
What about Dying?

Genesis 23

Introduction Death is a common experience of all of us. Many of you know what it means to lose a loved one to death. When I was a teenager, my father was killed in a traffic accident. After years of living in Africa, facing death from wild animals and disease, to die in a car wreck in an American highway seemed almost stupid. He lacked only one class to complete his Masters. Yet, God was pleased at that precise time to take him home.

Death is a part of living in a fallen world. God warned Adam that if they disobeyed Him, they would die. Their disobedience brought suffering and death into the world. That is now passed down to generation after generation. We all expect, short of the Lord's return that we will all die.

Death is a hard time of separation and grief. It is hard sometimes to communicate the sense of loss and emptiness. This sense of separation is designed by a good God to remind us of our separation from Him and how often we are insensible to it. The sense of loss draws out the depths of our compassion and love for one another.

Dealing with grief is often difficult because of heart issues. God is at work in the midst of this time as well to expose where our hearts are doubting, disobedient and desiring relationships in a way that displeases God. So unresolved grief comes because:

We were too close to the person. They were an idol of our hearts. We had put more on the relationship than God designed for it to bear. These kinds of relationships, often with parents or children, leave us depressed and angry, often unwilling to be consoled or comforted.

We were too distant from the person. There are unresolved relational difficulties. We have unforgiven words and deeds between us. We said things to them we regret and we can never take back. We never got to know them like we ought. This will often leave us with vain regrets.

Death often leaves us with hard questions.

Why do people have to suffer in dying? We stand by the bedside of someone we love and watch the terrible suffering. Why does God allow this, particularly for Christian people who love Him and have walked with Him?

What about lives seemingly ended too early? I have had the funeral of 2 children in my ministry – my dad was just entering a new phase of life and ministry. Their lives were snuffed out early by accidents and disease. Is this a life incomplete in some way? Or is God really in control and these few years were all that is ordained for them?

What about unfulfilled promises? What do we do with people who have clearly banked their lives on God's promises and die before seeing them fulfilled?

Some of these questions are what Genesis 23 is all about. We are confronted with a problem: someone who has been given a direct promise from God now dies without receiving that promise. Why is this the center of this story? Because this chapter begins with Sarah's death and ends with Sarah's burial. Everything in between is about securing a burial plot for her.

The Terrible Reality of Facing Death (v.1-2)

Despite what some people and groups teach, most of us will face death. Yes, the Lord may come back and rescue us from the experience of death. But death is an almost inescapable reality. Even a long life like Sarah eventually comes to an end.

As Experiences of Loss (v.1-2)

Sarah and Abraham have been married at least 100 years. Imagine having a Centennial Anniversary Celebration. They have had a long life together with many challenges and changes. They have walked together with God and sometimes had serious failures. They have trusted God and waited long for Him to keep His promises. They have also run ahead of God and brought trouble and trials into their marriage.

But, Abraham and Sarah were very close. His grief is not just a public performance. This is real searing pain in loss. She has been his wife, lover and friend for longer than any of us have even lived. This is a great loss. Most of you have experienced this in some way. You've lost a loved one – a parent, a child, a close friend. You know the inexpressible emptiness of that loss.

With Expressions of Grief (v.2)

Abraham, the great patriarch and man of obedient faith, expresses his loss in mourning and grief. He is sad and weeps. In his culture, he may have even torn his clothes and poured dust and ashes over his head. He is not stoic. He does not see the holiness of stiff upper lips. He experiences his loss and expresses his grief. But he does so in a way that does not give in hopelessness. He does not spiral down in long, self-focused depression or despair. His grief is guided by His faith in God.

Paul tells us that Christians grieve too. We just do not grieve like the rest of the world as though we were without hope. We are saddened in our loss. We grieve and weep at separations. But we must not grieve like the world. There is all the grief counseling that is available from secular sources. The books touting the stages of grief have been popular. As usual, those books study and speak in the context of unbelievers grieving. While they may tell us what grief is, they cannot tell us what grief ought to be, though most of the books try.

The Bible tells us that people will experience loss and express grief like they do everything else – it will be determined by their hearts. You will feel sorrow in a way that is shaped by what you believe and what you desire. A heart that is poured into the world's mold will be filled with doubt, anger, frustration, depression, despair and self-focus. But a heart that is shaped by the Word of God and

surrendered to the will of God will experience loss, and will be comforted and find hope.

