

The Most Unlikely Place

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[0 : 00] We're continuing our series in Genesis 23. Genesis 23.

Give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. The Hittites answered Abraham, Hear us, my lord, you are 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. Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land.

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, that he may give the cave of Malchpia, 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. 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.

[1 : 55] No, my lord, hear me. I give you the field. 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.

Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. 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. Ephron answered Abraham, My lord, listen to me. A piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver.

What is that between you and me? Bury your dead. Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, 400 shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

So the field of Ephron and Malchpia, 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.

[3 : 06] After this, Abraham buried Sarah, his wife, in the cave of the field of Malchpia, east of Mamre, that is Hebron, in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for burying place by the Hittites.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. May it speak to us this morning, and may you give us your spirit to show us Jesus.

May we trust in you because of your word and the testimony that it gives to your son, that it gives to you. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

It's not about the nail. It's not about the nail. I'm not sure if you've ever seen this video where this phrase is repeated over and over again.

It made its round on the internet a couple years ago. I think it might have even been a TV commercial, but it's not about the nail. There's a woman that's sitting on the couch, and she's clearly agitated.

- [4 : 13] She's uncomfortable. She's discussing her pain. She's discussing the effects that something is having on her, and she is in trouble.
- And then the camera pans over to her boyfriend, and he's gesticulating. He's waving his hands, and he's beside himself. He's so angry. He starts to talk, and then he stops.
- And then as the camera continues to rotate, you see this woman, his girlfriend, has a nail directly implanted in her forehead. And the man never gets the chance to address the nail.
- The woman is describing her headaches, her pain, but it's not about the nail. The video, I don't think it's produced for this purpose.
- If it is, it's genius. Psychologists and marriage therapists, and even pastors, use this video to talk about the differences between men and women. But I'm not here to talk about that this morning, how helpful or unhelpful that video might be in that arena.
- [5 : 19] But sometimes in life, we might see something that's so obvious, a story like this, so obvious, but it's not about what we first think.
- On the surface, there's an obvious problem here, but there's a lot more going on. This morning, it's not about the burial plot. It's not that at all.
- It's not about the death of Sarah. It's so much more than that. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it. It's not about the nail. But what about the nail? After all, Sarah's death and burial is what it talks about most in this chapter.
- In fact, there's very little reference to God. Apart from his speaking, there's very little reference to Abraham. But it's not about the burial plot.
- It's not about Sarah's death. Or her faithfulness. It seems cut and dry, but this morning, we're reminded through this story of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises.
- [6 : 28] Now, sometimes when we say that, that's a lot of Christian mumbo-jumbo. And we throw that out at a lot of things. But what I mean narrowly this morning is God is going to do what he said he's going to do.
- That's what this story is about. And that's something that we all struggle with if we're honest. We struggle thinking about, is God really hearing me when I pray?
- God, do you really care about me? Do you really care about my marriage? When you said you would never leave or forsake me, did you really mean it?
- We've all thought those things, if not this morning, but definitely this week, or definitely in this life. And yet we're left to navigate this world where we don't feel his presence.
- And that's what brings those questions about. I'm here, and I desperately want to be married. And I'm here alone.
- [7 : 30] Or I'm so lonely because my wife has gone, or my husband has gone. Or you promised to bless me and take care of me, and it doesn't seem like it.
- In fact, it seems like a struggle where I will never get out of this spot. I read the Bible, and yet my kids have not come to faith, and they've walked away from you, and everything that I tried to do for them.
- My husband or wife is not the person that I want them to be, not the person that you have called them to be. And I don't know what to do with that.
- Or if I'm honest, I'm honest about myself. I say that I'm a Christian, and I don't pray. I barely follow you, if I'm honest.
- How are you blessing that, Lord? Those are all the questions that swirl about in our minds, and sometimes they even come out of our mouths.
- [8 : 35] Those are the same kind of questions that the followers of God have always had. And yet God has promised to do what He said He was going to do.

