

*First Things – Genesis*  
**Genesis 23**  
**“The Death of a Princess”**

**I. SOMETHING EVENTUAL: THE PASSING OF A LIFE**

- A. This was a normal death
- B. This was a notable death

**II. SOMETHING NATURAL: THE PAIN OF A LOSS**

- A. It is a sign of his heart
- B. It is a sign of his humanity

**III. SOMETHING SPIRITUAL: THE PURCHASE OF A LOT**

- A. This purchase was based on Abraham’s condition
- B. This purchase was based on Abraham’s conviction

1. On August 31, 1997, the world was shocked to hear of the tragic death of Princess Diana, the ex-wife of Charles, Prince of Wales.
2. Her funeral at Westminster Abbey was broadcast around the world, and accompanied by an estimated 3 million mourners and onlookers in the city of London.
3. In Genesis chapter 23, we read of the death of Abraham’s beloved wife. Originally, she was named Sarai, but God had changed her name to Sarah, which literally means “Princess”.
4. While the significance of her life and death were largely lost on the world at that time, her obituary has been recorded for us by the Holy Spirit of God. We are reminded that: *“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”* (Psalm 116:15)
5. In chapter 22, Abraham stood on the mountain top and saw the glory of God. In chapter 23, he walked through the valley of the shadow of death.
6. In chapter 22, Abraham had faced the possibility of sacrificing Isaac. In chapter 23, he had to face the reality of burying Sarah.
7. This chapter reminds us that death is always a part of life. Whether it is our own death, or that of someone we love, you don’t live for long without realizing that life is short.
8. There are some lessons to be learned from the record of Sarah’s death, as well as Abraham’s response to it.
9. These are lessons that we need for today, as well as for the day when we will have to, as Abraham did, lay our loved-ones to rest.
10. Looking over this chapter, we are reminded first of all of:

## **I. SOMETHING EVENTUAL: THE PASSING OF A LIFE**

1. Hebrews 9:27 tell us that, "...it is appointed unto men once to die..." Though Sarah's life had been a long one, at least by today's standards, it was not without its appointed end.
2. There is an appointment with death that all people, good or evil, saint or sinner must eventually keep.
3. Someday, unless Jesus returns soon, what happened to Sarah will happen to all of us as well. Eventually, our lives will pass.
4. With that in mind, it is wise for us to consider the death of Sarah as a truth we may very well face ourselves. Consider first of all that:

### **A. This was a normal death**

1. Succinctly and simply, verse 2 records that, "...Sarah died in Kirjatharba..." That is all we are told about the nature of her death.
2. In many ways it was just another death in the long line of deaths since Adam. Like millions before her and billions since, Sarah's heart stopped beating, her lungs stopped breathing, and her body grew cold as life left from her.
3. Back in Genesis 5, the drumbeat of life and death is recorded as over and over again we read of the years of a man's life, followed by the statement, "...and he died."
4. Sarah's death was not a strange occurrence. Even as Abraham wept over the body of Sarah, there were thousands of other people weeping over thousands of others whose lives had passed the same day as Sarah's.
5. Currently, it is estimated that over 55 million people die each year. That is over 150,000 people a day.<sup>1</sup>
6. My point is that while death often startles us when it touches the sphere of our lives, there is nothing abnormal about death and dying.
7. Deuteronomy 32:29 says, "O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!"
8. While the subject of death is something we often try to ignore, to do so if foolish! What happened to Sarah is normal, and we ought to recognize the normalcy and regularity of death.

9. Just before his death, a popular writer said, "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?"

10. No exception was made for Sarah. Her death happened as normally as any other death. We would do well to recognize that truth in our own lives.

11. While in a sense this was a normal death, as we consider Sarah's passing, we recognize also that:

### **B. This was a notable death**

1. Sarah was just one of any number of people who passed away that day many centuries ago. And yet, her normal death was a notable one.

2. Here we are, thousands of years later and worlds removed from this scene, and yet we are contemplating the death of this ancient nomad's wife.

3. Why is her death notable? It is notable because of her relationship to the God she served! It is the grace of God poured out on her 127 years of life that makes her death significant and notable.

4. There is a lesson for us in the importance of Sarah's death. Our life and our death are only made significant by our connection to the eternal God!

