

A Time to Die 7-15-07

Genesis 23

Please read Genesis 23. Sarah went the way of all mankind. After 127 years of living, 37 of those with her miracle son, her soul left her tired body. She is one of the very few women in the Bible whose age is mentioned. I suppose, ladies, that that gives you Biblical precedent for not telling your age. (a joke)

Man is destined to die once. (Hebrews 9:27) You and I will die. There is no getting around it, unless the Lord returns first. We saw the repeated expression in the genealogy of Genesis 5, "and then he died". The wisest man to ever live told us that there is a time to die. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2) God has numbered our days. (Psalm 39:4) Avoiding the thought does not change the fact that we are mortal. Death has a way of causing the living to consider the brevity of life. It teaches us to consider our ways. (Psalm 90:12)

Sarah had lived a full life. Though her testimony had not always been perfect, she did some things that we are admonished to consider. First, let's consider what she did wrong. She twice went along with her husband's request to lie about their relationship. Some think that this was merely submission to Abram, yet surely she knew her husband's God and that it was unacceptable to lie to Him. She had encouraged Abraham to take matters into his own hands and marry her servant Hagar. Then she overreacted to Hagar's pride and abused her. (Genesis 16:6) She laughed at God in disbelief that He could bring about what He had declared. (Genesis 18:15) Then when confronted about her laughter, she lied.

If someone were to go over the highlights of our sins the list would surely be much longer. To have your sins publicly listed is a frightening thought, isn't it? Surely in Sarah's case, the record is incomplete. I'm not trying to compare our lives to see who is better, but to point out that the Scripture is true when it declares all have sinned. (Romans 3:23) One sin is enough to condemn us to hell, for every sin is rebellion against all the goodness of God. It is declaring that you are god and will do as you please in spite of the fact that all you have and are is a gift from your Creator. Sin is proof that the heart is evil. Sarah sinned. We sin. Any mercy offered to us is a gracious gift.

Sarah also expressed faith. She left Ur with Abraham not knowing where they were going. She sent Hagar and Ishmael away, which at first seemed a continuation of her animosity towards Hagar but later was shown to be God's will. (Genesis 21:12) She miraculously gave birth to the child of promise when she was 90-years-old. For 37 years she mothered him in her old age. And what is her testimony in the New Testament? As we have seen before, she is symbolic of the church. ²⁴ *These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.* ²⁵ *Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children.* ²⁶ *But the Jerusalem that is*

Commented [notes1]: 27 Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,

Commented [notes2]: 1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:
2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,

Commented [notes3]: 4 "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life.

Commented [notes4]: 12 Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Commented [notes5]: 6 "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

Commented [notes6]: 15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Commented [notes7]: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Commented [notes8]: 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

above is free, and she is our mother. Galatians 4:24-26 (NIV) Sarah is the mother of the people of faith. She represents the new covenant of faith in what Jesus did for us.

Peter used her as an example. ⁵ *For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.* 1 Peter 3:5-6 (NIV) She is a picture of the perfect wife, submitting to her husband. Now when I read her story in Genesis, I wouldn't call her that, but the Lord showed Peter how He sees her, through the eyes of redemptive grace. It is the same thing we have seen in the life of Abraham. We are all people who fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) There is none righteous. (Romans 3:10) But God enables us to have believing faith, and credits that belief as righteousness. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

If you have seen that you are a sinner, unable to be righteous on your own, in desperate need of God's enabling grace, and truly repented of your rebellious heart and asked God for mercy, you, too, will have a righteous record in God's eyes. (2Corinthians 5:21) It will never be because of what you have done, but because of what Jesus did for you. (Titus 3:5) The record of all the sinful details will be wiped clean and only the work of Jesus' righteousness through you will be remembered. (Romans 5:17) Praise God? That is a reason to praise God! There is a new song on the radio in which the lyrics ask for reassurance of how far the east is from the west, for that is how the Scripture says our sins have been removed from us. (Psalm 103:12) The answer in the song is as far as one nail scarred hand to the other.

Abraham went to mourn and weep over her. Mourning involved an outward expression of grief, usually the beating of the chest. Weeping was shedding tears, and was more of an inward reaction to the pain of the moment. We often celebrate the death of a Christian because we know where they have gone. At the same time, we weep because we will not have their fellowship. Until we go to them, our interaction of love has ceased. (2Samuel 12:23) There is nothing wrong with mourning. It is healthy to mourn and even encouraged in Scripture. ² *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.* Ecclesiastes 7:2 (NIV) Mourning causes us to take to heart our interactions with one another.

