

Genesis 23:1-20¹***Reminiscent Grief, Reliable Promise, Resilient Faith*****Introduction**

In our text today, we look at a “tough man of God”—Abraham the Patriarch. The Bible says that he “believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). And he became the “father of all” who so believed God like him (Rom 4:16). He was also called “God’s friend” because of his faith (James 2:23). Abraham had demonstrated exemplary obedience and faith, even though not perfectly. He had not always exercised faith and obedience as he should. But he grew strong in faith and obedience as God dealt with him in and through his human mistakes.

Today, we see this tough man of God looking at the body of his dead wife, who had stood with him for many years through ups and downs. And we also see his softer side—he was emotionally filled with deep grief, mentally flooded with fond memories, and visibly expressed his sorrow with tears (23:2).

Even in our tears, the truth that we can hold on today is this—we can go through earthly grief and gloom with hope because we have the comfort of heavenly promises. Let’s examine how this truth works out for Abraham as he faced the death of his beloved wife Sarah.

I. Reminiscent Grief over Sarah (23:1-3a)

V. 1 Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old.

V. 2 She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.

V. 3a Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites.

Probably about 17 years have passed between Gen 22 and 23. The accounts of Abraham’s trials in these chapters are separated by many years of blessing and peace. Some commentators have suggested that Abraham was not by Sarah’s side when she died. He had settled temporarily in Beersheba following the binding of Isaac in Gen 22. Upon hearing Sarah’s death, he “went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her” in Kiriath Arba or Hebron (23:2). Wherever Abraham might have come from, the important point is that he was there to mourn and weep over his beloved wife.

And this is the only time we are told that Abraham wept. This old man had gone through many, many bitter disappointments and times of heartbreak.

- He was disappointed when Lot left him.
- He was heartbroken when Ishmael was expelled from his household.

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- His heart was torn with anguish when he had to offer Isaac on the mountain.

But the only time the Bible reveals that he wept was when Sarah died. This reveals his deep love and grief for Sarah.

Imagine Abraham bowing over the body of his beloved Sarah. All the sweet memories with Sarah came flooding into his conscious mind. Each remembrance of those wonderful times added heartache to his grief. He recalled that compelling call from God that sent them out together as a couple into an unknown land. He remembered how Sarah went along with him, sharing hardships and accepting the nomadic life without a murmur or complaint.

How his heart must have anguished as he remembered anew how he exposed her to danger and even dishonour with his lie before Pharaoh, and again years later before Abimelech—that she's not his wife, but his sister. All the memories rushed upon him as he recalled their long, weary years without a child. He remembered how Sarah cried bitter tears over her barrenness, and how in her desperation to give him a son, she offered her handmaid ... and Ishmael was born. He also remembered how at long last, pride and joy showed on Sarah's face when she carried her own son, Isaac, in her arms.

Now death had taken her away from him. It was a time of darkness in the shadow of death. But we are told in v. 3a that "Abraham ROSE from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites." This means that when his weeping was over, Abraham STOOD UP and MOVED ON to do what he needed to do.

Grief is a normal part of living, but grief must not paralyze us without end. Sorrow over death is normal grief, even for men. Abraham wept at the death of his wife; Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. Real men do cry for a time at the death of a loved one. But we the people of God don't weep as those without hope. It's OK for us to weep when our loved one dies—it's a healthy thing. But sorrow that does not end can become abnormal grief.

So, I love this phrase in v. 3a—"Abraham ROSE from beside his dead wife ...". That signified a squaring of the shoulders, a lifting up of the head, and a stepping out to face life again.

Although Abraham had been weeping in the valley of the shadow of death, he knew well that there could be no shadow without a light somewhere. When a shadow comes into your life, it is a sign that there must be light somewhere. Of course, if we turn our back on the light, we ourselves are the ones who cause the shadow. Perhaps, many people are seeing constant shadows because their backs are turned toward the light. But if we face the light, as Abraham did in his life—looking at that light streaming down from the city whose builder and maker is God—then we can bask in the light of God's goodness, leaving the shadow of life's gloom behind us.

Remember that the whole land had been promised to Abraham by God. But the dead body of his wife before him reminded him that it was not yet God's time to physically possess all that was promised.

Abraham's response to his grief teaches us this: *In our grief, we choose to see the light of God and move on, not to stay in the shadow of gloom and stagnate.*

Let's now consider how Sarah's death had not weakened Abraham's faith in God's reliable promise of the land.

