

Genesis 23 — Funerals

April 3, 2016

Good morning. If you are new, my name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. I hope you had a chance to join us last week for Easter at the SAMI Center. It was a great day. The worship team did an excellent job. The service was great.

This morning, we return to our studies in the book of Genesis. Genesis is a big book. It covers as many years as the rest of the Bible combined. The book of Genesis doesn't cover all the details in 2,000 years of history but it takes the lives of different people and zooms in on them so we can learn God's story through their lives.

Beginning in Genesis 12, Moses — the author of Genesis — zoomed in on the life of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. They were pagan moon worshippers from the city of Ur next to Babylon. God supernaturally broke into their lives and told them to leave their land and follow God's leading to a new land that God would give to Abraham. In addition to a new land, God promised to give Abraham and Sarah a son. Up to that point, Sarah couldn't conceive. For the last 10 chapters, we followed their lives as they traveled to the Promised Land, as they fell into sin, as they had their victories, as they struggled to have a child, and as God miraculously gave them a son named Isaac even though Sarah was in menopause and all human hope was gone. It was an amazing life.

Now it is time for the passing of the baton. The next three chapters of Genesis focus on the closing of Abraham and Sarah's life and the passing the baton to the next generation, their son, Isaac.

Today is a rough day. Sarah dies. If you have lost a wife or a mother, you can understand the pain of this day. It is a hard day when the matriarch of the family dies. It is a day when the world closes in around you. This is that day.

Last week, we celebrated that Jesus is no longer in the grave. The tomb is empty. Since Jesus' tomb is empty, we know that when we die, our spirits go home to be with Christ but when Christ returns he will also raise our bodies to be like his resurrection body.

Until Christ returns, there will be funerals. Until Christ returns, our graves will be full, not empty. This week, we see Sarah's body still occupies her grave, just as at our funerals, our bodies will go in the grave. This week, using Sarah's death as our backdrop, we will look at funerals. How can I prepare for a funeral?

This is never a fun subject. Talking about death is worse than talking about taxes and your health care plan combined. Nevertheless, it is something we need to study. Baring Christ's return, every one of us will face death. We need to prepare for it. Let's dive into our study.

1. Live each day of marriage like it could be your last.

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. Genesis 23:1–2 (ESV)

For you trivia buffs, I believe this is the only time a woman's age at her death is given in the Bible. If it isn't the only time, it is one of the few times. For men, age isn't a problem. Men's ages are listed all the time. Men are comfortable with age. Women are more vain in this area. I know a number of you ladies do not like to share your age because you want people to think you are younger than you are. I regretfully admit, you now have biblical precedence

for not sharing your age because we don't typically get the age of women in the Bible. So when someone asks your age, don't share it. Tell them you keep it to yourself just like the women of the Bible.

Sarah is the one exception. She lived to the age of 127 but I am sure all of her friends told her she didn't look a day over 100.

Sarah lived 37 years after the birth of Isaac. She and Abraham left Ur to come to the Promised Land 62 years before this day. If she married at age 15, which was the typical age for marriage in that culture, that means she celebrated 112 years of marriage. Can you imagine your 112th wedding anniversary?

After her death, Abraham outlived her another 48 years. Abraham would eventually remarry a woman named Keturah and have additional children. For Abraham, life went on and had another family. This is a reminder for those who grieve so deeply after the loss of a spouse and a long marriage that there is life after the death of your spouse, even though it may not feel that way.

The additional 48 years of Abraham's life made me think differently about Sarah's death. I wonder if Sarah's death was unexpected. I wonder if it was premature. It seems sudden. In Biblical times, people lived a long time; 127 seems young. There is no warning in this chapter. Her death comes out of the blue. Sarah died. One moment Sarah was there, the next moment she was gone.

Look at Abraham's response. He mourned and wept over her. That may not stick out to you but this is also the first time weeping is mentioned in the Bible. The Bible doesn't talk about crying at the death of Abel, the son of Adam

and Eve after his brother murdered him. The Bible doesn't talk about crying at the death of the world when only Noah and his family were in the ark. The first time the Bible talks about crying is Abraham's response to the death of Sarah, his wife. This was a special relationship. They were close.