We have that question. Abraham has that question. We know that Sarah had that question. God, are you going to do what you said you were going to do? They laughed because they thought, surely it can't happen.

We can't have a child. We can't have a home. They thought it would never come, and that is where we find ourselves this morning. The promise of a child has come to fruition.

But what about the promise of the land? This morning, it's not about the nail. It's not about Sarah's death. It's about God being faithful to His promises.

Even when it seems like all is lost, God is still faithful. When time has run out, when there's not an answer, God is still faithful to His word.

[9 : 41] This morning, the story has three kind of sections. One, Sarah dies. The second is the negotiation for Sarah's burial plot. And the third is the significance of all of this.

It's like, what does it mean in Sarah's actual burial? First, let's turn our attention to Sarah's death this morning. If you have your Bibles, your bulletin, let's look back at verse one.

If you remember, before we get there, we stepped away from Romans momentarily. And we did so that we could zero in on the life of Abraham because there's so much in Romans that's about Abraham, which seems kind of odd, right?

It's this ancient figure, and we're talking about faith and justification and all these big categories of sin and righteousness. And yet here we are with Abraham.

Not so righteous if we really think about Abraham and Sarah's life. Think about all that Sarah has endured. And here is the chapter that we get.

[10 : 42] All that she's endured, even at the hands of Abraham. Or as another has put it, she is a woman in Genesis of heroic proportions who endured a hard life trapped by her husband's stupidity.

I think if we're honest, that is a really good description of Abraham. And so when we think about righteous Abraham, we have to remember, Abraham, he's kind of a dummy.

And yet, there's so much in common with Abraham and us. If you remember, the last time we talked about Sarah was at the beginning of chapter 21. And even there, she was silent.

And here, she's the only wife of a patriarch who we know how old she was because she's that significant. And time is spent on Sarah because she's that important.

Not just in the life of Abraham to correct all of his stupidity, but in the life of Israel. And our clue is in verse 1 where it tells us how old she is.

[11 : 48] She's the only patriarch's wife that's named with age. Verse 2, and she dies not where? Not in the peaceful confines of her home, but in a foreign land, in Canaan.

That's our first clue that something's up. Hebron, which is the name of the city that we know it as today, and even in Abraham's time, there's some interplay.

Kirith Arba is the other name of that city. Hebron is the Jewish name, which we'll return to momentarily. Abraham's response to all this, of course, he's sad.

And it's captured in verses 3 and following. He weeps, he mourns, and all those things that accompany it. We know very little, though, about what he actually does, but we can assume it looks like something like this.

Him messing with his hair, ripping his clothes, cutting his beard, scattering dust, fasting, all the normal things.

[12 : 48] Abraham is undone because he has lost his wife. But there's a bigger problem at play. He has nowhere to bury his wife.

He has no land. He has no home. If you remember, Abraham was the guy that was called out of his home to go into this new land, to follow God, and everything would be okay.

Except for, we have a big problem. His wife's just died, and he has nowhere to bury her. What are you going to do, Lord? What are you going to do, Abraham?

Look at verse 4 with me. What does he do? He says, I am a sojourner and foreigner among you. Give me property among you for a burying place that I might bury my dead out of my sight.

He goes to the Hittites and asks them, I have nowhere to bury my wife. In fact, I have no rights to land. I can't do anything. I have no place, no home.

[13 : 53] What am I going to do? I can't take her to the local cemetery because I'm not even from this land. Abraham has no rights.

He's a foreigner. Now often that thought, the problem is lost on us in modern society. I won't ask for a show of hands, but how many of us grew up in Colorado Springs?

Not that many. Colorado, not that many. How many people live on the land on which they were born? I'm guessing there's even fewer.

Maybe one or two. Even if that's the case, as we move away from this idea that we are locked into our land, that the land is where our home is, as we move about, as we take different jobs than our parents or grandparents did, we lose our connection to that land.

