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HOW BELIEVERS DEAL WITH DEATH

Genesis 23:1-20

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Genesis Lesson 47

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No subject is more difficult for us to face than that of death. Writer Somerset Maugham said, "Death is a very dull, dreary affair, and my advice to you is to have nothing whatsoever to do with it" (*Reader's Digest* [1/80]). But, of course, we can't dodge it. We all have loved ones and friends who have died or will die. And we must die. But it's still difficult to think about.

Author William Saroyan, just five days before his death from cancer, issued this statement: "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?" (*Reader's Digest* [12/81]). He was probably being facetious, but underneath he was probably voicing a fear that has haunted most of us: How are we to think about and deal with death, be it the death of loved ones, or our own death?

That question has caused some confusion among God's people. Some have said that since Christ defeated death, we're supposed to be joyful and victorious through it all. They deny the process of grieving. Others are quick to explain how God will work it all together for good, which is true. But we still grieve and feel the pain.

Genesis 23 provides some answers to the question of how believers should deal with death. Abraham, the man of faith, loses his wife, Sarah. His response reflects both realism and faith. It is interesting that only two verses deal with Sarah's death and Abraham's grief, whereas 18 verses deal with his negotiations to secure a burial plot. You have to ask, why is so much space devoted to that which, at first glance, seems insignificant? The answer is given in Hebrews 11:13-16, which talks about Abraham and Sarah's faith:

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. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they

had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

It is significant that just preceding the death of Sarah is the news from Abraham's homeland of the children born to his brother Nahor. In that day, it was important that a person be buried in his native land. It would have been easy for Abraham, with news from the family in the homeland, to have thought when Sarah died, "I must take her back there to bury her."

But God had called Abraham to the land of Canaan and promised to give it to him and his descendants. Verse 2 states that Sarah died "in the land of Canaan." Verse 19 states that it was "in the land of Canaan" that Abraham secured the burial site for her. So the point of emphasizing Abraham's efforts in securing a burial plot *in the land of Canaan* is to show his faith in God's promise as he dealt with Sarah's death. The field and cave of Machpelah was the only piece of real estate in Canaan Abraham ever owned, and he had to pay the going price for it. But in so doing, he was saying, "I believe that God will do as He promised." Abraham dealt with Sarah's death realistically, but with solid faith in God's promises concerning the future. That's how we must deal with death:

Believers deal with death with realism,
but with faith in God's promises.

1. Believers deal with death with realism.

Death is the ultimate test of our faith. Being a faithful Christian doesn't exempt us from death, unless we are living when Christ returns. We can't escape it or postpone it when it's our time to go. As Christians, we need to view death realistically.

That means that we recognize death for what it is: an *enemy* that entered the human race as God's curse on our sin. It is not, as some say, a natural part of life. It is our enemy. When the Bible says that Christ abolished death (2 Tim. 1:10), it means that He broke its power over believers. Christ's resurrection triumphed over death, but that victory will not be fully realized until He returns to give us resurrection bodies like His own. Until then, death

is our enemy, a painful reminder of God's judgment on our rebellion against Him. We are not supposed to smile and say it doesn't hurt. Death brings hard realities.

A. Death brings emotional realities.

There is the reality of *loss and grief*. Even though Sarah lived a relatively long life (she is the only woman in the Bible whose age at death is given), Abraham mourned and wept when she died. It's never easy. There is nothing unmanly or unbiblical about tears in a time of grief. Jesus Himself wept at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:35). Paul tells us to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). We should not make people who are grieving feel uncomfortable or unspiritual about their tears. I once preached the funeral for a man who had died in his thirties. Afterwards, I was consoling his widow when her former pastor from another town came up and tried to get her to stop crying by saying, "Well, praise the Lord! Scott's in glory now!" I wanted to punch him in the nose! Let her weep!

There is also the reality of *loneliness*, as the loved one is no longer with us. Twice Abraham repeats the phrase, "bury my dead out of my sight" (23:4, 8, NASB; not in NIV). This may be just a Hebrew way of expressing burial, but it suggests the pain of separation which death brings. Before death, a loved one is in our sight often. We delight to see the person. In the case of lovers, even in old age, the beauty of her face, the warmth of her smile, the twinkle in her eyes, all make your heart glow. But death instantly changes all that.

Abraham and Sarah had shared their whole lives together. She had been with him when he left Ur of the Chaldeans by faith. She had shared his anxieties as they moved into the land of Canaan. She had waited with him over the years as they longed for God's promised son. Together they had seen that son grow into a man (now 37). So when Sarah died, Abraham was left with a gaping hole in his life. While he had Isaac, and he had the Lord, and he later remarried, nothing could fill up the hole left when Sarah died. Death brings the pain of loneliness into our lives.

