



MACPELAH, A TOE-HOLD IN ETERNITY

SERIES: *THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS*

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 Genesis 23:1-20
 Sixteenth Message
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While on vacation this summer I got one of those dreaded messages to call home. Two of my close friends, a father and son, had been killed in a car accident. Such news is difficult to process overseas, especially on vacation. But by God's grace the funeral was postponed for a time and I was able to attend with several close friends. The memorial service took place in the beautiful chapel on Princeton Seminary campus. The beauty of the setting, the magnificent organ, a haunting oboe and a tearful choir, all contributed to make mourning flow easily. For a few moments we were caught up with that rare holy splendor that laced our sorrow. Even nature cooperated with a loud clap of thunder and pouring rain right at the benediction. It was as if everything in God's creation aided our tears and made worship accessible, except for one. I noticed in the front row a familiar face. She looked calm and poised, but unable to fully enter into the grief of the hour. She was the one carrying the mantle that day. My friend's sister had lost her father and brother. How could she fully mourn for them when she had to continue being a mother, make all the funeral arrangements in three states, and face all the financial and legal battles that will follow?

Many in our nation find themselves in the same situation today. From New York City workers at ground zero to governmental leaders in Washington, mourning has to be postponed. For the sake of the nation they must first manage the crisis, then they can mourn. I take great comfort knowing that they follow in the steps of our father Abraham.

Our text, from Genesis 23, records the death and burial of Sarah. Surprisingly, however, most of it is dedicated to the pained negotiations Abraham is forced to carry out to secure a burial plot for his wife. A narrative that we might expect to find replete with sorrow, tears and worship is dominated by legal language and shrewd economic negotiations. But when it is all done, Abraham leaves behind a legacy that teaches us much about how to die by faith.

Introduction: The Death of Sarah (Gen 23:1-2)

Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. (Gen 23:1-2, NASB)

The opening verse is all about life. The term "life of Sarah" frames the verse, celebrating the greatness of the matriarch. Bruce Waltke points out: "She is the only woman in the Bible whose life span is given, signifying her importance."¹ Sarah is the spiritual mother of all who walk by faith. She gave up all to follow the call of God to a new land. Though she began life barren, her faith grew to the point where she trusted God to work a miracle in her

womb, bringing life from the dead. In this way she became a type for all who would follow.

If verse 1 speaks of life, verse 2 speaks of death: Sarah dies in Kiriath-arba. This is the older name for Hebron. It means "city of four" which perhaps, as Robert Alter suggests, is "a reference to its being a federation (a possible meaning of 'Hebron') of four townlets."² The significance of Hebron is that it faces Mamre, a place that had a rich spiritual memory for Abraham. Mamre had been a special place of revelation and worship for this couple (13:18; 14:13; 18:1). Abraham had sanctified the site with the building of an altar. Sarah dies in a very holy place. Now, with over a century of memory and emotion, Abraham enters Sarah's tent to weep and mourn for her. How do you mourn for your life's mate after a hundred years of marriage? How do you give thanks to God for a wife who faithfully honored and followed you even when you put her life at risk?

There is much more we would like to know about this moment, but we are not permitted to linger. Abraham is at the threshold of another crisis. His bride is dead, and he does not have a suitable grave in which to lay her body. As a resident alien he owns no property and "ordinarily is not entitled to buy land."³ We can feel the tremendous tension of the moment. Abraham was promised the entire land of Canaan as a gift from God, but now at the end of Sarah's life he does not even possess an acre to call his own. What will the man of faith do?

I. First Round of Negotiations (Gen 23:3-6)

Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." (23:3-6)

Abraham is forced to curtail his mourning and enter into the most difficult legal and financial negotiations of his life. Such a scene seems all too familiar for many among us. Time and time again I have seen how at the hour of death a parent or spouse must set their emotions aside to make funeral arrangements. Some wisely try to make them ahead of time to eliminate some of the more painful decisions. But no matter how much we prepare we are never quite ready to face the financial and legal battles that death brings in its wake. Five times I have been an executor, but I always find the task overwhelming. Unlike Abraham, however, I have never had to secure an estate or carry out funeral arrangements in a foreign land, bereft of legal rights and financial advisors.