II. Reliable Promise of God (23:3b-16)

V. 3b He said,

V. 4 "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead."

V. 5 The Hittites replied to Abraham,

V. 6 "Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead."

V. 7 Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites.

V. 8 He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf

V. 9 so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you."

V. 10 Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city.

V. 11 "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead."

V. 12 Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land

V. 13 and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there."

V. 14 Ephron answered Abraham,

V. 15 "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead."

V. 16 Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.

These verses tell us that after some 42 years in Canaan, Abraham still didn't own any part of the Promised Land. He called himself an "alien and a stranger" because after all these years that's how he felt. Many of us do own a home, big or small. Not Abraham. He's an old man by now, having lived through so many crisis situations. He had left security and stability in Ur for an

unknown future. Forty-two years of nomadic lifestyle and he still didn't even own a burial plot. Ever since Abraham left Ur and followed his God, what had it gotten him? Not even a place to bury his wife. Now he had to go to the Hittites.

At first the Hittites offered to give Abraham their choicest cave as a gift since they regarded him a "mighty prince" (v. 6). But Abraham refused, partly because he understood that in Middle Eastern customs, this was just mere politeness. So, the proper response from him should be, "Thanks, but no thanks! Let me pay for it." Also, Abraham really wanted a plot of land that he rightfully and legally owned so that he could lay Sarah to rest in peace and dignity.

But even more important is this—burying his wife in that piece of land was a statement of his faith that someday his descendants would possess the whole land. God had promised it and though the fulfilment lay in the distant future, Abraham was fully convinced that God would keep His word.

Verses 8-16 describe the negotiation between Ephron and Abraham. In an ever-so-polite way, Ephron initially offered to give the burial plot to Abraham, but he actually didn't mean it. In fact, some commentators have suggested that Ephron eventually charged Abraham far more than a fair price. But Abraham readily accepted the offer. Now, having to pay for land that God had promised to give him might have caused many of us to shake our heads at Abraham's lack of business acumen—"Stupid! Why buy at such a cut-throat price when you can get it free one day?" But Abraham was able to see beyond the present into a future when the land would all be his (through his descendants).

What we see here is the practice of cultural adaptation. Abraham was living in a pagan culture. If he was going to live in such a culture, he must respect their practices. Now that doesn't mean he should compromise all his values. Rather, it means that wherever possible, he would become "a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks," and a Hittite to the Hittites. So he not only bowed down, he also entered into this game of negotiations. Abraham wanted to show that he respected Ephron as leader of the Hittites.

But something else was happening at a deeper level. Verses 17-20 read like a property deed with these details:

- The exact location of the cave (in Machpelah near Mamre)
- The agreed price (400 shekels of silver)
- The precise extent of the property (the cave, the field, and the trees in the field)
- The witnesses present (all the Hittites who were there)

Only when this was properly concluded did Abraham bury Sarah. Acting in faith and working out the details carefully are not mutually exclusive. It's not that when you act in faith, you should not be concerned about the details. Or

when you are concerned about the details, you are not acting in faith. Acting in faith and working out the details carefully are not mutually exclusive.

So, in the name of faith, are we sloppy about details when we ought to be precise and definite? We say, "Let's not worry about the fine print." But it's the fine print that often gets us into misunderstanding and conflict situation. It is said, "The devil is in the details." If this is so, then we need God's wisdom to work through the details and not let the devil hide in there.

In v. 16, we are told that Abraham "agreed" to Ephron's price of the burial plot without even making a counter-offer. The word "agreed" means "content"—Abraham was content with the terms ... not so much because the price was cheap or reasonable. Rather, he's content in that he's grateful to God because this purchase gave him legitimate ownership of a small plot that would be part of the bigger land promised by God.

So, we learn this from how God had directed Abraham here: *We often experience God's promised goodness not in excessive measures because He wants us not to grumble, but be grateful for what we can or already have at any one time.*

We have the tendency to grumble rather than be grateful for the small things or beginnings that we can or already have.

I remember when my older daughter Vera was a baby and learning to crawl. Instead of crawling forward, she actually was sliding backward. I asked a friend, "When your baby son crawls, does he go forward or backward?" He replied, "Of course he goes forward. You mean your baby goes backward?" So I was kind of confused if this was something extraordinary or abnormal about Vera.

Then one day, it happened! What happened? Vera began to crawl ... and she began to crawl FORWARD! You can imagine the delight on my face when I saw her crawling forward ... one small step at a time. One small step forward by her was like a giant leap for all mankind!

In the same way, don't despise the small things or beginnings that God has blessed us with because these can mean bigger things to come.

And God often uses small things or beginnings to build obedience, faith, commitment, and character in us. Small things and beginnings help us see how far we have come from where we started, as well as the work we still need to do in order to do bigger things as God finds us faithful even in the little things.

This is why we often experience God's promised goodness not in excessive measures because He wants us not to grumble, but be grateful for what we can or already have at any one time.