It doesn't just say that Abraham mourned her death. It says he also wept. This wasn't little pouty tears. The word for weeping in Hebrew is the loud wailing of a crushed heart. Abraham wept uncontrollably over the body of his beloved Sarah.

If an illness is drawn out, death is a type of relief because you don't want to see the one you love suffer. When death comes unexpectedly and you haven't had a chance to emotionally prepare yourself, you emotionally lose it. Sarah's relatively young age and Abraham's uncontrolled weeping makes me think Sarah's death was unexpected. Maybe she dropped dead of a heart attack. Maybe it was a blood clot to the brain. I don't know. What I do know is there are lessons for us.

If you are here this morning and you are married, I want you to reach over and hold your spouse's hand for this part of the sermon. Listen to me. You never know how long you will have each other. Death is always a surprise.

Here is my question, if your spouse were to die unexpectedly tonight, like it appears Sarah did for Abraham, what regrets would you have? What sins have you not confessed to one another? Tomorrow you may not have that opportunity. What words have you said or done that you lost the opportunity to take back because it was too late to make it right? If your spouse was to die tomorrow,

have you said “I love you” enough? If your spouse died, would he or she know how much you love him or her or would there still be that lingering chill in the emotional air from a fight you didn’t resolve?

At your spouse’s funeral, what kind of tears would you shed? Would they be tears of thankfulness for the blessing of his or her life or tears of regret because of what you didn’t make right?

Some of you are aware of my mother’s dying of cancer almost two years ago. It was one of those deaths that appeared to drag because Mom was so strong. As Mom experienced more pain, hospice began giving her Roxanol to make her comfortable. Roxanol is a form of morphine. Once they gave it to her, she went to sleep. What I didn’t expect is as they kept giving her Roxanol, it kept her asleep. I told the hospice nurse I was a little angry because I didn’t realize that when Mom took Roxanol the last words I would hear from her mouth were already spoken. I lost my chance to bless her one last time with words of love. The nurse explained to me that once they give Roxanol, there is no going back without exposing her to great pain. Even her expected death happened in an unexpected way sooner than I realized.

2. The most important day of my marriage is the last, not the first.

Everybody focuses on the first day of marriage. There are bridal shows. There are bridal magazines. A woman will not eat for two months so she looks good in a wedding dress. A man will shave, floss and wear a tux for that day. Ladies, make sure you take good pictures because he won’t look that good ever again. The first day of marriage is fun. It is easy. We put all the attention on the first day. The first day is not the most important day. The most important day of

marriage is the last day. In your marital vows you promise to love one another for better or for worse until death do you part. The last day is most important because it means you kept your word.

To make it to that last day you need lots of forgiveness. You need lots of compromise. You need a lot of humility. You need to literally die to self.

Abraham and Sarah did not have an easy marriage. It was hard to make it to the last day. He had a real problem and in public kept acting like he wasn't a married, and he took off his wedding ring. Ladies, how would you feel about a husband that claimed to be single in public and wouldn't acknowledge you as his woman? Remember you cannot murder him. Twice Abraham gave Sarah away. In essence, he divorced her twice only to have God supernaturally come to the rescue and save their marriage. They didn't have an easy marriage. It was hard getting to that last day. Then, at Sarah's prompting, Abraham slept with a girlfriend. After Abraham had an affair with the younger woman, Abraham's girlfriend and her child ended up living in the same home as Abraham and his wife. Talk about hillbilly! You thought your marriage was tough! Imagine Abraham and Sarah living with Abraham's girlfriend!

In spite of all this marital trash, they forgave each other and made it work all the way to the end. We don't know much about the beginning of their marriage. The middle of their marriage was filled with crisis. The end of their marriage — the last 37 years — was apparently smooth sailing. This is a great reminder for those going through a tough spot in your marriage today; just like Abraham and Sarah there is hope for recovery and better days. The most

important day of your marriage is the last day, not the first day. It is the hardest day because you lose someone you love but it is the best day because it means you kept your promise to the end.