As an exile on the earth, Abraham is at the mercy of the sons of Heth⁴ for his needs. Appealing to their generosity, he makes it clear from the outset that he has very little negotiating power. Time is critical, so Abraham appeals to the goodwill of the community for a burial site for Sarah. His request is for real property that will serve as a permanent grave site for his “dead.” (Throughout the negotiations, Sarah is never referred to by her name, but as “his/my/your dead.” At the end of the text her personal name finally reappears, suggesting that it is only when the negotiations have been completed that Abraham feels free to continue his mourning.)

The sons of Heth respond with extreme deference and unbelievable generosity. Their opening address, “Hear us,” which runs throughout these negotiations (vv 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 16), places the proceedings in a legal setting, where everything is being recorded under due process of law. They address Abraham with dignity and respect, calling him (literally) “a prince of God.” This suggests that they were keenly aware of God’s hand upon him. Yet imagine the irony for Abraham, who has had to live with the tension that God’s prince spends his entire life as a “homeless one.” Such would be our Lord’s destiny as well (Matt 8:20).

As a community they give Abraham a blank check to pick from among the choicest of their graves, saying that no man will refuse him. Yet this public display of seeming generosity is tarnished by a subtle hint that they actually are reluctant to part with any real property. Abraham had asked for a burial site (“landed property”) and all they offer is “tomb.” Not a home but a condominium, where all that one legally owns is the air space. Abraham can bury his dead anywhere he likes, but real property is another matter. What will he do?

II. Second Round of Negotiations (Gen 23:7-11)

A. Abraham’s Request (23:7-9)

So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, “If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site.” (23:7-9)

Abraham rises and bows to demonstrate his humility and continued dependence on the generosity of the sons of Heth. Taking them up on their generous offer, he singles out the tomb of his choice, the cave of Machpelah, owned by Ephron, to bury his dead. Abraham then makes sure that what follows is done in a public and official manner. He pays careful attention to exact legal procedures, appealing to the community to act as his agent to subpoena Ephron, and to remain present as appropriate witnesses, just as today one would use a judge and county recorder.

Once the legal scene is set, Abraham, using his keen negotiating skills, places three bargaining chips on the table. First, he notes that this cave “is at the end of the field,” suggesting that its acquisition should pose no threat to Ephron’s business activities. Second, he announces that he is not interested in a grant. Rather, he is willing to pay full market value for the field, and refuses to negotiate for a

cheaper price. This will preclude any future possibility that the community will feel they had been taken advantage of and contest the site. And third, he reiterates his original request that this is to be an irrevocable sale of real property, not a grant to rent the “air space” of a tomb. Abraham trumps their feigned generosity, countering their reluctance to sell with an offer of cold cash.

B. Ephron’s “Generous” Offer (23:10-11)

Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, “No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.” (23:10-11)

As the legal negotiations continue, Ephron uses the occasion to place himself in the public eye as a model of generosity. He needs no community pressure to let go of his “cave,” and therefore rises to speak before the community acts. Surprisingly, he refuses any financial remuneration. He is willing to let the burial site go for free. In full view of the entire community, three times he says, “I give, I give, I give.” And that’s not all. So moved does he appear to be by Abraham’s plight, he not only offers him the cave, but throws in the entire field as well. Could there be any doubt about this man’s generosity?

But is Ephron really generous or is he caught in the throes of public pressure? Is his offer of the field really a gift or just a political maneuver to elicit an exorbitant offer from Abraham? One commentator argues: “The object of the offer and of the excessive politeness as a whole is to put the other party on the defensive...By offering more than was requested, he [the seller] would indirectly command a higher price.”⁵ Now that Ephron has countered Abraham’s request with an offer even more generous than he originally requested, Abraham enters into the third and final round of negotiations.

III. Third Round of Negotiations (Gen 23:12-16)

A. Abraham’s Counter-offer (23:12-13)

And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.” (23:12-13)

With a legitimate offer on the table, Abraham takes full advantage of the moment, countering with a little generosity of his own. He places himself at the absolute mercy of Ephron, and again offers him full price, not just for the tomb but for the field also. The final card having been played, Ephron must now choose to either close the deal or withdraw. His response reveals where these “sons of Heth” have stood all along.