5. The great missionary, C.T. Studd wrote a poem that contains one of my favorite lines. He said:

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last*

6. Would we know anything of Sarah at all had she stayed in Ur and not followed her husband and her God into Canaan?

7. Would we care at all about her death had she not in her life believed God to do the impossible and give her the promised son?

8. While all men die alike; not all men live so that when they die their death is something to be remembered. Sarah's death is recorded because of the kind of life she lived by the grace of God.

9. So in this chapter, we find here firstly *something eventual: the passing of a life*. Notice secondly that we find here also:

## **II. SOMETHING NATURAL: THE PAIN OF A LOSS**

1. Death is not just a reality for those who die. It is often even more of a burden for those who are living.

2. The Holy Spirit tells us of Abraham's reaction to the death of his dear wife. Verse 2 says, "*And Sarah died in Kirjatharba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.*"

3. Though Abraham is the friend of God, the Father of the Faithful, and a larger-than-life Bible figure, in this chapter he is simply a grieving husband.

4. There is something very natural about the grief of Abraham in this text. It is a comfort to those of us who will share in his heartache at some time or another.

5. Consider the mourning and tears of Abraham in this text. For one thing:

#### **A. It is a sign of his heart**

1. The text says that Abraham came to, "*...mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.*" As the old man stood by her body, he wailed and wept over her passing.

2. I find it interesting that this is the first time we ever hear of Abraham crying or weeping. He shed no tears when he left his family behind in Ur.

3. He did not cry when Lot was carried away captive. As far as we know, he did not even weep when he tied his only son to the altar, and prepared to slay him.

4. Now, however, as he looks at the body of his beloved wife, the dam breaks, and the old man mourns.

5. One old writer said that "sorrow is love, widowed and bereaved,"<sup>ii</sup> and it is Abraham's love for Sarah that feeds the flow of his tears in this text.

6. For 75 years or more she had been his constant companion. She had followed him and God on a pilgrim journey, and she had been the instrument through which God had given the promised son, Isaac.

7. She was, in the truest sense, Abraham's soul-mate. His mourning and weeping for her were a sign of the deep place she held in his heart.

8. Those who love little, lose little when death comes. However, when God knits your heart to someone else's, it is natural for it to break your heart when they are taken from you.

9. Abraham's pain at the loss of Sarah is a sign of his heart, and moreover:

#### **B. It is a sign of his humanity**

1. Bible characters can sometimes seem like mythological giants; spiritual superheroes, that seem far removed from the frailty of our own lives.
2. Yet, when we see Abraham broken-hearted over Sarah's death, we are reminded of his humanity, and of the fact that even the godly can grieve.
3. F.B. Meyer said, "Religion does not come to make us unnatural and inhuman..."<sup>iii</sup> That is, having faith does not mean that we have no feelings.
4. Tears stain the pages of the Word of God. The people of God were never forbidden from mourning and grieving.
5. Peter wept. Mary wiped the Lord's feet with her tears. The Ephesian elders wept on Paul's neck when they knew they would never see him again.
6. At the front of the line of those who weep is our Lord Jesus! He wept at Lazarus' death. He prayed with strong crying and tears in the garden as He faced the cross for us. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
7. My point is this: Christianity is not an emotionless, painless, tearless faith! The day *will* come when Christ will wipe away all tears from our eyes, but until that day, it is alright to weep.
8. I've counseled with people who break down and cry, and then apologize to me, saying, "I'm sorry, preacher, I don't mean to be such a mess."
9. I say to them, it's alright to cry! Don't apologize for your emotions! You are human, and to be human is to hurt.
10. There is something very natural and very comforting in the pain of this loss revealed through Abraham's tears and mourning.
11. So here we have *something eventual: the passing of a life*. And we have also *something natural: the pain of a loss*. Looking further at this chapter, we see also thirdly:

### **III. SOMETHING SPIRITUAL: THE PURCHASE OF A LOT**

1. The Holy Spirit uses only two verses in this chapter to tell us of Sarah's death and Abraham's mourning.
2. Verse 3 begins by saying, "*And Abraham stood up from before his dead...*" The rest of the chapter is taken up with what we would describe as Abraham making the funeral arrangements for his wife.

3. Abraham purchased a cave and field as a burial plot for his wife and for his family in the future.

4. At first glance, it may look like just a practical, logistical detail. Yet, there is something very spiritual about this purchase of a lot.

