

Zelmyra and Herbert Fisher were from North Carolina. They were married on May 13, 1924. In 2008, the Guinness Book of World Records recognized them as the oldest living couple with 84 years of marriage. Their marriage withstood the Great Depression, during which Herbert earned a nickel a day. It survived World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and 15 presidential administrations. By the time Herbert passed away in 2011 at 105, he and his wife had been married for nearly 87 years. Zelmyra, who'd lived most of her life with Herbert at her side, lived for another two years after his death.

In honor of Valentine's Day in 2010, the couple answered several questions on their Twitter account. When asked what was the best marriage advice they ever received, they said, "Respect, support, and communicate with each other. Be faithful, honest, and true. Love each other with all of your heart." And when asked how they handled the days when they weren't getting along, they said, "Remember marriage is not a contest, never keep a score. God has put the two of you together on the same team to win."

We come to Genesis 23 in our study of the life of Abraham. The truth is, this is really the story of not just one man but of a couple—Abraham and his wife, Sarah. Today we come to the death of Sarah. She passed away at the age of 127. Most women back then were married in their mid-teens, which means she and Abraham were married for over 110 years! Imagine their history together. They started in Ur of the Chaldeans, somewhere near Babylon, in present-day Iraq. They worshipped the idols of their fathers. But then Abraham heard from the one true God, Yahweh, who told him to leave all that was familiar and go to *"the land I will show you."* God promised he'd become a great nation and a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Scripture says Abraham *"obeyed and went, even though he didn't know where he was going"* (Heb. 11:8).

It's easy to forget Sarah was at his side as they left everything familiar. Together they lived as nomads. They worked hard and eventually amassed wealth and status in this new land. But, still, they were "foreigners and strangers" with no place to call home. Together they endured the long years of infertility, month after month, waiting for a child. Together they endured the faults and failures of the other. Neither of them was the perfect spouse. On more than one occasion, Abraham placed Sarah in danger when he lied about their relationship, saying she was his sister.

Imagine the resentment that might have built up in Sarah's heart. Sarah had her flaws too. After giving up all hope of having her own child, she tried to help God's plan along by handing her maidservant Hagar over to Abraham. After Hagar bore Abraham a son, Sarah blamed Abraham and then treated Hagar so harshly the poor woman had no option but to run away.

And yet, through all of that, they stuck together. And together, they must have laughed deeply and loudly when God blessed them with a long-awaited son. Abraham was 100 years old; Sarah was 90. They named him Isaac, which means "he laughs." Every time they looked at him, they remembered God's faithfulness despite their unbelief. But then came another test.

Abraham's love for Isaac bordered on idolatry. So God told him to offer his son as a burnt offering. The Bible tells us nothing of how Abraham explained that to Sarah. How do you think that conversation went? But Abraham obeyed, believing God would raise up his son if need be. I only wish I could have seen the look on Sarah's face when both Abraham and Isaac returned home in one piece! After all of that, Abraham and Sarah's faith journey on earth together came to an end.

Abraham Grieves the Loss of Sarah

Listen to how the narrator describes it. *"Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her"* (vv. 1-2). Imagine standing beside Abraham as his wife of 112 years ebbs away and finally takes her last breath. She dies in what would later become Hebron, which is part of what we call the West Bank of Israel today. The writer reminds us this was *"in the land of Canaan,"* which is the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

And then we're told simply, *"Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and weep over her."* In the ancient near east, this grieving process was typically done publicly, which may be why it says, he went somewhere to do this. We've seen Abraham go through so much, but this is the first time we see him weeping. Imagine the depth of grief he felt as memories of their life together flood his thoughts. Though Isaac was likely at his side, he must have felt very alone. I'm afraid sometimes we as believers minimize the power of grief, as well as its necessity.

Author Edgar Jackson describes grief this way:

Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children alone. Grief is the man so filled with shocked

uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. She knows that a part of her is in the cemetery, just as part of her is in her daily work. Grief is silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died. Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again. Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.

Even as believers, we experience all of that. One of the mistakes we can make as Christians is we think we should see death as a blessing and therefore we aren't really allowed to mourn and weep. It's important to remember in the Bible death is an enemy and a fierce one at that. Death is ugly. It destroys relationships. It's repulsive to us. There's something horrible about death. We shouldn't pretend otherwise.

But death doesn't have the last word. Listen to how the apostle Paul put it: *"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" (1 Thess. 4:13)*. Notice, we do grieve! But we don't grieve as those without hope! In the next breath, Paul says this: *"For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (v. 14)*. There's our hope! Why? Because death is an enemy that's been defeated by Jesus. He conquered it when he rose from the dead.