We lose sight of the fact that we are tied to land. We're more mobile. We're more city-like. We work in factories, or maybe not factories, but we provide services to people.

[15 : 02] We're not tied to the land. And that's all well and good. But when we come to a passage like this, there can be a disconnect. And we think about, why is there such importance on the land?

Abraham, why do you care so much about the land? It seems like an ancient idea. It's not as ancient as you think. When I was a kid, I would hear this story about this Presbyterian in the Carolinas.

And it's a pretty famous story. And this man had gone off to war. And he had gone for many, many years. And he'd been a prisoner of war. And when he came home, and he was released after many years, he was coming home.

And as he was crossing the border, he ordered the carriage to stop. And when he did, he got down, and he knelt on his knees, and he kissed the land.

Not just because he liked dirt in his mouth or churred rock or asphalt in our day, but because he was connected to the land. And he thought he would never see it again.

[16 : 06] The problem of land is not as ancient as we think. But it compels us when we have a right understanding of how land forms us and shapes us to yell out, South Carolina, my mother.

We might never do that, but we do things that are similar if you think about it. Maybe you've gone off to college. I had a friend in college that grew up on a farm in South Carolina.

And he took a mason jar and he took land from the farm and he put it on his desk in his dorm room. So he brought the farm with him. We might not do that, but we might take dirt or sand from the beach and put it in a glass jar to remember things that have happened.

Or we might put dirt in a Ziploc baggie and put it in our rucksack and take it around the world. No family graveyard back on the farm to bury his wife.

Abraham is a man without a home. He has nothing. He's a sojourner, a foreigner, a pilgrim, and Christian, oh yeah, by the way, you are no different than he is.

[17 : 23] You're marching on and yet this world is not your home. This world is not our home. In fact, we're going to a land, to a place that has been prepared for us that's greater than anything on this earth.

John Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress talks about the allegory of the Christian life and there's a character in there named Mr. Valiant and when he's introduced to the reader, Mr. Valiant says this, I'm a pilgrim and I'm going to the celestial city.

Not to the land of this world, but the land that is to come and there's a tension as a Christian. If we're missing that tension, then there's a problem.

The tension is we live in this world but we're going to a land that is not right here. We have to remember that and if there's no tension in that, then there's a big problem because we might love the things of this world, our family, our friends, our bank accounts, the ease that we have in this life, the joys that we have in this life and yet we're called to love where we're going more than this world.

Christian, Abraham was a pilgrim and so are you. Remember that. Abraham, the sojourner, has made the ask though to the Hittites, give me land to bury my wife for I'm a pilgrim.

[19 : 03] Now let's turn our attention to the negotiations for that land. The line of argument here can be a little difficult to follow and it takes up most of the chapter but we're going to spend some time trying to understand what's going on.

Why is Abraham trying so hard to get this land? Look at verses five and six with me as I read. The Hittites answered Abraham's request and they said this, Hear us my lord, you are a prince of God among us.

Bear your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead. Seems really nice. The Hittites, they're good guys.

They want to help a guy out in need. They recognize what Abraham has done to them. They seem like gracious businessmen. Hey, you're in distress. Let me help you out.

They say take the nicest tomb that is, the nicest tomb that you can find. But really, are they that kind? Are they trying to help him out?

[20 : 06] They are and they're not. They want to help him out because they see him as an okay guy, but they don't want something to happen. They don't want Abraham to own one square inch of land in Canaan.

Nothing. If he buries Sarah, he might come and visit, but he has no claim, no rightful inheritance, and the landless pilgrim now becomes a rightful citizen.

You see the problem there. If they give him the land, if he buys it, then he will have a right to land in Canaan. Okay, round two starts. Abraham begins his second round with this.

Not just an acknowledgement of their kindness to him, but really a match in their flattery. He bows before them and he says that he might bury Sarah in their land, but then Abraham asks specifically for this one piece of land from Ephron.