The day I was working on this sermon I went shopping. A clerk, who looked to be in her 60s, was admiring our grandson. She admonished us to love him all we could every day and then told us of the loss of her son. She told us he died in his 30s from cancer.

When a loved one dies, there are two kinds of grief. One is over separation. The other is for our failure to express our love or meet needs in their life. Whether we die young or live a long life, our time on earth is still brief. Our chance to express love is limited. Death reminds us to make the most of everyday. Death reminds us that bitterness and grudges are senseless. It reminds us to love without holding back, even if it is painful at times.

Commented [notes9]: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Commented [notes10]: 10 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one;

Commented [notes11]: 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Commented [notes12]: 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Commented [notes13]: 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

Commented [notes14]: 17 For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Commented [notes15]: 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Commented [notes16]: 23 But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

At the same time, we must go on with our life. Abraham wanted to quickly bury his beloved Sarah out of his sight. We must go on with the duties and callings that God has for us. Many people find it difficult to let go, and that is understandable. However, God has you here. That means He has more for you in this life. The best way to break free from the chains of depression after the loss of a loved one is to get busy with the things God has called you to do, especially ministering to the needy. That does not mean to forget your departed loved one, but not to wallow in self-pity that life isn't according to your plan. You will go to them one day; until then, get busy with what God has called you to do. Think of your departed loved one in heaven cheering you on as you run the race of faith. (Hebrews 12:1)

Commented [notes17]: 1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Abraham went to the Hittites and said, 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."* Genesis 23:4 (NIV) The author of Hebrews tells us that this was more than just a declaration of his present condition. He writes that this was a statement of conviction that this world is not our home. It declares that Abraham is looking for a better country, a heavenly one. He may have had wealth, authority, and respect, but he wanted something much greater. He wanted to live forever in the presence of God. The death of his beloved wife made the statement even clearer, the longing even greater. We know that we are not here forever. This world is filled with death and decay. God has something better for us. (Romans 8:20,21)

Commented [notes18]: 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The author of Hebrews writes that because he had this longing, God was not ashamed to be called his God. (Hebrews 11:16) What is the converse of that? If you are satisfied with this world and seeking to be filled with all it has to offer then He is ashamed to be called your God. If you love His creation more than the Giver, it makes me wonder if you ever met Him. Can you say you really love Him? On what is your heart set today? Are you an alien on a journey or comfortably satisfied?

Commented [notes19]: 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

The second thing we can see in that verse is that Abraham believed the promise. Instead of taking her body back to Haran where the rest of the family was and where his father was buried, he wanted her body in the Promised Land. Throughout the Scriptures we read that someone died and "rested with their fathers". (1Kings 2:10) It means that they were buried beside their ancestors. It was the custom. But Abraham broke that custom in a big way. He believed that God would indeed give his descendents the land. Then he put his money where his belief was. We all do that. If it is in the world and its pleasure, that is where we invest. If it is in the things of God, then that is where we invest. It is the treasure principle. Jesus said that where you treasure is, that is where your heart is. (Matthew 6:21)

Commented [notes20]: 10 Then David rested with his fathers and was buried in the City of David.

Thus began a negotiation process that is still employed among Orientals. We saw a preview of the process when Abraham and Abimelech made a treaty and an agreement on ownership of a well. Here it is spelled out in more detail.

Commented [notes21]: 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

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."* Genesis 23:6 (NIV) The word "Sir" here is *Adon*, or lord. They are speaking with great respect. You are a mighty prince among us. The word "mighty" is the word *Elohim*.

Almost everywhere else we translate this as God. Translators think that the Hittites surely did not know the true God, so, they reason, the word must mean what the name represents, might or power. Perhaps they did know that Abraham believed in one true God referred to as Elohim. Yes, they called their gods elohim, but just maybe, Abraham's testimony and message had been heard, and in respect for his belief, they acknowledged that he was his God's prince. After the miracle birth, the defeat of the four kings, Abimelech's dream and the healing of his harem, they must have been impressed with the power of Abraham's God.

