

The Witness of a Grave

The parashat covers Genesis Chapter 23, Verse 1 to Chapter 25, Verse 18. There are two major stories in the parashat. The first is about Sarah's death and burial. The second major story in this week's parashat is finding Isaac a bride. In some respects the two stories are about Abraham taking care of the really important things in life – looking after the family cemetery and making sure his son has a good life partner. Both stories have meaning, but we will focus our thoughts this morning on Sarah's death and burial.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, died. Abraham needed a place to bury Sarah. Abraham was offered a place to bury Sarah for free. He declined the offer. Instead he wanted to buy the burial site. But Abraham was a stranger in the land. As an alien living in the region, he had limited rights. In Israel, for example, aliens were not allowed to own their own land.¹

Genesis Chapter 23 tells the story. The negotiations were conducted in public. There is a reason why the negotiations might have taken place in public. As a stranger in the land, Abraham might have needed permission from the people to purchase land.²

Genesis 23:17- 20 (Moffatt Bible) Thus the field of Ephron at Makpelah (mak PEE lah), east of Mamre (MAM rih), the field, the cave in the field, and all the trees in the field and on its borders, were conveyed over to Abraham as his property, ¹⁸in the presence of the Hittites, before all the citizens of Ephron's town. ¹⁹After that, Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field at Makpelah (mak PEE lah), east of Mamre (MAM rih) (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; ²⁰the field and the cave in it were conveyed over to Abraham as his own property and burying-place by the Hittites.

Abraham did not pay a small sum for the cemetery plot. In fact, he paid a small fortune for the burial land. He paid 400 shekels of silver. Jeremiah paid 70 shekels to redeem the land of his ancestors. The amount paid for this piece of land might be considered to be "exorbitant."³ While the land might have been worth that much, there is a very significant difference between 70 shekels and 400 shekels.

Here we see Abraham having no real legal rights, but God has given him the land. Abraham does not use his spiritual inheritance and his spiritual right to the land as an excuse to take advantage of people.

We can learn a lot from Abraham's example. We are also aliens in the land. Like Abraham, a heavenly land has been promised to us, because we are in Messiah. We will reign with Messiah. But that gives us no right to take advantage of people now. In fact, as spiritual heirs we are responsible to treat non-believers with respect, fairness and honor.

Our rights in this land in this age are not important. What is important is that we have rights in the land in the age that Yeshua is establishing. Remembering that helps us put things in perspective, so we can interact with all in a loving manner, showing consideration for all we meet.

Probably the most important thing to remember about this chapter is that Sarah died in faith. The place where she was buried became the burial place for many people who died in faith of the promised land.⁴

¹Derek Kidner. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Genesis. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 145.

²Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible*. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 47-48.

³Berlin and Brettler, 48.

⁴Kidner, 145, says all who were buried there died in faith.

This piece of property was used as the burial ground for some of the patriarchs of old. Jacob was probably buried on the piece of land Abraham purchased. About the patriarchs, John Calvin is cited as saying, 'While they themselves were silent . . . the sepulcher cried aloud, that death formed no obstacle to their" possession of the land.'⁵

Years ago, there was a serious car accident in Washington. It was one of the worst car accidents Washington had that year. Twelve people died in the accident. Six of those people were Canadian college friends. They attended a small college. Four of the young people were from the same small church. There are four graves side-by-side in the cemetery. Each tomb stone contains a Bible passage of hope. From their graves, these young people testify to the hope of eternal life through the Messiah. The clear tones of the gospel ring out to those who walk past those graves.

The testimony of a godly life cannot be destroyed by death. Each person you touch as you go through life extends the influence of Messiah. That impact can easily out live you.

Death cannot keep us from the promised land, from the heavenly. Death did not keep the patriarchs of old from the promised land and it will not keep us from heaven. The tomb cannot keep us enslaved any more than it kept Lazarus enslaved when Yeshua commanded that he come forth. And the tomb cannot keep us imprisoned any more than it kept Yeshua imprisoned. This understanding can encourage us to act as responsible alien residents here and to live in such a way that our lives will testify, "Behold He Comes!"

⁵Kidner, 145.