

“WHEN YOU LOSE SOMEONE YOU LOVE”
(Genesis 23:1-20)

When I was going through college and seminary, I worked a variety of jobs to pay the bills, and one of the more interesting jobs I had was working for a telemarketing company – you know, the annoying people who call you and try to sell you something over the phone. I was not one of those people, but I was hired to kind of babysit the telemarketers in the evening and make sure they were doing their job and not slacking off. While they were working, I sat at a desk and studied.

The telemarketers sold something I had never heard of – they sold pre-arranged funeral plans. All evening long I could hear them repeat their opening line... “Hello, I’m from Jerome-Crane Funeral Home, and was wondering if you have ever considered a pre-arranged funeral plan.” If the person on the other end of the line didn’t hang up on them, they would then go on to describe the cost benefits and ease of mind that comes from working out all your funeral arrangements ahead of time.

I don’t know what people on the other end of the line thought, but I thought that the last thing I’d want to talk about to a stranger over the phone about is my funeral. Death is a subject most people don’t want to talk about, much less think about. One writer said, “Death is a very dull, dreary affair, and my advice to you is to have nothing whatsoever to do with it.” But try as we may, death is a subject we can’t avoid because one day it’s going to happen to us and to everyone we love.

Last year in the space of a few months, Sharla and I received two phone calls of tragic family deaths. The first was early in the morning when Sharla’s sister called to say that her 36-year-old son was just found dead in the bottom of an empty swimming pool. Apparently, he had tripped and landed on his head which killed him instantly. Josh was a great guy – a strong Christian and father of three young children – and just like that he was gone.

A few months later I was here in my office and received a call from my brother’s son. I said, “Hey John, how are you?” He paused and said, “My mom just called me and said that my dad had a massive heart attack.” In that split second, I thought, “He must be in the hospital and he’ll be okay.” But John completed his sentence by saying, “and he died.” What do you say? He was 66 years old, energetic, and healthy – and he was suddenly gone. Whether it’s the death of a brother or sister, a child, or a spouse – the death of a loved one is jolting and traumatic event that every one of us will eventually face.

This morning as we continue our study of the life of Abraham, in chapter 23 we see Abraham face the death of his wife of over sixty years. He and Sarah shared a lifetime of memories – happy times and sad times, ups and downs, highs and lows – they shared the experience of leaving everything behind them to follow God to a new land – they shared the heartache of waiting to have a child and the joy of holding Isaac in their arms – they had been through it all – and now she is gone from his life.

How Abraham deals with his grief and loss is instructive for how we as believers handle the death of a loved one. Very simply, he does two things: First, **he embraces grief** – he doesn’t deny it or avoid it, but allows time and space to mourn. And second, **he exhibits faith** – most of chapter 23 deals with Abraham’s burial arrangements for Sarah, and in doing so he makes a loud statement as to what he believes about his future.

In verses 1-2 we see Abraham embrace his grief... “Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. 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.”

Sarah, interestingly, is the only woman in the Bible whose age is given. I've heard that you're never supposed to ask a woman her age, but here we know Sarah was 127 at the time of her death – which is way past our life expectancy of 77 years, according to the latest statistics. In the time period right before and after the flood, lifespans were longer, and Sarah lived a good, long life.

She dies in Hebron, where Abraham years earlier had built an altar and where he lived after separating from Lot. Abraham spent most of his time in this southern region of the Promised Land between Beersheba and Hebron. It was as close to what could be called home as you can get.

After Sarah dies, Abraham does what we would expect him to do – he mourns and weeps over her. He grieves. Death is commonly referred to as “natural” and “normal” – but it's not. God created us to live forever – but death is an enemy that came through man's choice to rebel against God, and death robs us of the life God intended us to live. It's a brutal reminder of the consequences of sin, so we grieve the pain and separation it brings.

