

# **The Life of Abraham**

## **The Burial of Sarah**

*Genesis 23:1-20*

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# The Burial of Sarah

## Scripture

We are continuing in our study of “The Life of Abraham” by examining selected incidents in his life.

When Abraham was seventy-five years old, God called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised that he would make him into a great nation. That promise began to be fulfilled twenty-five years later when Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. Thirty-seven years later, Sarah died. Genesis 23 is an interesting and important chapter that tells us about Sarah’s death and burial.

Let’s read about the burial of Sarah in Genesis 23:1-20:

<sup>1</sup> Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. <sup>2</sup> And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. <sup>3</sup> And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, <sup>4</sup> “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” <sup>5</sup> The Hittites answered Abraham, <sup>6</sup> “Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.” <sup>7</sup> Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. <sup>8</sup> And he said to them, “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, <sup>9</sup> that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place.”

<sup>10</sup> Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, <sup>11</sup> “No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave

that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.”<sup>12</sup> Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land.<sup>13</sup> And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, “But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”<sup>14</sup> Ephron answered Abraham,<sup>15</sup> “My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.”<sup>16</sup> Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

<sup>17</sup> So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over<sup>18</sup> to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city.<sup>19</sup> After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.<sup>20</sup> The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites. (Genesis 23:1-20)

## Introduction

This past week we saw demonstrations and riots that began in Charlottesville, VA and then spread to other cities. White nationalism, racism, and violence have all mixed together into a boiling cauldron of hatred. Furthermore, we now routinely hear of terrorist attacks around the world. All of that is a confirmation that sin abounds, and injustice seems to be at home on this earth. As a result, we tend to give up on God’s promise of “a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

Many times, God’s people in the Old Testament were similarly tempted to give up on God’s promise of a homeland. After their exodus from Egypt, they feared the giants living in Canaan.

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During the exile, they wondered if they would ever return to their homeland.

It was in that context that God's people in the Old Testament heard the story of Abraham and Sarah. They heard about the time when Abraham was seventy-five years old, God called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised that he would make him into a great nation. Twenty-five years later, long after Abraham and Sarah were capable of producing children, God blessed them with a son named Isaac. That part of God's promise was being fulfilled.

However, when God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, he also promised to give Abraham the land that he would show him (Genesis 12:1). When Abraham got to the land of Canaan, God said to Abraham, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). God repeated that promise to Abraham on several occasions. For instance, he said in Genesis 13:17, "Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." And God promised it again in Genesis 15:7, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

Our present text concludes in Genesis 23:20 with these words, "The field and the cave that is in it *were made over to Abraham as property* for a burying place by the Hittites." One commentator writes, "Clearly this purchase was regarded as extremely important by the editors of the Book of Genesis, as it is mentioned on three further occasions: in connection with the burial of Abraham (25:9–10), with Jacob's will (49:29–32), and with Jacob's burial (50:13), each time referring explicitly to the details of the purchase and property rights."<sup>1</sup>

When one first reads Genesis 23, one is tempted to conclude that the account is simply about Sarah's death and burial. But far more is in this important chapter. You see, Abraham was buying a

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 214.

piece of land in fulfillment of God’s promise to him. It was only a small piece of land, but it was the beginning of God’s fulfillment to give him all the land of Canaan. Just as Isaac’s birth was the birth of just one child that would eventually lead to a great nation, so the purchase of the burial plot would eventually lead to the possession of the whole land. As another commentator said, “In God’s time, Abraham’s offspring would possess all the land.”<sup>2</sup>

## Lesson

The burial of Sarah in Genesis 23:1-20 shows us that the Lord began to fulfill his promise of a homeland for his people.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Abraham’s Mourning for Sarah (23:1-2)
2. Abraham’s Negotiations with the Hittites (23:3-18)
3. Abraham’s Burial of Sarah (23:19-20)

### I. Abraham’s Mourning for Sarah (23:1-2)

First, let’s look at Abraham’s mourning for Sarah.