Let's now consider why the purchase agreement in vv. 17-20 is not merely a property deed. But more importantly, it's a testimony of Abraham's resilient faith in God's promise.

III. Resilient Faith of Abraham (23:17-20)

V. 17 So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre - both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field - was deeded

V. 18 to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city.

V. 19 Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan.

V. 20 So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

Abraham did not take Sarah back to their former home in Ur, but buried her in the land God had promised to him and his descendants. So, by purchasing the cave of Machpelah for a tomb, Abraham was making a public statement of faith related to this promise.

In fact, by the time you get to the end of Genesis, Abraham's tomb had become quite full—the bodies of Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Leah, and Jacob were all buried there. Why? Certainly it was because the members of the family wanted to be together in death as in life. But more than that, having these deceased buried in that same, small burial plot testified to the faith that someday God would give the whole land He had promised.

It has been said that God buries His workers but His work still goes on. We come on stage for awhile, and then we move on to God's next season for us; to be replaced by someone else whom God has chosen. And in this way, God's work goes on and on until its full completion. Put in another way, God's promises as revealed in His Word are not nullified by death, but they will all be fulfilled and claimed in God's fullness of time.

The servants and people of God still die one by one. I still attend funerals for such people. Like Abraham, we too have not received the fulfillment of everything God has promised. We all die some day, but the promises of God will live on after us.

When Abraham first came into the land, he was a pilgrim and a stranger. It might have taken him a long time to win the respect of the pagans in Canaan. But in v. 6, they all gathered around and said to him, "You are a mighty prince among us." They viewed Abraham not so much as a mere wanderer. Rather, they respected him as powerful, blessed by God, and worthy to be among them.

At the end of his life, although he was promised the whole land by God, the only part he actually possessed was a field and the cave where he buried his

wife. But this modest possession at his death testified to his resilient faith in God and His promises.

This is what we see in Abraham in our text today. He only owned a burial cave in a field at the end of Gen 23. But this is NOT all that God promised to Abraham and those who would come after him.

We are not created by God to be satisfied with our temporal possessions here on earth, and then to leave them all behind as we vanish away like the flame of a candle in the wind. God has set eternity in our hearts. But we can so easily lose sight of this. We get fixated on the earthly problems of here and now, and we lose focus on the heavenly prospect of eternity.

Yet in God we can have the power to enable us to lift up our faces resiliently with faith and radiantly with hope in the midst of challenging times—to be strong when others are weak; to refuse to give way to panic and fear when others are filled with worries and anxieties. It is this attitude; this mindset that gives peace, strength, and faith in the face of loss and crisis. When we see with our eyes of fear, we become fixated at the circumstances out there. But when we see with our eyes of faith, we become focused on the Lord who is up there. We can then be calm and composed no matter what happens here and now.

Abraham could only own a small burial plot in his life time. But this is a powerful symbol of his resilient faith in God's promise of an extensive land to come. After he had passed on, this small plot would serve as a powerful reminder to his descendants of God's unfailing promise of the land. And they in turn would similarly trust God, act in faith, and claim that promise for their respective generations.

So, we learn this of Abraham's resilient faith: *Resilient faith is passed on when we do what we believe now, so that we can show the way for those after us to do what they believe then.* God buries His workers but His work still goes on.

Conclusion

Let me now pose three questions for us to reflect and apply:

- First, Abraham's grief over the death of Sarah was great, but so was his faith in God. *It's easy to follow God in the good times, but how can we still trust Him in our moments of grief and gloom?*
- Second, Abraham believed God would give him many offspring even before he had a child. With this same faith in God, he went to the Hittites to seek a burial place for Sarah. *How should we respond to God in view of what we do have and what we do not have at this time?*
- Third, Abraham trusted God's promise of the whole land even though he could only own a small burial plot in his life time. *What does trusting*

God's promise to provide in the face of present loss and future uncertainties mean to us in practical and specific terms?

Let me close with this Good News—God has given us the power to manage and overcome our grief and daunting circumstances. Jesus' "farewell" words to His disciples before He was arrested and crucified were—"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The promises of peace and power to overcome are always available to us through faith in Jesus Christ. If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, and you want to know how you too can claim these unfailing promises in the Bible, I encourage you to talk with a Christian, perhaps someone you know or whose life has impacted you.

People have suffered much loss amidst the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Loss of health
- Loss of a loved one
- Loss of job
- Loss of income
- Loss of physical contact
- Loss of freedom of movement

But God has given us a comforting and reassuring reminder in Gen 23: *Our moments of loss are often used by God as momentum to build up faith to conquer the odds against us, as well as to claim His promises for us.*

Therefore, even in our loss, we know it's OK to grieve for a time. But we shall overcome because we are not without hope in God, and not without help from God. Amen!