In other words, Christian funerals ought to look like what all the rest of Christian experience is like. It is mingled sorrow and joy. It is tears and it is singing. The funeral of a Christian should be so focused on God that the hope we have is clear to all who see us grieve.

Sarah's death raises a very great question. What does it mean when a person has a promise from God and then dies before that promise is fulfilled? Has God lied to Sarah? The way Abraham responds tells us that he understands God's promises are not limited to only the present moment. God's promises often have a *beyond the death-line* element.

The Simple Responsibilities of our Faith (v.3-16)

Isn't it interesting that the bulk of this chapter is taken up with what seems to us a pointless negotiation for land? Why doesn't the chapter focus in on what interests us? Why don't we hear more about how long Abraham grieved? Why do we not see him moving through the so called "stages of grief"? Why doesn't Moses help us with how we talk to our children about death? Why, is the Bible so concerned with Abraham's acquiring a burial plot?

Because Abraham is again expressing his faith. He believes so strongly that God will give his descendents this land that he will insist in burying Sarah here.

In a Request for a Burial Plot (v.3-9)

Abraham approaches the titular lords of this portion of Palestine, the Hittites, seeking to purchase property around Hebron to bury his precious wife. He refuses their offer of the use of one of their tombs. He knows that in order to stake his claim in the land, he must own it. He is not simply looking for a place to put her. He intends to bury her on land he owns. He wants that ownership to be acknowledged by their descendents.

This is in contrast to the Lord Jesus who was buried in a borrowed tomb. He needed no tomb on land his own. He was already Lord of all. He would not need some permanent place for He rose from the dead. His promised land is all the universe beginning with heaven!

Abraham restates his request to purchase a piece of land. He identifies the piece he wants and its owner. He asks the Hittite rulers to appeal to the owner on his behalf.

In a Negotiation for Ownership (v.10-15)

Apparently, Abraham did not know the owner by face. Ephron was sitting around the council table. On the face of it, it appears that Ephron is being generous in offering to give the land to Abraham. However, according to the custom and law of the day, that ground would be Abraham's only as long as Ephron lived. Upon Ephron's death, it would be returned to Ephron's descendents. It may be that Ephron was being generous, not realizing that Abraham is looking away from the present to a long distant, by faith seen, reality.

Abraham then enters into an intense negotiation to actually purchase and own the land for Sarah's burial plot. He will not allow Ephron to simply give it to him. He wants to own it outright. So he argues for a price to be set so that he can pay Ephron and have the title to the land in his own name.

In a Finalization of the Purchase (v.16)

This paragraph brings this purchase to a close. It leaves no question that Abraham has staked out a further claim on the promised land. He has paid the full price for the land where he will bury his dear wife. He is confident in God's promise. He knows that this will be a permanent place for his descendents.

This sense of returning to the land as a confidence in God's promises causes both Jacob and Joseph to desire the return of their own caskets to the land. They require an oath from their children that when they return from Egypt, they will not leave their remains in Egypt. Following Abraham's lead, they know that the Promised Land is theirs and their people's. So they want to finally be buried there. They plan and prepare for it.

The Glorious Anticipation of Future Fulfillments (v.17-20)

In this concluding paragraph, Abraham takes possession of what will not yet be fully his. The death of Sarah is heat in his life. The good fruit of buying the burial plot arises from faith in God's promises and a desire surrendered to God's providence. So the land is signed over to him. He buries his beloved Sarah in anticipation of God doing what He said He would.

In Present Preparations

We are challenged here by Abraham's faith. In the midst of death, with faith in God, he does the simple things that his faith requires. Is it not easy for us to sometimes take some truths and then bend them to serve our sins? Some Christians at Thessalonica took the doctrine of Jesus' return and used it to excuse their being lazy and busy-bodies. Paul challenged them take that very truth as grounds to diligent work and faithful ministry as an expression of believing.

With Future Hopes

Do you have a settled confidence by faith in what God promises? This future oriented confidence is what the Bible calls "hope". Abraham had a sure hope that his descendents would settle in the land. He had to wait. But he was confident it would take place.