Two words are used to describe Abraham's grief. The first is *mourning*. In Jewish culture a period of time was set aside to formally mourn and grieve, and this is the first time we see the ritual of mourning in the Bible. Later in Genesis a seven-day period of mourning was set aside for Jacob, and when Moses died a thirty-day period of mourning was held.

During times of mourning Jews would give full expression of their emotions – they would beat their breasts, tear their garments, sometimes they would sit in ashes – all symbolic of desolation and ruin. It was customary for musicians to play sad songs and dirges. All of this seems very foreign to our rather composed way of dealing with death. Instead of calling it a funeral service, we prefer to call it a celebration of life. In planning funeral services, it is not uncommon for people to tell me that they want the service to be upbeat and joyful – but I have yet to be able to pull that off. No matter how much we want to avoid the feelings that accompany death, they come anyway and that is normal and healthy.

The second word used to describe Abraham's grief is *weeping*. Weeping is the natural human response to loss. F.B. Meyer wrote, “Tears are God's relief mechanism – they discharge the insupportable agony of the heart, as an overflow lessens the pressure of the flood against the dam.” Some folks cry more than others, some cry less, but we all cry because we live in a fallen, broken world that awaits restoration. One day, the book of Revelation says, there will be no more mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

In the meantime, Psalm 56:8 says that God keeps our tears in a bottle. God has a little bottle for each one of us, and when we weep tears of pain, it's as if God takes those tears, puts them in His bottle and He treasures them and He cherishes those tears. I have read that during the Civil War, that wives and mothers who were back home would take little bottles called “tear vials” and they would literally take and capture the tears that they wept for their sons and husbands who were fighting in the battle. They would seal up these little tear vials and send them to the soldiers. Civil War buffs still collect these vials. The soldiers would put them in their pockets, and they would cherish and value the tears that this loved one had cried for them.

According to Psalm 56:8, God has a tear vial in heaven for all of us. Some of you may have some pretty big vials! All those tears you have shed have not been wasted or lost. We have a God who understands our tears. But in heaven there will be no more need for God's tear vial – He will personally wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Everyone handles grief differently, and the temptation is to either rush quickly through grief and get on with life, or to go the other extreme and let grief swallow you up. Queen Victoria of England lost her husband, Albert, when she was forty-two. Instead of dealing with her grief she refused to let him go. For years she slept with his nightshirt in her arms. She made his room a “sacred room” to be kept exactly as it had been when he was alive. Every day for the rest of her long life, she had the linens changed, his clothes laid out fresh, and water prepared for his shaving. On every bed on which Queen Victoria slept, she attached a photograph of Albert as he lay dead.

One thing I try to remember when mourning the loss of a loved one is what they would want me to do with the rest of my life. They would expect me to grieve their loss, but they would want me to be happy, to slowly resume life and live in a way that honors them. In time Abraham would do just that – he would remarry and have more children.

The other extreme is to bypass grieve and move on. I think of a scene in the western movie *Lonesome Dove* where after one of the cowboys on the cattle drive dies, the other cow hands are standing over the grave weeping, and the trail boss, played by Tommy Lee Jones, says, “The best thing you can do with death is ride off from it.” That tends to be the way many people deal with death – just get back in the saddle and ride on.

Even in church we sometimes convey this attitude when we try to comfort someone. Well-meaning Christians will say, “Aren’t you glad you know where your loved one is... He or she is in a much better place, and their suffering is over.” Or they might say, “Time will heal... life will get easier... you can always have another child... you can always get married again.” All these things are true, but the implication is that you should move on and little room is left for mourning.

While we shouldn’t be like Queen Victoria and let grief consume us, it is important to let the initial stage of grief run its course – which lasts months, if not a couple of years. While the Bible speaks of joy, it also speaks of lament – in the book of Psalms, 60 of them are psalms of lament, which is one of the reasons the book is so beloved by Christians – they speak to real life – they don’t sugar-coat it or deny the deep pain of life’s losses. Jeremiah wrote an entire Old Testament book entitled Lamentations. Jesus grieved the loss of his friend Lazarus. The shortest verse in the Bible – my favorite verse to memorize as a kid – is John 11:35... “Jesus wept.” Those two words speak volumes about the importance of grieving loss.

