

Graveyards: Seeds of Hope and Promise – *Genesis 22:20-23:20*

Introduction – Abraham’s faith was proven to be strong enough to withstand the fiercest trial-by-fire from Almighty God. It wasn’t until just before the knife plunged into Isaac that the Lord provided on Mt. Moriah a substitutionary atonement that brought his only beloved son, figuratively, from the dead. This was the pinnacle of the test of faith for Abraham. Now the story begins to close on Abraham, but not before he would face a test of faith we all face: the death of loved ones and our own death.

The Twelve Children of Abraham’s Brother (22:20-24) – While Abraham had the son of promise, Isaac, and the promise was of a multitude of nations, it was his brother who actually seemed to be receiving quite the blessing. A housefull. Placing this here in the story notes that Moses is building a bridge for the original readers in preparation for the changing of the patriarchal guard. For in this list, we are first introduced to Rebekah, if only a passing mention (v23). She will be the grandmother of another twelve. The importance of her story will be picked up in Chapter 24.

R. I. P. Sarah: Our Woman of Faith (vv1-2a) – What would her obituary say? Sarah had been married to Abraham over one hundred years. She had been with Abraham for 62 years since they left their home in Ur. She had sojourned with her husband in multiple places with multiple threats and trials: famine, wars, kidnappings, a child for her husband by her handmaid, a promise that had to wait 25 years before Laughter arrived. She leaves behind her husband and her son who is 37 and she dies at 127 years.

She is the first woman listed in the “Hall of Faith” (Heb 11:8-10). And the next verse says, “*These all (including Sarah) died in faith...*” (vv13-16). She knew that this earth in its current fallen state was not her ultimate home. Surely she believed with Abraham that he would be heir of the whole world (Rom 4:13), and she may have had a faint sense that some kind of transformation, a death and resurrection, would have to take place. She is the only woman specifically named for Christian wives to imitate (1 Pet 3:1-6). She had the privilege of being the first one (at least recorded) to offer hospitality to God (Gen 18, Heb 13:2).

A Man of Faith Still Weeps (v2b) – All of these promises. All this faithful waiting. So many blessings. But for all of it, his wife still dies. And while it is true that “*neither death nor life...shall be able to separate us from the love of God...*” (Rom 8:38-39), there is still a time for weeping (Eccles 3:4). For men and women of faith, of great faith, there still must and will come seasons of weeping and real sorrow. Jesus wept for the sorrow his friends experienced in the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). We know a God who collects our tears; he does not discount our sorrows (Psalm 56:8). Our Lord, acquainted with grief, understands ours. He truly is our sympathetic High Priest. And so, even with the incredible hope that is ours in Christ, we are not called to be Stoics. Death is a defeated enemy, but an enemy nonetheless. In His Word, He gives great consolation for those in Christ (2 Tim 1:10, Heb 2:14-15, 1 Cor 15:22-25).

Planting in Hope (vv3-18) – But she is dead. And now what? What actions declare hope; what do you do with a cold corpse? Abraham wants to bury Sarah in Canaan and not in their ancestral land. Or he could have buried her in some obscure place. There is this odd financial land interaction that takes place. Abraham will not take any plot of land for free (possibly because it would place him under certain other obligations, we aren’t sure). He will purchase the land, a small portion of a promised inheritance; a place where future relatives would join Sarah. The others encourage Abraham to remain a landless but respected immigrant, but Abraham is seeking a public testimony of faith and hope even in a burial. This is Sarah’s land. If we consider Heb 11 carefully, Abraham is making an eschatological claim that this land will be his through some kind of heavenly transaction and transformation. It will be hers as well.

Interestingly, Jesus was offered all the kingdoms of the world from one who said he would give them to him for nothing; just a little bowing down and worship (Matt 4:8-9). Jesus didn’t want any deals with the devil. He intended to purchase the land, the kingdoms, with His blood. And now He owns them free and clear, defeating the devil in the process (Rev 5:9-10, 11:15, Col 1:19-20). Abraham wanted ownership, nothing else, at whatever price. This man of faith was a shadow of Another who would be buried in hope. Jesus teaches us how to be buried in hope.

Burial: Seeds of Hope and Promise (vv19-20) – Graveyards are gardens of hope, seeds planted and showing nothing above ground, like your garden in late spring after planting. We do not believe in a heavenly Canaan where we will be forever, while our bodies rot and are to be discarded like an empty milk carton. They are to be planted like seeds of promise to be raised with a new resurrected, but earthy, forest of Canaan in the fulness of glory, body and soul. Because of creeping Gnosticism and simple pragmatism, Christians *en masse* are abandoning the ritual of a funeral and a burial. That is going hand in hand with a loss of belief in a real, future, resurrected world with our bodies walking upon that land.

Consider how the Scriptures speak of dead bodies (John 5:28-29, 1 Kings 2:10, 11:43). Paul tends to use the word “death” when he talks about Jesus and baptism, but when he talks about dead bodies, he tends to use the word “sleep” (1 Thess 4:13, 1 Cor 15:20, 1 Cor 11:29). The Greek word, “koimeterion” means “a place of sleep” or “dormitory” and became “cemetery” in English. A cemetery is a sleeping place. This is where we place the dead until they rise again. And so, we say “R.I.P.” And we mean it. When we die, Christian souls are immediately brought into the presence of the Lord, and we reside with Him in heaven. And our bodies? The Bible does not talk about a dead body as what used to be a person. And all of this informs us of how we should handle dead bodies.

Firstborn from the Dead – Jesus is the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18) and the firstfruits of a great resurrection harvest to come (1 Cor 15:20-23). Our bodies are sown in corruption, but they are not annihilated. They will be raised in glory (1 Cor 15:42-44). The resurrection will be the great harvest of that graveyard-field. And the seed metaphor is fitting because there is complete continuity between the seed and the plant or tree that comes forth while at the same time complete discontinuity in the outward show. This hope is for all who have faith in the One Who made the Way for that glorious hope (Rom 10:9-10). Christ’s victory over the grave, over sin and death, declares His victory over your sin and death and every moment of suffering. In Christ, your little insignificant seed-life is going to be worked into immeasurable and eternal glory.

Abraham buried Sarah in Canaan because Sarah one day will own the glorified Canaan. *“The dead body of a saint of God, destined to rise again, has an indefeasible right to an everlasting inheritance. Ah! It is the dead – the dead in Christ – who are the only legitimate possessors of this whole creation of God. To the redeemed dead belongs the entire property of the redeemed world”* (R. Candlish). *“The meek shall inherit the earth”* (Jesus).