Note that the Lord did not appear to Abraham or give a special word of comfort at this point in his life. I'm not suggesting that God abandoned him, or that Abraham did not find comfort in the

Lord. But there is no indication of any special revelation at this difficult point in Abraham's life. Sometimes we give pat comfort when we tell a grieving person that God will be especially close to them in their loss. Maybe He will. But there is no indication that God was especially close to this great man of faith at his time of loss. The picture is rather of a lonely man grieving and taking care of the necessary arrangements to bury his wife. Death brings the hard emotional realities of loss and loneliness, even to a man who is the special friend of God. It's okay to say, "Even with God, it's going to be hard!"

B. Death brings financial realities.

Perhaps you thought that the expensive cost of funerals was a recent American phenomenon! But 4,000 years ago, Abraham was faced with the high cost of burying his wife. He had to take care of this business in the midst of his grief.

Maybe it's from the Lord that we must take care of such business in a time of grief. If we didn't have to rise from our grief (23:3) and deal with some of the practical matters of living, we might be overwhelmed. The duty of work and taking care of the business side of life helps us not to grieve beyond what is healthy and to get on with the process of establishing a new life for ourselves after our loss.

This story gives us an inside look at the way business was carried on in this ancient culture. There are a lot of nonverbal, culturally-understood signals going on here, but the basic issue being decided is whether this resident alien, Abraham, will gain a permanent foothold or not by becoming a land owner. The flattering words of verse 6 were probably an attempt to get him to remain a landless dependent. Abraham's rejoinder, where he names Ephron, "made skilful use of the fact that while a group tends to resent an intruder the owner of an asset may welcome a customer" (Derek Kidner, *Genesis* [IVP], 1:145).

Ephron offers to give Abraham not only the cave, but the field attached to it (23:11). On the surface, that sounds like a generous deal. But the offer to give it to Abraham was probably a culturally courteous way of saying, "Name your price." No one with honor would actually take up such an offer. It was kind of like our

asking a dinner guest at 11 p.m. to stay for one more cup of coffee. It gives the person the polite opportunity (hopefully) to say, "No thank you, I've had a wonderful time, but I must be going now."

In offering to throw in the field along with the cave, Ephron wasn't being generous. Under Hittite law, if he retained ownership of the field, in modern parlance, he would have to pay the taxes on it. But if he sold the larger portion with the cave, the obligation passed on to the new owner. Abraham agreed to this extended package, so all that is left is establishing the price.

Ephron is subtle in this matter as well. He persists as if he is willing to give the property to Abraham, but he attaches a market value to his "gift." This allows Ephron to mention the value of the land as he sees it, and it implies that if Ephron is so generous as to give Abraham this land, how could Abraham be so petty as to dicker over the price? Abraham accepts the price, pays the money, and the transaction is legally witnessed (23:16-18, 20). Note also that Abraham had enough money in hand to pay for this need. I believe that God's people should have enough in either a savings account or life insurance so that you don't have to go in debt to cover the cost of a funeral.

Let me say a practical word on the expense connected with funerals. The key should be moderation. Some people are extravagant in buying the most expensive caskets and floral arrangements. Sometimes they feel guilty about their relationship with the deceased. Sometimes they feel the need to impress those who attend the funeral. But in my opinion, it is not good stewardship of the Lord's money to be extravagant at a funeral.

On the other hand, we don't need to get by as cheaply as possible. Christians are divided over the issue of cremation. I'm not bothered by it theologically, in that whether a corpse is burned or decays in the ground is no problem to God in the day of resurrection. But cost shouldn't be the only factor in deciding. It's important that you feel right about the funeral in terms of the honor given to the deceased within the boundaries of moderation. There may be some benefit to succeeding generations to have a grave site, which cremation usually doesn't provide. While I do not believe in putting flowers on a grave site or that the dead person enjoys a grave with a nice view, there can be value in having a place where

people can go to see the grave marker and reflect on the life of the dead person.

When we were in Macau, we visited the only Protestant cemetery there, where Robert Morrison and his wife, the first missionaries to China in the modern era, are buried. It was sobering to walk around that cemetery and notice that most of the women died in their twenties or thirties, and the men in their thirties and forties. They paid a high price to take the gospel to China in those days before modern medicine. To see their graves was a solemn reminder of the godly pioneers of the faith who carried the torch faithfully in their generation and a challenge to imitate their faith.

It's important that the funeral be a time of publicly expressing the hope of the gospel. It's fine to mention some of the person's strengths and reflect on the lessons of his life. But the main focus ought to be to make those present think about the reality of death for them and the hope of the gospel if they will trust in Christ. Whoever you ask to officiate at the funeral of your loved one, make sure that he promises to give the gospel clearly. A funeral is no time to beat around the bush about the truth of the gospel.