Even though we still experience death and grieve as a result, we know one day death will be completely eradicated. 1 Cor. 15:26 says, *"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."* It's still an enemy. We still have to deal with it. But it's an enemy that will be destroyed. That's why the apostle John says in the kingdom of heaven, *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:4)*.

Abraham shows us taking time to grieve is important, and this can apply not just when we lose a loved one but with other losses as well. Just think of all the losses surrounding COVID over the past 18 months. How do we grieve those losses well?

Now, as I said earlier, despite amassing great wealth, Abraham didn't own any land and really didn't have a home. So when it came time to bury Sarah, he needed to find a burial site. This would need to be a large plot of land for not just her but also for him and other family members down the road. In the ancient

near east, people would go to great lengths to bury their dead in their homeland, but there really was no homeland for Abraham. Canaan was the land God had promised him.

Abraham Continues to Live a Life of Faith

And you see that in what he does next.

Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, "I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead" (vv. 3-4).

He goes to the Hittites, or more literally "the sons of Heth." Notice he calls himself a "foreigner and stranger." He comes humbly and respectfully and asks to purchase some property so he can bury his wife.

You can see from what follows they had a great deal of respect for Abraham. *"The Hittites replied to Abraham, "Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead." (vv. 5-6)*. I find it noteworthy that Abraham was a foreigner and stranger in the land, a man who refused to worship their gods, and yet the people of that land hold him in great esteem. They call him a "mighty prince." Not only was he wealthy, but he'd proven to be a warrior when he fought the invaders in chapter 14. Sometimes as followers of Christ, we think there's some merit in antagonizing the world around us. And, certainly, there are times when our convictions will put us at odds with unbelievers. But Peter says to *"show proper respect to everyone" (1 Peter 2:17a)*. Paul says leaders in the church should *"have a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Tim. 3:7a)*. Clearly, Abraham was that kind of man.

But the sons of Heth really don't want to sell him the land. Instead, they offer him one of their own choicest tombs for Sarah. This was a very generous offer as these tombs were considered sacred. But there was an ulterior motive here. They know if they sell Abraham some land, then he'd become a permanent inhabitant there. They'd much rather have him remain a foreigner and stranger. This is so important to them they'll even allow him to choose which place: *"None of us will refuse his tomb for burying your dead,"* they say. In other words, "Take your pick!" How will Abraham handle this?

What follows is a process of diplomatic bargaining between Abraham and the sons of Heth. It would have taken place at the gate of the city where much of the business of a city was conducted in public. If you've ever been to the Middle East, you know that bargaining and negotiating are expected rituals. In this case, you'll see how Abraham will settle for nothing less than purchasing a plot of land for a burial place. So he counters their offer.

Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen

to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.” vv. 7-9

Again, notice his respect; he was sitting, but now he stands and bows to the people of the land. He has a specific plot of land in mind, the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to a man named Ephron. He wants to buy it for full price. This cave was near the trees of Mamre—the place he'd settled in Hebron. It turns out Ephron was there, so he responds.

Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. “No, my lord,” he said. “Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.” vv. 10-11

Ephron's very public offer seems generous on the surface. He offers to give Abraham not just the cave but the field around it. Turning down an offer like that would have been hard and even offensive. But beneath the surface was a desire to pressure Abraham to drop his pursuit of owning the land. But Abraham didn't want to be indebted to anyone, and more importantly, he wanted to own the land. So he offers not just to buy the cave but the land.

Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land and he said to Ephron in their hearing, “Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there.” vv. 12-13

Then, finally, Ephron counters with a price.

Ephron answered Abraham, “Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” vv. 14-15

So he names his price, but then he says, *“What is that between you and me?”* Again, he's trying to entice Abraham to accept the land as a gift. And when he names the price of 400 shekels of silver, it's exorbitant by the standards of the day. That's about 20 pounds of silver! I mean, David paid only 50 shekels to purchase the place for the future temple. And Jeremiah paid 17 shekels for a field in Anathoth. Again, Ephron is trying to discourage Abraham from buying the land.

But look what happens.

Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants. v. 16

Much to Ephron's surprise, Abraham doesn't blink. He calls Ephron's bluff and agrees to the price without further haggling.

Everyone is watching, so Ephron has no choice. He set the terms, and Abraham agreed. So Abraham weighs out the silver, ensuring everything was done right, and Ephron is obligated to sell the land.

So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre—both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field—was deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. vv. 17-18

The description of the land is very precise. The field, the cave, and all the trees now belonged to Abraham and his descendants. It's a place, by the way, you can visit today in Israel.

With that, Abraham buried Sarah.

Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site. vv. 19-20

Notice it says he buried her at Hebron, which is in the land of Canaan. He committed himself and his descendants to this land God has promised him. He was making an investment in the future based on his faith in God's promise. In fact, three generations of his family would later be buried there in that cave, not just Sarah and Abraham, but also Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, and even Joseph.

Why is this so important, and what can we learn from this? Remember, God had said the promised land would belong to his people. So, in buying property, Abraham was making a statement about trusting God's promises. He's acting upon the promise God made to him and his family that they'd possess this land. He's declaring in the burial of Sarah, “I believe God.” He's proclaiming, “The Lord is going to give us this land, and I'm telling the world we believe him.”

There is more here than just human bargaining. The Lord had made a promise, and Abraham acted upon that promise. In burying Sarah in the one piece of land in Canaan that he owned, he's announcing in strong terms he's trusting God to do what he said he would. It's this ability to see the far horizon, to realize that God has a purpose for us and that death is not the end of everything, which gives us the strength to deal with times of mourning.

God wants us to grieve but also to continue to live a life of faith

You see, when we experience loss, God wants us to grieve but also to continue to live a life of faith, a life of investing in the future. Certainly, you can't easily pass over the grief. It takes time to grieve well. But neither should you let the grief paralyze you; you must move forward, live a life of faith, and invest in God's promises.

Gerald Sittser was a professor at Whitworth College. Several years ago, his minivan was hit by a drunk driver, and he lost three generations in a moment. His mother, wife, and his daughter were all killed. He wrote a book called, *A Grace Disguised*, which tells about his grief. He describes his initial experience of living with the loss like this:

I felt like I was staring at the stump of a huge tree that had just been cut down in my backyard. That stump, which sat all alone, kept reminding me of the beloved tree that I had lost. I could think of nothing but that tree. Every time I looked out the window, all I could see was that stump.

Some of you feel like all you can see is the stump of something beloved that's been lost. The question is, "How do you live with that?" Sittser says later that he discovered, "The experience of loss itself does not need to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss." He says, "We do not have the freedom to choose the roles we must play in life, but we can choose how we are going to play the roles we have been given." That's what Abraham did as he bought that burial site in the promised land. That's what you and I must do as we choose how we're going to play the roles we've been given.

One of my favorite Bible stories is of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. These two women endured great loss. Naomi was an Israelite who was married to a man named Elimelech. They had two sons. Because of a famine in the promised land, they migrated to Moab. But then tragedy struck. First, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a single mother in a foreign land. As a widow, she'd have no way of providing for herself until her sons grew up and could take care of her.

We don't know how much time passed, but eventually, her two sons took Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah (not Oprah!), and they settled there for ten years. But, as if one tragedy wasn't enough, Naomi's two sons died. I can't imagine the devastation of losing one child, much less two. Besides the emotional toll this must have taken, there was a practical side to this as well. Now Naomi was totally helpless. There was no social security system or life insurance to fall back on. You can't help but feel for Naomi. She's probably too old to marry. She doesn't even have grandchildren! She must have been overwhelmed by grief, loneliness, fear, and an utter sense of hopelessness. What would she do? What was there to live for? It must have at least crossed her mind, "Why don't I just give up and die?"

But the first thing Naomi does is make a choice. *"When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by*

providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there" (Ruth 1:6). Naomi decides to return home. The reason Naomi decides to return home is she "heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them." The choice to return was an important one for Naomi. It reveals her courage, her stubborn will to live. It even shows her faith in God.

Sometimes in the midst of loss and grief, and hopelessness, the hardest thing to do is to do anything at all that might be a step in the direction of starting over, of receiving life and blessing again from God. Sometimes we're paralyzed by our need to hang on to the last remnants of the past. Sometimes in our depression, we lack the energy and will to do anything at all. We want just to give up, to just keep counting our losses, to wallow in self-pity. I'm not saying we should run away from the pain. Naomi took her pain with her. But she decided to live and receive from God. We have to do the same. For you, that might be a decision to see a Christian counselor. It might be a decision to come to church or join a small group. It might be a decision to get out of bed. It might be a decision to invest in a ministry. Whatever it is, God gives you the strength to make a choice in the direction of life.

You see, we can make those investments because just as Abraham had a promised inheritance, so do we. Hebrews 11:9-10 tells us what Abraham thought about his life. *"By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."* He was a sojourner, but "he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." The same is true of us. This isn't our home. We have a promised inheritance. Peter says God has *"...given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3b-4).*

It is this ability to see the far horizon, to realize that God has a purpose for us and that death isn't the end of everything, which gives us the strength to grieve well, but also to continue to live a life of faith, investing in God's promise, our future inheritance.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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