sometimes I say this jokingly. For most people, 20 minutes after the dirt is on the grave, the burning question on their minds is, ***"I wonder who made the potato salad?"***

Abraham mourned the death of Sarah...Mourning is one of the healthiest things you can do when you experience the loss of a loved one.

ILLUSTRATION: *I remember over 10 years ago, my wife Julie miscarried... we lost a child just a few weeks old... but I mourned... I remember thinking - I wanted to give that child so much! I wanted to give them a home, an education, a car... but all I could give them were tears... so I gave the child my tears.*

Abraham mourned the death of Sarah...

2. Faith Waits Humbly

Genesis 23:3–4 (ESV)

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.”

It is a sad fact that you aren’t able to mourn for long before your attention must be turned to matters of business. Specifically, securing a proper burial.

NOW – Why is this important? We as Christians believe that the person is with God, right? So what difference does it make how we deal with the body left behind? Well, you need to understand that **there is something very special about the particular body you inhabit.**

- You see – when a believer dies, his Soul is immediately taken into God’s presence. We’ve already established that.
- The believer’s **body obviously stays here on earth –**
- **Then, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns -**
Paul explains in **1 Thes. 4:14** ... God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep
1 Corinthians 15:52 ... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

The Body and Spirit are rejoined to the resurrected body. You are not meant for a disembodied eternity.

Jesus says in John 5:28, “The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment”.

Jesus also says in John 6:39, “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 at the last day**. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:39-40)

Well what will that body be like? The same, but different - 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 (NAS) ⁴² So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable *body*, it is raised an imperishable *body*; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual *body*.

NOW – with this reality in mind, what are we to do with the bodies of those who die before the return of Christ?

We are to honor that body appropriately.

- **We see that when Jesus died, Joseph of Aramathia claimed his body and buried it according to Jewish custom.**
- **One of the most fascinating passages in scripture is found in 2 Kings 13.** Remember that when God called Elijah up to Heaven that Elisha requested that a double portion of the Spirit be upon him. Elijah told him that if his mantle fell as he ascended into Heaven, it would be done. Sure enough, it happened. Now count the number of miracles that were performed by Elijah, **then the number performed by Elisha**, and you will find that Elisha performed almost double in his lifetime, but he was one short of double. But then in 2 Kings 13

2 Kings 13:20–21 (NAS) ²⁰ Elisha died, and they buried him. Now the bands of the Moabites would invade the land in the spring of the year. ²¹ As they were burying a man, behold, they saw a marauding band; and they cast the man into the grave of Elisha. And when the man touched the bones of Elisha he revived and stood up on his feet.

NOW think about this – the soul of Elisha was with the Lord, but the Spirit of God still used the **body** of Elisha.

What about cremation? There were many in the times through which the Bible was written who practiced cremation. If God wanted to condemn the practice outright, He would have certainly done so. He did not. It is not a sin to prefer cremation - the issue is one of attitude and honoring.

We are to mourn the loss, honor the body...

3. Faith Walks Hopefully

In verses **3-20** Abraham engages in a series of typical **Middle Eastern negotiations**. They follow a well-established pattern of respect and request.

The sons of Heth offer to give Abraham a cave to bury Sarah, but Abraham refuses to receive the cave as a gift. As a matter of fact, ultimately, **he pays far more than the land was worth to purchase both the cave** and a large spot of land here in the heart of Canaan. Why?

Why did he not take her body back to Ur of the Chaldeans? We will see in Chapter 24 that they still had family there.

God had promised that he would give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. By insisting that he purchase the land in a public way, paying far more than it was worth, Abraham was saying that he intended to put down roots in Canaan.

We don't hear about this land until the end of Genesis. Jacob (called Israel) asks Joseph to be buried in this same cave.

When God called Abraham, he promised to give him the land from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates River... but Abraham did not receive that promise in his lifetime... the only land Abraham took possession of was this little field and a cave in which to bury his wife.

How would you feel if you followed God expecting a NATION but ended up with a FIELD?

Speaking of Abraham and Sarah - The writer to the Hebrews writes in Hebrews 11:13–16 (ESV) ¹³ 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.

In taking possession of this field, Abraham greeted from afar that which God had promised.... Like the little cloud that Elijah saw and ran for the hills lest he be swept away in the flood... this little field was evidence that his faith had not been in vain.

Ultimately, Abraham's descendants would receive the territory promised... but better than that...Abraham's eyes were set elsewhere...

¹⁶ 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.

There are a few times in life when your faith is placed on display -

- When you respond to the Gospel.
- When you are baptized.
- When you face death.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 ¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

Perhaps the light of the gospel never shines brighter than it does at the graveside – where you weep with hope.

ILLUSTRATION: We know that the **shadow of death** is inevitable, but we also remember **there can be no shadow without light** – the fact that death is difficult reminds us that eternity is set in the hearts of man.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: The story of two boys in the back seat of the car when a bee stung the younger one. The elder brother was stung first.

“The story began with a soldier who kept fighting a war that had already ended. But there’s another soldier — the Captain of our Salvation — who fought the war to end all wars. On the cross, Jesus took the full sting of death. He didn’t just declare peace — He *purchased* it. The enemy continues to fight; thus, the scripture teaches, “the final enemy to be defeated is death.”

So now, when faith faces death, we no longer fight for victory — we fight *from* victory. Death doesn’t get the last word — Jesus does.”

1 Corinthians 15:55–57...“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”