Where is your hope focused? Is your hope for this world in bank accounts, retirement portfolios, the stock market? Is your hope for eternity in your good works, your religious activity, your spiritual heritage or traditions? Our hope is to be in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to put our hope in who He is and what He has done. A sure future with God is grounded only in believing in Jesus who has lived, died and raised from the dead. Your hope is only sure when you have bowed to Him. He invites and calls you to surrender. In surrendering to Him, you will find peace in the present turmoil and assurance of all that He has promised in eternity.

Lessons

How do you handle the death of a loved one?

If they are a Christian, then we know that the separation is temporary. We know that the glory awaiting them the other side of the valley of the shadow of death is so wonderfully great. And we know that we will see them again when Jesus comes and all believers are reunited with Him.

If they are not a Christian, then we know that the separation is permanent. This realization ought to fuel great gratitude for the salvation God has given you. It ought to spur a greater effort in giving the good news of the gospel to your family and friends.

How do you help Christians who are grieving?

You comfort them with truth (1 Thessalonians 4:13,18). Quiet, loving, comforting words of truth about their present state and our future blessedness will encourage them. We can remind one another that death is not an end, but an entry. While the passing is painful, the arrival is glad and glorious.

You care for them in love. Your being there to share with them, to listen to them, to reminisce with them – just send across your relationship the depths of your care and compassion.

You confront them when necessary. I know this sounds odd. But a Christian whose grief is overwhelming them must be both consoled and confronted by God's Word. If you are helping someone who has lost someone they idolized, help them surrender their wants and will to God. They must acknowledge that God is their all in all. If you are helping someone who has lost someone they have a broken relationship with, help them to repent of the sins they committed against that person. Help to acknowledge and receive the forgiveness of God, even when they cannot restore the human relationship.

How do you respond the present failure of a promise? This is a huge area of concern for many of you. Yes, a death may cause you to consider this. But many of you wrestle with the apparent failure of other of God's promises. I want to think about this for a moment.

Be sure that the promise is yours to claim. Many promises God makes in the Bible are to specific people or people groups. God does not promise any of you a son who will have many descendents. None of us have been promised all the land that we walk around on. Many Christians take promises aimed at God's people in the Old Covenant and try to claim as their own. The problem here is not a failure on God's part to keep His promises, but on your claiming what is not yours to claim.

Many promises in the Old Covenant are re-shaped by the New Covenant. The blessings of long life, financial prosperity, continued good health if we will obey God are fulfilled for us in Christ. We may or may not experience these fulfillments in this life. Just as the promises of punishment are taken on by Jesus in His death, the promises of prosperity are anticipated in His resurrection.

Many promises are imbedded in the already-not yet structure of redemptive history. Now, hang in there a minute. All I am saying is that God has promised that there will be healing through the redemptive work of Christ. Occasionally, we experience the special grace of God's miraculous healing in this life. We will all certainly be healed of all our sins and diseases in the life to come. We will have a glorified body that is not corrupt and cannot be corrupted. But not yet... This same principle works for all these sorts of promises.

Many texts that are taken as promises are not promises at all. Particularly in the Psalms and the Proverbs, we cannot take declarative statements about the nature of life and things and turn them into either commands or promises. To do so will bank your hopes on false trusts. For example, many misuse, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it," as a promise that wayward children, raised Biblically, will one day return. This verse is not a promise. It is an observation of the way things are. Children trained a certain way (right or wrong) will have difficulty changing as they grow older. I find a great many of the promises in the "Promise Books" are not promises at all. It is frustrating and folly to take a simple statement in the Bible and turn them into promises.

Many promises have surprising heart impacts. For example, Hebrews 13:5 says, "Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" How is the promise of God's abiding presence supposed to cast out money-love and give contentment? Because we are supposed to be satisfied with God as our all. His nearness is our good. Many promises are like this. So we need to be on the lookout for heart trouble that is settled by surprising promises.

Finally, you do not get your promises based on the amount of your faith. I am amazed that we have allowed this to creep into our understanding of the Bible. We may have a full and complete faith, trusting totally in the promises of God and never receive them in this life. We may, like Sarah in the land and Abraham for a city, be awaiting a great and future day. And we may well face death before receiving the promise. This is not a failure of our faith; it is the freedom of God's sovereign providence.

What about dying? What about being a Sarah with a promise and yet dies before it is fulfilled? Listen to Hebrews 11:13-17. 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. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone 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 for them a city.

Ah, there it is – greet them from afar for we are pilgrims and exiles. What about dying? It is the way to go home!