Verse 1 says, **“Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.”** Verse 1 is an “inclusio”: **“Sarah lived...; the life of Sarah.”** In Hebrew, it is literally, “the life of Sarah...; the life of Sarah.” An inclusio denotes the beginning and the end of a story or a statement. Greidanus notes, “The repetition focuses the reader’s attention on Sarah—her age and her importance for Israel. Sarah is the precious mother of Israel; the only woman whose life span is recorded in the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

Many people throughout the past two millennia have made a big deal of Mary, the mother of Jesus. James Montgomery Boice, however, makes a fascinating comment about Sarah:

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<sup>2</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 214.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 221.

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Sarah was a great woman. There is no place in all the Bible where we are told to look to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an example of what a godly woman should be. But in two different passages—one in the Old Testament and one in the New—we are told to look to Sarah: “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth” (Isaiah 51:1–2); “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear” (1 Peter 3:3–6).<sup>4</sup>

Sarah was not without her faults. For instance, she acted unwisely in giving her Egyptian servant, Hagar, to Abraham. Nevertheless, Robert Candlish rightly notes:

She too walked by faith, having favour with God, and waiting for his salvation. In faith, being like-minded with Abraham, she left her early home and her father’s house. In faith, she bore him company through the long years of his exile, cheering him amid many troubles, and upholding him under many disappointments. Through faith she received strength to conceive seed; and afterwards, when even Abraham himself was perhaps too much divided between the child after the flesh and the child by promise... she seems to have had a more spiritual discernment than he had. She believed salvation to be in the line of Isaac alone, and her counsel, to “cast out the bondwoman and her son,” obtained the sanction of God himself. Finally, she stands enrolled among those “of whom the world was not worthy;” and it is in immediate

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 710.

connection with her, and with “the strength she received to bear seed...” that the apostle introduces his comprehensive testimony to the humble walk and high hope of all the patriarchs: “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” (Hebrews 11:11–14).”<sup>5</sup>

Sarah and Abraham had been married for at least 62 years, for she was 65 years old when they left Haran. However, it is likely that they were married long before that in Ur of the Chaldeans, and so they may have been married for over 100 years. As Boice said, “The longevity of their marriage is a model for all who are numbered among Abraham and Sarah’s spiritual children.”<sup>6</sup>

Verse 2 says, **“And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.”** I want to note two things in this verse.

First, Abraham really grieved over the death of Sarah. Commentator Gordon Wenham said that the terms **“to mourn”** and **“to weep”** “together suggests that Abraham did not just weep aloud but carried out other traditional mourning customs, such as rending his garments, disheveling his hair, cutting his beard, scattering dust on his head, and fasting.”<sup>7</sup> It is entirely proper to mourn and to weep at the death of loved ones. Death is an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). And when death comes to rob us of those whom we love, it is right for us to grieve. But, for believers there is hope, as Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (*NIV*), “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” Our hope, of course, is in Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 710–711.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 711.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 126.

And second, Sarah died in the heart of the Promised Land. But as yet, Abraham did not have any possession of the land. He had no property of his own in the land. He had no permanent place to bury his beloved wife. And that is what makes this account in Genesis 23 so fascinating. Abraham sought to purchase a down payment on a small piece of land that would be his permanently.

### II. Abraham's Negotiations with the Hittites (23:3-18)

Second, notice Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites.

James Boice notes, "This is a priceless and informative vignette from ancient history. It is a masterpiece of ancient writing and a vivid look into the customs of the times. We notice the elaborate and careful exchange of courtesies between Abraham and the Hittites, as the patriarch approached them to request a piece of land in which to bury Sarah. These are real men, acting according to their highly developed views of proper conduct."<sup>8</sup>

Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites to purchase property in which to bury Sarah proceeded in three stages.

First, Abraham asked the Hittites to give him some property for a burial plot (23:3-6). The Hittites responded by saying that Abraham could bury Sarah in any one of their choicest tombs. That seemed to be very generous. However, had Abraham taken them up on their offer, he would still have had no permanent property. And, in a century or two, Sarah's bones would be discarded and no one would ever know where she had been buried. No. Abraham wanted something more permanent.