B. Ephron’s Final Answer (23:14-15)

Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, “My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead.” (23:14-15)

What do we discern from Ephron’s words, generosity or greed? First, to inflate the value of the “gift,” Ephron

changes the word “field” (sadeh) to “land” (‘erets), “intimating, by way of a term that also means ‘country,’ that Abraham is free to imagine he is getting more than a field with a burial cave for his money.”⁶ Second, Ephron insists Abraham should think nothing of his generosity. But in his insistence that the gift should mean nothing between “equals,” he slips in the price, a mere four hundred shekels. “It is a strange donor who will put a price-tag on his gift; how much stranger to meet one who jacks up the figure in explaining why he gives it away.”⁷

What are a few hundred shekels between friends? To feel the full “weight” of that amount, we might reflect that a thousand years later, David paid Araunah the Jebusite fifty shekels for the site of the Jerusalem Temple, including cattle for sacrifice (2 Sam 24:24). What are a few shekels among equals? That which Ephron says is a mere “pittance is actually a king’s ransom” (Alter). The figure comes as a staggering blow to Abraham. He is in no position to negotiate, since he has already legally vowed to pay “full price.” So what appears to be “nothing” is in fact “everything,” for “this sum alone will make the difference between clinching and calling off the deal.”⁸

IV. The Deal Closed (Gen 23:16-18)

A. Cash on the Barrel (23:16)

And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed [shakal] out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. (23:16)

Amazingly, Abraham doesn’t flinch or protest. He simply empties his pockets of all his cash right then and there. The niceties are dispensed with. No more words are needed. The only sound heard is the sound of cold cash (shekels) weighed (shakal) on the scale. Ephron gets the full price, not a down payment, and in cold cash, commercial standard. We are left with a bad taste. This closing scene makes all the previous gestures of politeness and generosity sickening. Here is a community taking advantage of a man at his weakest moment, all the for the sake of profit.

B. The Deed of Sale (23:17-18)

So Ephron’s field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. (23:17-18)

After the cash is delivered, the title to the property is deeded over to Abraham. Notice how precise and legal is the description of the property, down to the number of trees. (Trees were considered “property improvements” in ancient Near Eastern contracts). The entire proceeding is carried out in full view of the community to show that Abraham’s claim on the land is irrevocable. Everyone’s signature is notarized. In the end, both parties get exactly what they want. Ephron gets his cash, and Abraham acquires “real property” to honor his wife. Now that the patriarch has successfully negotiated his way through the greedy financial markets of his day, he returns home to bury his wife.

Conclusion: The Burial of Sarah (Gen 23:19-20)

And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field, and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth. (23:19-20)

Once the meticulous negotiations are concluded, the narrator no longer refers to Abraham’s wife as “the dead”; henceforth he refers to her as Sarah. The sense of what is holy and personal returns to the text, and Abraham is free to resume his mourning. Sarah’s journey ends in Machpelah, the only property Abraham will ever own. The field came at great expense, but to Abraham, cost was not an issue as long as the site was near Mamre. Sarah’s bones will look out over Mamre for all time, in anticipation of the promises of God and a new land.

Let me conclude with three lessons concerning how we ought to die by faith.

Lessons from Machpelah: How to die by faith

1. Our Identity in this Life: Exiles and Strangers

First, Abraham knows exactly who he is, a “stranger and sojourner.” Though he enjoys the reputation of a “prince of God,” to the very end he lives his life as a landless one. What a trial this was for our forefather! God had promised him all the land as a gift (13:15-17), and specifically named the Hittites in its description (15:7, 18-19). Further, Abraham was told that within four hundred years, or the fourth generation, his descendents would realize this promise (15:13, 16). But now, rather than inheriting all the land as a gift in four hundred years, Abraham has to pay four hundred shekels for a mere burial site at Kiriath-arba (the city of four).

When we see this trial as the sequel to the sacrifice of Isaac, we realize how little Abraham experienced the fulfillment of God’s promises of “land” and “seed” in his own lifetime. Sternberg captures it well when he speaks of these two gifts as “both promised only to be long withheld and finally given in the shortest measure, except for pain.”⁹ Typically, however, Abraham rises to the challenge “without even a murmur on his lips” because he knows who he is. As the author of Hebrews writes: “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13).