5. Consider this purchase with me. For one thing, consider that:

**A. This purchase was based on Abraham's condition**

1. Look at the text, and notice what Abraham said to his neighbors in the land of Canaan. In verse 4, Abraham said, *"I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."*

2. Notice, Abraham still considered himself to be "a stranger and a sojourner" in the land of Canaan. This is in spite of the fact that God had promised to one day give him all of that land.

3. Abraham believed that one day it would be his, but as of yet it was *not* his, and he was just a pilgrim passing through.

4. This grave lot was the only land Abraham ever truly owned. Though he could have, he never bought any more land than he needed to be buried in.

5. There is a lesson for us here if we will see it. Like Abraham, this present world is not our final home. Like Him, we seek a better country, a place prepared for us by Jesus our King.

6. Rather than trying to seize and claim as much as we can down here, we should be laying up treasure in heaven, and looking more toward eternity than this present world.

7. The truth is; the only ground we *really* need on this earth is the soil our bodies will rest in until the day the trumpet sounds and we are raised to new life.

8. Several years ago, I visited the grave of Samuel Wesley, who is buried beside his church in Epworth, England. Samuel was the father of the famous preacher, and founder of Methodism, John Wesley.

9. The first place John Wesley ever preached was standing on top of his father's grave. It was the only land his family owned, and the only place, at the time, that Wesley could legally preach.

10. As I read about this lot that Abraham purchased, I thought about Wesley preaching from the only ground he owned.

11. If our condition in this world is truly that of strangers and pilgrims, then we don't need to own any more than is necessary to serve Christ until we inherit the kingdom that is to come.

12. This purchase was based on Abraham's condition. Consider further that:

**B. This purchase was based on Abraham's conviction**

1. When Abraham purchased this lot in the land of Canaan, he was making a statement about what he believed in his heart.

2. Again, God had promised Abraham repeatedly that this land was one day going to belong to him and his descendents.

3. Rather than carrying Sarah's body back to Haran or Ur, and burying her among her people, Abraham chose to bury her where he believed his people would one day live!

4. R. Kent Hughes says, "Abraham was so sure that his descendents would get the land that he wanted Sarah's bones to be there when they got there!"<sup>iv</sup>

5. Hebrews 11 tells us something about the conviction and faith of Abraham, as well as Sarah. Beginning there in verse 13, it says, "*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*"

6. Verse 14 adds, "*For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.*"

7. Abraham buried Sarah in the ground of a country that was not theirs, believing in his heart that one day he and her as well would receive a country that was theirs!

8. In much the same way, when we place our loved ones in the ground, we do so in anticipation of the promise of God that one day the dead in Christ will rise again!

9. We too will be buried someday in a lot somewhere. Our bodies will rest in the soil of this earth, waiting for the day when Jesus will call our names, and we will be raised to inherit that which has been promised to us!

10. This chapter ends in verses 19 and 20 by saying, "*And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan. And the field, and the cave that is therein,*

*were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the sons of Heth.”*

11. They tell us that today the Cave of Machpelah is covered by a Mosque, and guarded vigilantly by the Muslims.

12. One day, however, that mosque and those Muslims will have to give way, for the bones of Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, along with all those who belong to the Lord Jesus, are going to be raised to new life, and are going to inherit the land God has promised to them!

1. If there was a soundtrack to accompany this chapter, it would probably be an organ and a funeral dirge.

2. The death of Sarah was a sad chapter in Abraham’s life, as death always is when it takes a loved one.

3. Yet, even though we sorrow at the passing of a life and the pain of a loss, we have a hope that not even death can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

4. Because Christ Jesus has died and risen again, we know that we have eternal life through Him! He is the Resurrection and the Life, and the keys to death belong to Him!

4. The death of Princess Sarah reminds us to look beyond the grave and wait with hope, for *“the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”*

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<sup>i</sup> Ross, Stephen, “The Harvest Fields: Statistics 2011”, [www.wholesomewords.org](http://www.wholesomewords.org), accessed 10/27/11, <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/greatc.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Meyer, F.B., Abraham, (Christian Literature Crusade, Ft. Washington, PA, 1993), p. 144

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Hughes, R. Kent, Genesis: Beginning and Blessing, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2004), p. 309