Look at verse eight. He asks Ephron for the cave of Machpela in verse nine, which he owns and is at the end of his field.

[21 : 14] He wants that cave at the end of the field, and the fascinating part about this is that we know where that cave is to this day. It's in Hebron, and you can go visit it, except there's a building built over it, but we know where that is.

And Ephron, who is actually sitting with all the Hittites, answers him where all the other people could hear. Verse 10 tells us that they were sitting at the gate of the city.

If you remember back to what we've read so often in Genesis, Abraham and Lot interact with all the leaders of the city at the gates. And he's sitting and he says, how about this?

What about if I do this instead? Verse 11. No, my Lord, hear me. I give you the field. I want to give it to you instead. I'll give you the cave too.

And when I do that, I give it to you to bury your dead. And he did all this in front of all these people. The text keeps repeating this over and over.

[22 : 15] Everyone can hear. Everyone is around. And then to the final round in verse 12. Abraham bowed down once again and says to them, before the people of the land, 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. Abraham doesn't take this charity that's offered to him. He says, I want to pay for it.

And what does Ephron respond with? Jump down to verse 15, or 14 and 15. He answers Abraham like this, my Lord, listen to me, a piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver.

What is that between you and me? Bury your dead. But Abraham doesn't take the offer of kindness. Instead, he keeps negotiating.

A price has been named now. And be careful here. We might think in the American conception of bartering that he's starting with naming his price and they're going to keep going.

[23 : 21] I don't know if that's what's going on here. Ephron saying, it's worth this price. And Abraham, it is that important to Abraham to have a burial plot.

He doesn't negotiate with her or with him for Sarah's burial place. He says, basically, I'll have it. He names the price and Abraham agrees to pay it. And then he's measured out.

But that doesn't really answer the question of why is Ephron selling this land? It seems kind of weird. Like, why so much detail about this? Ephron offers the land for every reason that we do things in modern American life.

We try to avoid taxes, after all. If I give him the land, then I don't have to pay taxes if I've already given him the cave. If I sell it to him, I don't have to pay taxes on the land.

Abraham will pay taxes on the land. Of course, that's better for me. Nobody loves paying taxes. And Abraham says, you have yourself a deal. The real question is, why doesn't Abraham take the generosity?

[24 : 28] If they're offering to give it to him for free, why doesn't he take it? It's because there's no such thing as free lunch. They might offer him the land, but they're going to get it back one day.

If he takes the land and he hasn't paid for it, then they can have it back one day. It would essentially be on loan to him. So he wants to have it as his own.

And all along the way, we've had these curious hints of people that hear and the presence of these people or even the trees.

Listen. The hearing of the people in verse 13. The hearing of the Hittites in verse 10. Verse 16. The hearing, the hearing again and again.

It's this deal has been struck and it's absolutely certain because all these people have heard this deal. It's like they spit in their hands and shook on it.

[25 : 28] It's a certain thing. There's no question. There's no going back. Abraham is a full-fledged owner of a piece of Canaan.

And that's significant. Abraham now has a place to bury his dead. The scene in chapter 23 shifts from these negotiations to the actual burial of Sarah.

Look with me at verse 19. After this, Abraham buried his wife in the cave of the field of Machpela, east of Mambri. That is Hebron, in the land of Canaan.

And the field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property, as a burying place for the Hittites. Abraham has a resting place for his wife Sarah.

But not just for her, but for him, his child, his grandchildren, as we'll be reminded. And as he buries her, we see this curious repetition of this theme that now, in verse 20, the field and cave that were in it belonged to Abraham.

[26 : 40] He owns a piece of Canaan. It's been ratified by the Hittites. It's not given to him, but he owns it. Sarah is not really the focus of this chapter.

But Abraham having a piece of land in Canaan is the point. Yes, Abraham loved her. He mourned for her. He was sad.