In like manner, as exiles and pilgrims we will never have a lasting home on this earth. Therefore us keep pressing on, looking for that heavenly city whose architect and builder is God.

2. The Value of Death

The second thing we learn from the text is how death heightens Abraham’s affections for heaven. So passionate is he about acquiring this piece of property that it consumes him. He musters all his negotiating skills to obtain it, spares no expense to purchase it, and postpones his grief until the deal is sealed and notarized. He desire is not merely to honor his wife, but to leave behind a permanent testimony of his unwavering hope. Jesus reminds us all of this holy example in his words, “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys,

and where thieves do not break in or steal, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt 6:20).

In this respect death can be a gift, for it heightens our longings for heaven and encourages us to invest in what lasts. We have many reminders of this in our congregation, but I will give just two examples. Gus Marwieh has a passion to build the kingdom of God in his war-torn country of Liberia, from where thousands of refugees have fled to Ghana. What gives Gus so much passion to place a college right in the heart of Ghana's refugee camp? It is because he has tasted so much personal suffering and death among his countrymen. Marty Mathiesen is another example. When his wife Brenda died of a brain tumor, his whole family ascended this stage to give testimony to Brenda's faith and the reality of heaven. It was their Machpelah. Marty, now retired, wants to give his life in full service to the kingdom of God, serving as a missionary in the place of God's choosing, whether it be Africa or Romania, on his teacher's pension. This is death's gift to the soul. It is my prayer that many in our nation will have their affections permanently transformed in the aftermath of September 11th.

3. The Importance of Remembering

Finally, from Machpelah we learn the importance of remembering. Abraham spent a fortune to leave behind a tangible memorial of the promises of God spoken to him at Mamre. Every time Abraham's burial place is mentioned in Genesis it is described as "facing Mamre" (23:9, 17, 19; 25:9; 40:30; 50:13). Henceforth, every Jew who came to Machpelah would be brought face to face with the testimony of Abraham's faith. Abraham Joshua Heschel says: "Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word: Remember."¹⁰

How successful was Abraham in causing future generations to remember? Sarna writes: "After the Western Wall in Jerusalem, it has remained throughout history the most sacred monument of the Jewish people."¹¹ Even well into the Christian era, this cave still speaks. The fourth century Latin poet Prudentius (ca 348-405), seized by the faith of Abraham, wrote these words:

The Tomb of Sarah

Abraham bought a field, in which to lay the bones
Of his wife, because on earth a stranger carries:
Righteousness and faith: This price for him was inex-
pressible,
A cave, a place of rest created to hold her holy ashes.

(Translated, from the Latin, by Steve DePangher)

I am reminded of another Jew, Joseph, who was shaped by this act of remembering. Like Abraham, his world had just grown dark and he was swallowed in grief. But he would not permit his soul to weep until he made a needed acquisition. The cost was more than financial, however. He already owned the tomb. What he needed was the body, that of an executed revolutionary hated by the Jews and mocked by the Romans. If the negotiations went wrong it could cost him his life. But by faith he gathered up his courage and requested from Pilate for the body of Jesus. Joseph laid that body in his own tomb, and from that holy place we remember the day when forgiveness became our gift and heaven our home.

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1. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 317.
2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996), 108.
3. Waltke, *Genesis*, 317.
4. "Sons of Heth" - "These Hittites in the hill country of Southern Palestine have no obvious connection with the Hittite Empire, which fell to the Sea Peoples in approximately 1200 B.C...these Hittites do not reflect the customs and practices of that Hittite Empire...(they) have Semitic, not Hittite, names, and Abraham seems to converse with them without an interpreter." Waltke, *Genesis*, 317.
5. Gene Tucker ("Legal Background," 79-80) as quoted by Waltke, *Genesis*, 320.
6. Alter, *Genesis*, 111.
7. Meir Sternberg, "Double Cave, Double Talk: The Indirections of Biblical Dialogue" in *Not in Heaven, Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, eds. J.P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 47.
8. Sternberg, "Double Cave, Double Talk," 49.
9. Sternberg, "Double Cave, Double Talk," 57.
10. Abraham J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1951), 61.
11. Sarna, as quoted by Waltke, *Genesis*, 322.