Second, Abraham then requested Ephron to sell him the cave of Machpelah (23:7-11). Abraham had his eye on a specific burial plot. It so happened that Ephron was sitting among the Hittites. And he said in the presence of everyone that he would simply give the field (which presumably included the cave of Machpelah)

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<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, 712.

to Abraham for a burial plot. But, that would still leave Abraham without a permanent piece of purchased property.

And so, third, Abraham insisted on purchasing the cave and the land (23:12-18). Ephron mentioned that the field was worth four hundred shekels of silver. Some commentators say that Ephron's price was the going rate, whereas other commentators say that Ephron's price was wildly elevated. I suspect that the price was highly elevated. But notice the brilliant strategy of Abraham. He did not haggle at all. He did not bargain with Ephron to try and get the price down. Verse 16 simply says, **“Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.”** The reason Abraham's strategy was so brilliant is because no one could ever say that he did not pay a fair price for the cave and field. He probably paid far more than it was worth, but it was now *his* purchased piece of property in Canaan. Notice how Moses recorded the deed, almost like it was a certificate in a deed of sale in verses 17-18, **“So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city.”**

And so, Greidanus notes, “For the first time in his life, Abraham is legal owner of property in the Promised Land. Now he can bury his wife Sarah in hope—hope that one day all of this land will belong to Abraham and Sarah's offspring.”<sup>9</sup>

### III. Abraham's Burial of Sarah (23:19-20)

And third, observe Abraham's burial of Sarah.

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<sup>9</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 224.

Verse 19 records the burial of Sarah, **“After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.”** Moses emphasized that Sarah was buried **in the land of Canaan**, that is, the Promised Land. True, Abraham did not possess the entire land, but he had, as it were, a down payment on the entire Promised Land. Abraham did not have to bury Sarah in a Hittite grave that would soon be forgotten. He was able to bury her in his very own possession of Canaan, the Promised Land. As Greidanus said, “Sarah, the mother of Israel, could be buried in her own inheritance. Sarah may rest in peace awaiting the fulfillment of God’s promises.”<sup>10</sup>

The death and burial of Sarah is finished. It began with her death “in the land of Canaan” (23:2) and ended with her burial “in the land of Canaan” (23:19). But Moses added a very important summary in verse 20 about the significance of this story for the people of God in the Old Testament, **“The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.”** Finally, God’s promise to Abraham that all the land of Canaan would be his was being fulfilled. The field with the cave of Machpelah represented the whole of Canaan.

Later, Abraham would be buried next to Sarah (25:9-10). Still later, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah would be buried there (49:29-32). Finally, under Joshua, centuries later, God fulfilled his promise and gave the whole land to Abraham’s descendants.

### Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the burial of Sarah in Genesis 23:1-20, we may be assured that our faithful God can be trusted to fulfill his promise of a homeland for his people.

Jesus, “the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1) was born in the

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<sup>10</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 225.

land of Canaan, the Promised Land. But Jesus' vision of the Promised Land is much larger than Canaan. God said to his Anointed One in Psalm 2:8, "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, *and the ends of the earth your possession.*" Jesus therefore expanded God's promise of land from the land of Canaan to the whole earth. And so, Jesus declared in Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, *for they shall inherit the earth.*" But, like Abraham, God's people today still have to wait for the final fulfillment of God's promise. The writer to the Hebrews said in Hebrews 11:9–14, "By faith he [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland."

Christians today are still seeking a homeland. This earth is not our home. We live in a foreign land, filled with violence and wickedness, as Peter said in 2 Peter 3:13, "We are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." Even now Jesus is preparing a place for Christians, as he said in John 14:3, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

Friends, the hope of all Christians is that we will see the fulfillment of God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth. God's down payment for the Christian is the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we have a sure hope that we will be with him for all eternity in the new earth, if we have repented of our sins and put our trust in him. Amen.

## **Mission Statement**

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## **Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz**

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons).
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