When I do premarital counseling, I get most couples very frustrated. I tell couples that a marriage has almost nothing to do with love. It has nothing to do with that warm fuzzy feeling. Marriage is a raw mature commitment to sacrifice yourself, your desires, your money, your time, your entire life to serve someone else that you think is just like you, but wait a few years. You will learn the person you married is nothing like you.

The Bible says marriage is a living picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. That means giving up your life up for someone else, just like Jesus gave himself up for you and me. It means that person may gain weight. That person may transform from a stud to portly. He or she may go from an amazing beauty to homely. You love him or her the same. You love your spouse the same because love is a mature choice. It is not a feeling.

It means the person you marry may become sick and you have to give up all your dreams as you take all your time and all your money to care for him or her. Your spouse may not add to your life. He or she may consume your life. It means that while you may feel in love now there will be times in your marriage when you have no feelings of love for your spouse but out of obedience to God's Word and your promise you love him or her with the same commitment today as you did on the first day. It is the only way you can make it to the last day, which

is the most important day for you, God and everyone else following in your footsteps.

If you are going to make it to the last day of marriage you need to choose to sacrifice your entire life for someone, even if that person becomes moody and depressed. It means you choose to treat him or her with love, not anger and hatred, just like Christ sacrificed his entire life for us in love we don't deserve. The last day is more important than the first day. It is hard to get there. It wasn't easy for Abraham and Sarah. It may not be easy for you, but the last day is the one you are shooting for.

3. Funerals are a great opportunity to show our trust in God's promises.

Just as the birth and near sacrifice of Isaac were opportunities for Abraham to trust God's word, the death of Sarah was also an opportunity for Abraham to show his trust in God's word. In this culture, when you died, you were typically brought back to the family tomb in the town you grew up in. For Abraham, that would have been in Ur, in Babylon. God promised to give him the Promised Land. Abraham was going to trust God's word and not go back. The problem was, at this time, God hadn't yet kept his word. Abraham didn't have any of the land. Even though God had not kept his word in Sarah's lifetime, Abraham believed God would keep his word in the future even after their deaths. Even if Sarah and Abraham did not own the land in their lifetimes, they believed their descendants would. God will keep his promises, against all odds. Even beyond death.

God promised Abraham and Sarah a son. It took God 25 years to keep his promise. He kept his word against incredible odds, after Sarah was in

menopause. God was a promise keeper. God promised them this land and he would keep his promise, against all odds, even in the face of death.

...for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.
Genesis 13:15 (ESV)

Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.
Genesis 13:17 (ESV)

And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.
Genesis 17:8 (ESV)

Abraham believed that even if he didn't have this land while he was living, God would eventually keep his promise and give it to his descendants after his death.

The same is true for us. Many of God's promises to us are for after our lifetimes not in our lifetimes.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (ESV)

God promises that at a funeral, we don't grieve without hope. God promises that, for the Christian, death is better than life.

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Philippians 1:23 (ESV)

God promises death is better than life. Do we believe he will keep his promises in our deaths?

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. Revelation 21:4 (ESV)

God promises there will be no more crying in the new creation. God will keep that promise in the future, not now. Will you live today believing God's promises will all come true after your life not just in your life?

4. The funeral is a great way to show your love, not your cheapness.

And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, "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." 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 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." 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, "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." Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. 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 four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." 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. 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 to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. Genesis 23:3–18 (ESV)

If Abraham was going to bury his wife in the Promised Land, he had a problem. He didn't own any land. Land was not an easy thing to acquire in the ancient world. Land usually passed from fathers to sons. It stayed inside a family, like farmland in Iowa. The only way to get some is to marry into the family. For Abraham, marrying pagans was not an option. He needed to see if he could purchase land for a tomb.