To come back to the point of our text, death involves financial realities and those who are grieving often are faced with the practical matters related to the death of the loved one. But there is a much greater point here, namely, Abraham's great faith in God's promises. While believers need to face the reality of death, both emotionally and financially, we also need to face death with faith in God's promises.

2. Believers deal with death with faith in God's promises.

The point of this extended story of Abraham's securing the burial plot is to show his strong faith in God's promise to give this land to his descendants. Moses was writing to people on the verge of entering that land to conquer it from some frightening enemies. Many of them weren't so sure it was a good idea. As reports of the giants in the land spread through the camp, slavery in Egypt didn't sound too bad! Moses is showing how their forefather Abraham paid for legal title to this burial ground because he believed what God had promised. Not only Sarah, but Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob were buried in that cave as a testimony of their

faith in God's promise to give the land of Canaan to their descendants. Genesis ends with Joseph dying in Egypt, away from the promised land, but charging his sons to take his bones with them when God led them back there. So now Israel must go in and claim the land God had promised.

All of these were testifying that they believed in more than a piece of real estate. They believed that God's promises do not end with this life. God is going to do far more than He has done for us in this life. As the author of Hebrews says, they were desiring "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16). Abraham was "looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). His faith looked beyond the grave to the promises of God to send the Savior, and through Him to bless all nations.

Just as Abraham said that he was a stranger and sojourner (23:4), so God told Israel, "the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me" (Lev. 25:23). David acknowledged to God, "For we are sojourners before You, and tenants, as all our fathers were" (1 Chron. 29:15). In the psalms, he cries, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears; for I am a stranger with You, a sojourner like all my fathers" (Ps. 39:12). Even when Israel was in possession of the land, these men of faith confessed that their true home was not here, but in heaven (Heb. 11:13-16).

That's how believers face death. They say, "God, you've promised me something that I haven't yet realized. You've promised more than this life. You've promised me and my loved one who trusted You eternal life with You. You've promised a new, resurrection body. You've promised a day when all tears and pain and sorrow will be wiped away for Your people. And so, in this moment of despair, when death has claimed my loved one, when death stares me in the face, when I am lonely and I hurt inside, I trust in Your promises. Your promises are my hope in the face of death."

Conclusion

Joseph Parker, a famous London preacher in the last century, experienced this. At one point in his life he began to dabble with

some of the liberal theology of his day. Many scholars were undermining the truth of the Scriptures, and as Parker read their books and attended their meetings, he began to lose his grip on the foundational truth of salvation through faith in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ.

Then he was hit with the worst sorrow he ever had to bear. His wife, whom he loved dearly, became ill and died in a matter of hours. He was unable to share his grief with others. He paced back and forth in the empty rooms of his house, his heart breaking. In his misery, he felt for some footing in the liberal theology he had been embracing, but he found no comfort or hope. As Parker later told it publicly,

And then, my brethren, in those hours of darkness, in those hours of my soul's anguish, when filled with doubt and trembling in fear, I bethought myself of the old gospel of redemption alone through the blood of Christ, the gospel that I had preached in those earlier days, and I put my foot down on that, and, my brethren, I found firm standing. I stand there today, and I shall die resting upon that blessed glorious truth of salvation alone through the precious blood of Christ. (In H. A. Ironside, *In the Heavens* [Loizeaux Brothers], pp. 56-57.)

Parker faced the death of his wife with realism concerning the pain, but also with faith in the promises of God.

Death, even for believers, brings hard realities. It always hurts, it always leaves us with a lonely spot in our hearts. It often brings hard financial realities. The Lord does not spare us these things just because we believe in Him. But with the pain, which reminds us of our sin as the reason death entered this world, He gives us the hope of His promises. Christ died for us, so that the sting of death is gone. Yes, we grieve at the death of loved ones, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. He has gone to prepare a place for us. We will be reunited with our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus!

If you have not come to Christ and trusted in His death as the payment for your sin, the Bible says that you have no hope and are without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). But you don't need to be there. God promises that whoever believes in Jesus Christ "shall

not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). You can trust Him right now and go to bed tonight with the confidence that if you should die, you have eternal life because God promised it.

Discussion Questions

1. What is proper grief for a Christian? When is it excessive?
2. What should you say and not say in trying to comfort a grieving person?
3. Critics sometimes accuse Christianity as being "pie in the sky when you die." Is this true? How would you answer the charge?
4. How can we know that our hope in God's promise of eternal life is not just wishful thinking? What guarantees our hope?

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