Like Sarah, Abraham had not always been a good testimony, at least the last 37 years he had been. He is so respected that they allow some of their precious land to belong to a foreigner. A person who lives by the Spirit of God will be respected for their integrity even if disliked for their message. One cannot deny the testimony of the messenger even if they refuse the message. Abraham's testimony was the message of God to those cultures just as ours should be to our own. Would your neighbors call you a prince of God? Well, maybe they wouldn't go that far, but would they call you a godly person, or a caring person of integrity? (Matthew 22:39)

Commented [notes22]: 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

The Hittites offered the choicest burial cave to Abraham without cost, or so it seems. Actually, the process always began like this. When someone took something without cost, there was no deed. The giver could at anytime change their mind. It was a nice way to begin a deal, but the offer was never accepted because the offer wasn't really completely sincere. It wasn't that they didn't respect him, but that this was the customary way to begin a transaction.

This passage contains the only record of Abraham bowing before ordinary men. He bowed before God and angels, but only this time did he bow before men. He needed a quick deal so that he could put Sarah in the tomb before her body began to decompose, so he acted with great respect and in keeping with the traditions of the land. He asked for the officials to intercede with the owner of the cave of Machpelah. Abraham offered to pay full price for the cave.

The owner of that cave was in the crowd that had gathered to witness the transaction. 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." In typical oriental fashion, he offered the cave to him without cost. But wait, he offers the cave and the field. This means that he wants the sale to include more than Abraham wanted to purchase. (Proverbs 20:14)

Commented [notes23]: 14 "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.

Abraham bowed again in humility and said he would buy the field. Note the switch from cave to field. Hear the cunning response of Ephron, 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." Well, it's worth this much but the price shouldn't come between us. This is clever oriental dealing. If you haggle now over the high price that has been asked, you are saying the land is more important than your relationship. It would imply the other person was insincere and you are a penny pincher. (Scholars differ over whether the price was exorbitant.)

Without haggling over the price, Abraham immediately agreed and weighed out the silver on the scales accepted by the merchants of the area. By making this transaction in the gate of the city with the citizens as witnesses, the title of the property would never be in doubt. Abraham did everything above board and according to local traditions to secure a foothold in the Promised Land. Now he possessed the well in Beersheba and this cave and field, two faith footprints in Canaan.

What can we take home from this passage? I hope that you heard the importance of your personal testimony, the way you live, and the words you speak. They do have an impact on those we come in contact with, sometimes more than you will ever know. If you act in love and integrity, people will be asking you about your faith, giving you an opportunity to share your story. (Philippians 2:14,15) That can be so much more inviting than asking them if they are going to heaven or hell. You earn the credibility to be heard by living a life of integrity and love.

We have seen that there is a time to die. We mourn our separation, but let us live in such a way that we do not mourn what we neglected in the past. Let us not wait to mend wounds and clear up any bitterness. Let us take the time to express our love. We must place the timing of our passing and of those we love in the hands of God who knows all and loves us. We will probably not understand why the time came when it did. We would never call any time the right time, but God can and does. We must simply trust in His wisdom.

We can learn from Abraham's faith to invest in the promises of God. He believed the land would belong to his heirs. In fact, he would be buried in that cave. His son and his wife, Jacob, and 400 years later Joseph would be buried there as well.

The point that I most value in this passage is that, in spite of all her mistakes, Sarah has an honored memory in the New Testament. It is that way with many of God's servants. That is a demonstration of the wonderful grace that God pours out on those who trust Him. It is the work of Jesus on the cross. (Isaiah 43:25)

Sarah never really deserved to have the promised son. To a far greater measure, you and I do not deserve to have the Promised Son, Jesus, living in us either. But the grace of God through the work of Jesus on the cross enabled us to have this treasure in earthen jars of clay. (2Corinthians 4:7) Our bodies are the home of the Holy Spirit. When the day comes that folks stand around our grave and recount our life, I trust that in earth and in heaven there will be mention of the work of God in and through us, and not a word of our many failings along the journey. That is the grace of God! Thank Jesus for it! And if God does that for us, shouldn't we be doing that for one another? Think about it. Remember that what you sow, you will also reap. (Hosea 10:12) We should always live in readiness to meet the Lord. Are you ready? Have you forgiven those who have offended you? Have you reached out to those in need around you? Are you letting the life of Christ flow through you?

Commented [notes24]: 14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe

Commented [notes25]: 25 "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

Commented [notes26]: 7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Commented [notes27]: 12 Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.