He told the Hittites he was looking for a burial site for his wife. Notice the Hittites were quite happy to offer him one. They told him he could bury his wife in any of *their* tombs. Here was the problem. They were all pagans. What would it say to your grandchildren if you were buried in an all-Buddhist cemetery? What would it say to your great-grandchildren who won't know you personally if you were buried in an all-Muslim cemetery? It wouldn't be much of a message to future generations.

So Abraham entered into negotiations to buy his first official piece of property in the Promised Land as a grave site. He asked to buy only the cave at Macpelah from Ephron. He offered to buy it for full price.

Ephron offered to give Abraham not just the cave but the field that went with the cave. Why didn't Abraham take it for free? Here is where some cultural insight will help. Ephron was not giving him the field. They were doing what is called middle-eastern bartering.

When I was a teenager, I went on a number of mission trips. In one of my trips to South America I bought this turtle shell from a street vendor. This was obviously before 9/11 or I couldn't have gotten it on the plane to take home. I saw it with the vendor and I asked him how much he wanted. I don't remember the price but I do remember in my mission training everyone telling me that I wasn't supposed to pay that price. We were supposed to barter. I came back with a lower price. He came back with a higher price. We went back and forth for a while. Eventually, I



ended up with this nasty looking turtle shell. I bought it home and put it over the headboard of my bed to completely freak my parents out because I thought I was cool.

Bartering is a game. It is a way to see who is the better businessman. It is a way to give you a story to tell your friends about what a good deal you were able to make. This is what was supposed to happen with Abraham and Ephron.

Notice that Ephron is a tough business man. He wouldn't just sell the cave to Abraham but he wanted to throw in the field with it to drive up the price.

Abraham said to Ephron, "What is the price?" Ephron said, "The price was 400 shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me?" What is 400 shekels of silver? It is a lot of money. When David bought the land that the temple in 2 Samuel 24:24 he only paid 50 shekels of silver. Four hundred shekels of silver was an exorbitant price. It was supposed to only be the starting price. The Hittites were ready to see Abraham and Ephron go at it for negotiations. Everybody was ready to grab a chair and pull out the popcorn so they could see which one was the better businessman.

What did Abraham do? He paid the full unnegotiated price for the land.

All the men of the city were in awe that Abraham paid the exorbitant price. The question is, "Why did Abraham pay it?" Here are my thoughts. He didn't want the Hittites to remember his wife's funeral for his bartering and business skills but for his love.

When it comes to a funeral, don't try to go cheap. It is disrespectful to the one you love. Make it a proper funeral. Incidentally, that doesn't mean you

spend money you don't have. Even though Abraham spent a lot of money, he had the money.

Here is a point of application. When your spouse dies, and he or she will die, are you prepared to give him or her a proper funeral? Are you prepared to give your spouse a funeral that is not on the cheap side but it sends the message, "Look how much he loved her or how much she loved him." For some of us, the simple application point to the sermon is we need to go buy some life insurance so we can have a decent funeral if the one we love dies unexpectedly.

5. Consider the different messages of burial and cremation.

Abraham acquires this cave and the field with it as a burial spot. The way things usually worked is they laid a body in the cave. A year later, after the body decomposed, they gathered the bones and put them into a box called an ossuary. The tomb would then be reused and the bones of the ancestors would be kept together. Abraham was eventually buried in this cave. So was Isaac, Rebekah, Leah and Jacob and maybe many others.

While I am on this, I want you to notice that they were buried, not cremated. While God can just as easily resurrect a cremated body as a buried body, there is some interesting history to burial instead of cremation. In the Bible, bodies were almost always buried, not burned. When bodies are burned in the Bible, that is usually not a good thing.

Cremation is cheaper. Cremation was the normal practice for the Greeks and Romans. Christians and Jews in the early church made a conscious decision to bury their dead in a culture that typically burned the dead. Why did they make a conscious departure from culture?

Christian's in the early church buried their dead as a way of telling the world they slept in the dust of the earth until the resurrection. The self-same body would rise from the grave. The body was planted in the earth, like a seed, awaiting the day of Christ's return. Burial was a visual statement of someone's body waiting for the resurrection.