When we don’t grieve it leads to things like addiction, where you try to soothe the pain by watching TV all day or keeping super busy or overeating or drinking and taking pills – anything to help them avoid the pain. It can lead to withdrawing from people and remaining isolated. It can lead to pent up anger suddenly exploding when you least expect it. It can lead to depression. That’s why grieving is important – and as Ecclesiastes says, “There’s a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Embrace the grieving process, while at the same time honor those who have died by resuming life and living fully.

As we get back to our story, we see that Abraham not only embraces grief as he mourns and weeps for Sarah, but he also exhibits faith in God as he looks to the future. This is reflected in the rest of the chapter that is taken up by a lengthy negotiation for a burial site for Sarah. Let’s walk through what happens and then talk about what it means.

Verses 3-4 say, “Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, ‘I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.’” It’s amazing how much there is to do when your loved one dies – and one of those is making funeral and burial arrangement. This is where it probably pays off to listen to the telemarketer trying to sell you a prearranged plan... but Abraham needs to find a place to bury his wife.

Notice that Abraham refers to himself as a “foreigner and stranger.” Although Abraham has lived in the land of Canaan for over sixty years, he’s still viewed as an outsider. Although God promised the land to Abraham and his descendants, Abraham has yet to possess the land. Abraham lived his whole life in tents – he was a pilgrim – a Bedouin – and the only permanent thing he did was plant a tamarisk tree in Beersheba. He owned no land, and so when Sarah dies, he has no place to bury her.

In Abraham’s day where you buried someone was very important, and it was customary to bury them in your native land, which for Abraham meant going several hundred miles east back to Mesopotamia. But that was no longer Abraham’s home – his home was the land God promised him – the land he was standing on.

Abraham had his eye on a certain piece of property with a cave in which to bury Sarah, and he goes to the gates of the city where business transactions took place, and asks the leaders of the city to sell him a piece of property. In verses 5-6 we read... “The Hittites replied to Abraham, ‘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.’” Don’t miss the fact that Abraham has made an impression on the people of the land – in this case the Hittites who lived in Hebron. This is exactly what God wanted – for Abraham to live a life of faith before the unbelieving nations so that they would see a difference and be drawn to the one true God.

The Hittites say, “You are a great man – we respect you – if you need a place to bury your wife, just take it – it’s yours.” How nice of them, you say. But Bible scholars who had dug deeply into the customs of the day say that this graciousness is actually the beginning of the ancient bargaining process. It’s similar to buying a used car – you’ve all been there – you go to a lot and the salesman smiles, tells you how cute your kids are, and says, “What can I do to get you into a car today?” That’s the idea here. The Hittites are beginning the bargaining process.

Abraham returns the gesture of kindness... Verses 7-8... “Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. 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 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.’”

Abraham says, “I appreciate your kindness to give a place to bury my wife, but I want to own the land – I specifically want to buy the cave of Machpelah which belongs to Ephron and I will pay full price.” Material things did not matter that much to Abraham – of far more value was securing a piece of the Promised Land in which to bury his wife. He doesn’t want to be given the land for free because that implied it was a temporary arrangement that could later be rescinded after he died. He wants something permanent – he wants to be firmly rooted in the land. He wants to pay the full price.

The bargaining continues in verses 10-11... “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. ‘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.’” Ephron not only offers the cave Abraham wants to bury Sarah, but the field that surrounds it. It’s a bargaining ploy – Ephron knows how badly Abraham wants the land, Ephron hopes to make additional money by throwing in additional land.

Verses 12-15... “Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land 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.’ Ephron answered Abraham, ‘Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.’”