He lost her. But it's not about Sarah. It's about the land. It's a fact that Genesis returns to again and again. Chapter 25, chapter 49, chapter 50.

They read something like this. They rehash everything and say, his sons, Abraham's family, his descendants were buried in the cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron, the son of Zorah, the Hittite.

The field that Abraham bought from the Hittites. Abraham was buried there. Sarah was buried there again and again. The significance of this passage is that Abraham now owns a piece of land in fulfillment of God's covenant promise.

[27 : 52] God said he would give them Canaan and now God's people have a part of it. Remember Lot? Remember Abimelech? Remember Isaac?

Isaac. All those things were centered on the business that God was doing in the lives of his people. And even before that, remember what he had said to them.

I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you. And I will throughout the generations bring an everlasting covenant to be your God, to be, bring you offspring after you.

And I will give it to you and you and your offspring after the land of your sojournings, all that land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I will be their God.

This promise that has this simple fulfillment in the life of Abraham in weird circumstances where he goes and buys a cave and then a field to avoid taxes is the fulfillment of what God had promised to do.

[29 : 03] He now owns a piece of Canaan. Not in the way that Abraham thought or not in the way that Sarah thought but God has moved and fulfilled his promises.

If you think about that, that's the life of Sarah. Sarah never thought she would have children. Sarah never thought that she would have a nation out of her as numerous as the sands on the seashore.

She never thought any of that would happen. She never thought that she would have land. But the end of that promise in Genesis 17 that I will be their God, that God will be with them, that was the thing that she was to hold fast to, to cling tightly to.

That's what God promised to do. That's the North Star as we navigate this life. That God will be there. That he will be your God.

I will be your God. When we feel like he's distant or he doesn't hear us, I will be your God. When we feel like that he doesn't answer our prayer, I will be your God.

[30 : 13] When we struggle through if children are walking away from the Lord or a husband or a wife isn't as they should be or they've left us, I will be your God.

God is faithful to all those promises despite what we can see, despite if we have a home or not. I will be your God.

There's one nagging problem in this text that we haven't dealt with. The promise about land might have fulfillment in Abraham's bartering and getting a good deal on a burial plot.

However, he doesn't own all of Canaan, does he? He owns a small slice of it. The promise about land was for all of it, all of Canaan.

But God is not done yet. At the end of the life of Sarah, God has work yet to do. At the end of the life of Abraham, the promise is that is not finished.

[31 : 20] God has work to do. The promise of descendants, the promise of an everlasting covenant, and even here with all of the land of Canaan is not yet finished.

It's fulfilled partly in buying a burial plot. But one day, all of that land of Canaan will belong to Abraham's descendants.

It points forward to a day when that land will all be theirs. But it's not really about that land. It's about the heavenly land to which all those people that follow Christ are marching towards.

And even now, we're sojourners and foreigners in this land. But we are longing for that day when we will rest in that land. Not on a burial plot, but in the land fully and finally.

And our ticket is punched. Our certain hope that we have is bought and secured by the blood of Christ.

[32 : 29] That promise that was made all the way back in all those pages before is Jesus. Jesus. And that land is the hope.

That land is really heaven. So it matters not whether we walk and we don't see the effects or don't feel his presence, but the sure certain hope that we have in Christ as we march on to that celestial city, to the land that we were promised.

And all of it, not in part, but all of it. Christian, you are not made for this world. You are a sojourner and you are a foreigner in this land.

May we be reminded of that. May we have relief in this life from our sin. May we escape punishment from that as we dwell in the land for all eternity.

Will you come to him even now? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the reminder that we have this morning that we march on to a certain hope, a sure hope, that we march on to a land not in part but in whole.

[33 : 50] And Father, may we look back to a person like Sarah and think of her sure and present hope in your promises, in your fulfillment of those promises.

And may we lift up our praise to you that you are covenant-keeping, a promise-fulfilling God. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.