Cremation burns a body to ashes and erases its memory from the earth. In burial, the Christians kept a memory of that body and that person on the earth. When early Christians in Rome ran out of room horizontally in the graveyard, they dug vertically and created the catacombs. Christian grave sites were called *coemeteria*, which means sleeping places in Greek. That Greek word came over into English so we call the place where we bury the dead a cemetery, the sleeping place of those who are waiting for the resurrection.

I know some of you don't like burial because it costs more than cremation. Some of you do not like it because it takes up more land. The early church had the same problem. Burial was more costly. Burial took up more land. Why did they choose it? They did it out of respect to the body and witness to the resurrection. While cremation pictured the fires of hell, burial pictured sleeping in the dust of the earth waiting the day of Christ's return.

Is burial a biblical mandate over cremation? No. This is not a matter of right or wrong, it is a matter of picturing a body waiting for the resurrection instead of picturing the fires of hell and erasing a body's existence.

It is good for us to understand the thinking of the early church on this matter. Even in America it wasn't until 1876 that the first cremation took place in

our country. At that funeral, it was intentionally anti-Christian. They read Hindu Scriptures and Charles Darwin instead of the Bible. Even as recent as 1962 only 5 percent of Americans were cremated. Today, cremation is much more popular. I fear Christians have lost the biblical and historical roots on why bodies were buried and not burned. This is not a matter of right and wrong. It is a matter of picturing our hope for the future.

There is another reason to prefer burial over burning.

6. Leave a grave that will fuel the faith for those who come after you.

Abraham bought this field trusting in God's promise that some day his descendants would come back and inherit this land. He buried Sarah trusting God would give this land to his descendants in the future. Abraham died and was buried in this tomb trusting in that same promise. Isaac, Jacob and others died and were buried in this tomb all never having seen God keep his promise to give the Promised Land to Abraham's descendants. This tomb was a united witness to all their children, grandchildren and everyone that came after them that Abraham and all the patriarchs believed God would keep his promise and give this land to them in the future. One day, maybe in their generation, God would give them this land. This grave was a reminder.

Generations later, when Moses prepared to conquer the Promised Land, he sent 12 spies into the land to scout it out. Numbers 13:21-22 tells us one of the places the spies visited was Hebron, the burial place of Abraham, Sarah and the patriarchs. When the spies gave a report on the land 10 of the spies could only see the giants of the land, the obstacles and impossibilities. Numbers 14 says Caleb and Joshua were different. They believed the land could be

conquered in spite of incredible opposition. They were men of faith. Where did they find part of this faith? I think part of it came from visiting the graveyard of their ancestors. Just as God was faithful to Abraham and Sarah in their day and gave them Isaac in spite of incredible odds, God would keep his promise in Caleb and Joshua's day and give them the Promised Land in spite of incredible odds. The very presence of the grave in that land was a witness to Caleb and Joshua that Abraham believed God would keep his promise to them.

The faith of Caleb and Joshua was encouraged by visiting the graveyard of the patriarchs.

Some of you know, I am the sixth generation of Trucksesses in the United States. My children are the seventh generation. We come from Pennsylvania in the Philadelphia area. My great-great-great-grandfather was a founding member of Lower Providence Presbyterian church. I know this because his gravestone is one of the first in the cemetery. His gravestone tells me he led the church for 45 years of his life. Jesus was a huge part of his life. I know that from his grave. Another one of my ancestor's gravestones in that church cemetery tells me he led worship in that church for 45 years. Jesus was a huge part of his life too.



When I saw their gravestones, as I was preparing to be a pastor, my faith was incredibly encouraged by the legacy for Christ that was left behind at their graves.

The thought struck me. What will my grave say to my descendants? How will my grave encourage their faith? The only ones that will look for our graves will be our descendants. If you want a message left of your gravestone to encourage your great-great-great-grandchildren to follow Jesus, what would it be?

This week, as you go to lunch, talk with your family. What would you want on your gravestone to encourage your descendants to follow Jesus just as the grave of the patriarchs encouraged Caleb and Joshua.



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