I smile as I read this because it reminds me of the time I was in the old city of Jerusalem shopping for souvenirs, and in one little store I had my eye on a chess board made of olive wood. The shop keeper noticed my interest and started chatting it up with me. He asked me where I was from and said, “Oregon... yes, yes... so and so I know lived there once.” He said, “For you I will sell this chess board and pieces for \$125.” It was probably worth about \$10 or \$15 and I offered \$20. He said, “No, no... this is made of such and such olive wood and the lowest possible price I can go is \$100.” I said, “Thank you, but I can’t afford that.” I started to leave and he followed me out the door. “Because I like you,” he said, “I will let you have it for \$75.” I kept walking and he followed me down the street. He kept lowering the price until I think I paid \$25 for it.

Ephron begins bargaining by asking four hundred shekels of silver, which in the currency of the day was an exorbitant price. We know this because years later David would pay 50 shekels to buy the piece of land upon which the temple would be built, which today is the most prime piece of real estate in the world. Ephron is asking eight times as much for a small parcel of land.

Instead of walking out the door like I did, Abraham says, “Deal.” Verse 16 says, “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.” Abraham goes above and beyond what the land is worth to make sure that he owns it – that he has a legal stake in the land that would belong to his family for generations to come.

Verses 17-20... “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 to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. 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. So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.”

4000 years later the cave of Machpelah is considered by the Jews to be one of the holiest sites in Israel, and you can still visit the site today. But as with most sacred sites in the Holy Land, there is a building built over the site – in this case a Muslim mosque.

By this long negotiation for a burial site, Abraham is making a strong declaration of faith. When he and Sarah first left their home in the east to follow God’s call, God promised him three things: He promised him a land to call his own, He promised to make from him a great nation with numerous descendants, and He promised to use him as a conduit of God’s blessing to the whole world.

Yet by the time Sarah dies – some sixty years later – none of these promises were fulfilled except the birth of Isaac. He did not live to see a great nation of descendants, he did not live to see how his people would bless the world through the coming of Christ, and he did not possess the land that God promised him.

But in buying Sarah's burial plot, Abraham is saying, "This is my home. My home is no longer back east, this is my country. This land is my inheritance." Although it was just a small piece of land, it's a statement of faith that that one day the whole land would be his. Abraham believed that God would do far more in the future than He did in his life.

Abraham would live another 38 years without possessing the land, and when he died, he was buried alongside Sarah at the cave of Machpelah. Later Isaac and Rebekah would be buried here, as would Jacob and Leah. Before Joseph died, he gave instructions that his bones not be left in Egypt, but be taken to Machpelah and be buried with his forefathers. All this speaks of faith – faith that God will one day fulfill all His promises to His people, though it may take hundreds of years to bring it to pass.

What does this mean to us? As sons of Abraham through faith in Christ, God has also made promises to us. He promises that He will come again – He promises to reward us for living a faithful life – He promises to free us from sin and misery and suffering – He promises that we will live forever in a new, glorious world with no more death or mourning or crying or pain – He promises us a new body – and He promises us eternal life.

A big part of the Christian life is living each day with the hopeful anticipation that there is far more to come. Although we possess God's peace and joy and blessing in this life, it's just a foretaste of the day when we will fully possess all that God has promised us. This blessed hope enables us to endure to endure our grief and loss – as the Apostle Paul says, "We grieve, not as those who have no hope."

The story is told of a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and given three months to live. As she was getting her things in order, she met with her pastor to discuss her funeral and what songs she wanted, as well as what scriptures she wanted read, and then she said, "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor didn't quite know who to respond... "You want a fork in your right hand?"

The woman said, "After family dinners my grandmother always used to say, "Keep your fork because the best part of the meal is coming" – and that meant dessert. "When people see me in the casket with a fork in my hand, I want them to wonder what it means, and I want you to tell them to keep their fork because the best is yet to come."