

## THE DEATH OF SARAH

### Genesis 23

This chapter brings before us Abraham's supreme sorrow, which was the death of his beautiful wife. It also tells us of the purchase of a field for a burying-place for her.

She died at the age of 127 years. She is the only woman whose age is recorded in the Bible. The Old Testament does not relate the end of any other woman's life so particularly as it does the end of Sarah's life. In some respects Sarah is the most outstanding woman in the Bible. A unique miracle was performed for her. The Apostle Peter included her among the holy women, "who trusted in God" (Peter 3:5-6).

Sarah's death lay between a Spirit-guided life on the one hand and an abundant and holy resurrection on the other. Her death was that of a believer. Her spiritual life was real, and her faith in the promises of God was strong. Her death was that of a life-long companion. For sixty years Sarah had lived in Canaan with Abraham, and with the exception of the incident about Hagar, which was prompted by Sarah, nothing marred the fellowship of these two as husband and wife. They give us the picture of true married life, a husband and wife united in the Lord and in each other in Him.

It was the death of a mother. To Isaac the death of Sarah was a very great loss. Although he was nearly forty years of age, he had always lived at home and was the recipient of his mother's love and devotion and the subject of her constant hope and prayers. Genesis 24:67 distinctly tells us of his great sorrow at the death of his mother.

It was a death in the home. The removal of a member of a family or household, especially if that member is a beloved wife and mother, causes a vacancy which nothing else can fill.

Sarah's life came to its end at Hebron, in a foreign land, she not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off and saluted them. The child of God in this age dies in the land of his pilgrimage and sojournings, sometimes worn out by long service and old age, as in Sarah's case.

From the words "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah" it would seem that he was away at the time of her death. It is quite possible that he had two establishments with separate flocks and herds, one at Beersheba, and the other at Hebron, where Sarah then was. Abraham's personal sorrow is recorded in the words, "to weep for her."

This is the first occasion in the Scriptural record of a man's tears, and they are neither unmanly nor morbid, but the genuine and rightful expression of Abraham's deep sorrow on account of the death of his wife.

Some people have the notion that we ought not to show sorrow when we are sorrowful. That idea is an enemy to the Spirit of Christ, because it leads to heartlessness and hypocrisy. Not to sorrow is not even human, but it is diabolical. Tears and sorrow are the natural accompaniments of death, the more so in the day before Christ, when the hope of resurrection seemed remote. But the Lord God will swallow up death in victory and will wipe away all tears from our eyes. Christians are told by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul that we are to "sorrow not, even as others who have no hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13). Faith in God does not lead us to stoical indifference in the presence of sorrow, although it does restrain us from sorrowing as others who have no hope. It "neither eradicates nor reproves sorrow, but tempers and hallows it and binds up the broken heart."

In verse 3 we read that "Abraham stood up from before his dead." Evidently, he had either been lying on his face in sorrow or kneeling in prayer by the side of Sarah. At any rate, he rose up and spoke unto the sons of Heth, who were the Hittites, about a burial-place for Sarah. His desire for a resting place for the body of his wife is a simple but striking testimony to the innate feelings about the care of a corpse. The body of his beloved wife.

was precious to him and was regarded by him and by others as his own property, of which he was about to take special and loving care.

Abraham's statement to the Hittites that "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you" reminds us that every child of God is a stranger and a sojourner in the world. Abraham never could say that he was at home in Canaan, for he had left his home never to find another on earth. The genius of the Spirit of God is to make us pilgrims, consequently there is our continual un-at-home-ness in this world.

Abraham's request for a burial-place certainly indicates that he intended to stay in the land of Canaan, and not to return to Mesopotamia. When Eastern sentiment as to burial with ancestors is remembered, this request for a piece of ground in Canaan is a striking test of Abraham's faith. He was fully assured that Canaan was the place for him and his descendants, and on this account Sarah was to be buried there.

While the whole land was Abraham's by promise, yet he asked for the privilege of purchasing the barest necessity of a burying-place. The story of Abraham's conversation with the Hittites indicates that they had respect for him. They called him "a prince of God." Abraham was entirely at their mercy, and they might not have had any inclination to respond favorably to his request, but God knew the needs of His servant and so they were provided. Because God had given Abraham favor in their eyes, the Hittites were polite and courteous to Abraham. They recognized his power and influence, although he was only a sojourner. To Abraham they offered their best.

We notice the perfect courtesy of Abraham in reply to the offers of the people of the land. Whether all this was mere parleying with the view to a bargain, or it was a genuine and sincere offer on the part of the Hittites, Abraham's attitude stands out in a very beautiful way. Religion is not intended to decrease politeness, gentlemanliness and courtesy, but rather to increase them. In fact, courtesy is one of the truest marks of a genuine believer.

Abraham persisted in declining their offer to give him the choice of their sepulchres in which to bury Sarah. He was determined that Sarah should not be buried in any land but his own, and that must not be given or rented. "By faith" Abraham refused because he would not be a debtor to those who were to be dispossessed.

Although all of the land had been promised to Abraham, he did not attempt to stand on his rights or to make any unfair demands. Moreover, he did not need an entire field, but only the cave which was in the corner of it. That was the one thing which he valued and needed. Even so, the children of God are not very highly regarded by the world and are often pushed into its corners, but they are valued and needed by Christ.

Ephron seems to have been friendly to Abraham and to have desired to enter into a transaction which would have been advantageous or beneficial to both sides. He names a price, which may well have been too expensive. Doubtless this price had been in his mind all the time that he was pretending to be willing to give the land. Abraham hearkened unto him. He may have been taken in, but that was preferable to defrauding others. Possibly, Ephron expected Abraham to bargain with him by naming a price less than he had suggested. By accepting the first price named, Abraham showed his guilelessness, and gave a testimony to his God and His righteous requirements which was well worth any financial loss which he might have sustained. Payment was made and everything was done in due form in the presence of a number of witnesses. The transaction was legal. Thus, the first foothold in the land of Canaan that Abraham ever had was purchased. Notwithstanding all of God's promises of that land to him and his seed, Abraham would not deal unfairly, even in appearance, with those who were then in possession of Canaan.

Sarah's funeral brings us to the first grave of which we have any record in the Bible. After the last tribute of respect was paid, the lonely old man went back to his home.

From this simple and touching story of death in that home of the long ago, we may learn how we should behave in times of bereavement. Three things should be in evidence:

1. Sorrowing love.

The expression of love and sorrow is as natural as it is inevitable and beautiful. A consciousness of loss cannot fail to produce sorrow, and no one is to be blamed for feeling and expressing a sense of bereavement. It would be very unnatural for love not to elicit sorrow.

2. Faithful service.

In order that the soul may not be overwhelmed with sorrow, there comes to us all at such times the call to and opportunity for definite service. The memory of a loved one is first treasured by doing what that loved one would wish were he or she here. Service always prevents sorrow from being dissipated in idle regrets and mere remembrances. The greatest safeguard against this danger of being overwhelmed by sorrow is work. We are not here to do work for God, but we are here to be workers with Him. We are to be those through whom He can do His work.

3. Blessed hope.

Abraham laid Sarah's body to rest in the certain hope of a joyful resurrection. It was this above all things that upheld and strengthened him as he bade farewell to the wife who had shared his joys and sorrows for so many years. The expectation and anticipation of a reunion of Christians on the day of the resurrection is still the real hope, the blessed comfort and the strong inspiration of the people of God. It enables us to look upon death without fear and to look forward to it without dread.