

DEATH IN THE FAMILY OF FAITH GENESIS 23

Abraham suffered a great loss when Sarah was taken in death. She had been his faithful companion for all of the journey –she had gone through many trials with him. She was a hundred and twenty seven years old at the time of her death. It is of interest that this is the only time a woman’s age is given in the Bible – and this happened after she was dead. I don’t suppose we should make too much of that.

This is the first time we have a burial described in the Bible. It is obviously not the first report of death, but it is the first report of someone burying the dead. The rituals related to death are presented in this historical chapter while we will not find much that is helpful to us related to the rituals described in the chapter, we will find something here that will be helpful as we see faith responding to the reality of death.

Unfortunately in our day it is possible to live a rather normal life and be insulated from death. I shall never forget my surprise some years ago to discover a young man who was in his twenties and had never attended a funeral. I made this discovery while we were making plans for the burial of his father. He didn’t have the foggiest notion about what would happen at a Christian funeral. It came as a surprise to me because I grew up in a rural setting where death was with us often. Whenever a neighbor died in our community, someone went to the local church and tolled the bell. They would toll the church bell ringing it one time for each year of the person’s life. When it began to toll, we would count the number of the tolls in an attempt to identify the person who had died, if we did not know. Once the tolling stopped, then the community began to

mobilize to surround that family with their care. Some of the men would gather at the cemetery to dig the grave. Some of the women would go to the home to give assistance. When the funeral home had prepared the body, they ordinarily brought the body back to the home to lie in state until the funeral. Some of the neighbors would be there with the family as long as the body was lying in state. Death was very much a part of the world in which I grew up. The only death most of our young people have ever encountered is by watching it on television. They have never stood beside someone who has lost a loved one and felt the throb of their pain.

If we have faith like Abraham, then our faith should enable us to face the realities of death in a different way. I believe as we read this chapter that it will be obvious that Abraham's faith made a difference when his beloved wife, Sarah, died. Let us see what we can learn about faith when death comes.

I. THE PERSON OF FAITH MOURNS THE PERSONAL LOSS.

When word came to Abraham that Sarah had died, he went to her tent and set himself down beside her. As he set beside his dead wife, he appropriately mourned and wept. His being a man of faith did not prevent him from feeling the pain of loss. This woman had walked beside him in the long journey from the Ur of the Chaldeans and had endured all of the trials that had befallen him. She had stayed with him when a weaker woman might have abandoned him. He felt a deep and unspeakable loss at the death of his wife, so he wept. Some seem to think that there's a contradiction between grieving and faith. The scriptures do not forbid our sorrowing and grieving over the death of a loved one. Rather they admonish us to grieve as people who have hope and not as those who have no hope. This means that we will express our sorrow and our

grief, but we will do so in a proper and orderly way. We will not be moved to some of the bazaar responses that can be seen in pagan cultures. Our faith enables us to see beyond the pain of the moment and to have hope in the midst of our sorrow. But do not be critical of someone who has lost a loved one and is mourning that great personal loss. Your being critical of them probably indicates that you have never walked that way.

II. THE PERSON OF FAITH HONORS THE MEMORY OF THE DEAD.

Abraham set out at once to find a place to bury the body of his beloved wife. He did not want to cast her body aside as though it was of no worth. Instead he felt it his spiritual duty to gratefully honor her memory. This is what prompted him to go to the Hittites and to bargain with them for a place to bury Sarah. He wanted as a man of faith to honor her memory.

Some of our rituals related to death have come under criticism and rightly so. However, we must not misunderstand the significance and the place of giving honor to those who have died. It in itself can be an expression of our faith in God. Our faith in God allows us to have gratitude for the way God has worked through others to bless and to enrich our own lives. In her moment of death, Abraham saw more clearly than he had ever seen before just how blessed he had been by having this faithful companion. When he honored her memory, he was honoring the God who had given her to him as a faithful companion. And so it is with us.

I have encountered some families in recent years that seemed to feel that stopping in the midst of life to perform the rituals of death for a loved one who has died is an unnecessary waste of time. They're not willing to interrupt the routines of life long enough to acknowledge with gratitude

the person who has died. We can learn from Abraham that this is an appropriate expression of faith when death comes to the family.

III. THE PERSON OF FAITH ANTICIPATES THE RESURRECTION.

The burial rituals of different cultures are very revealing. In some cultures the dead are buried in a manner that suggests that they believe the person has ventured forth on a long journey. They will bury with the person things that they believe that they will need on this long journey.

Abraham evidently did none of this when he buried Sarah. Rather the Scripture seems to indicate that he purchased the field and the caves that were in the field, and in the cave he laid to rest his beloved wife. There's no hint that he put in her grave what she might need on the journey. His faith told him that her spirit had left the body and had entered into the presence of the Lord and that the body was to be placed in the earth to await that final day of resurrection. The body would need nothing in the grave.

I heard about a lady who came in to one of our Baptist Bookstores some time ago to make a purchase. She indicated to the attendant that she wanted to purchase a small white Bible to place in the casket of her mother who had just died. Her mother loved the Bible and she wanted a copy of the Bible to be buried with her mother. The clerk was very gracious in showing to her the Bibles that would be available for this type of thing and then suggested to her that a small white Bible might be the appropriate one to use. The daughter took the small white Bible and thumbed through it very carefully and then she said to the clerk, "It is beautiful, but it won't do."

"Why will it not do?" asked the clerk.

The daughter said, “The print is too small. Mother would never be able to read small print like that.” We smile at that but it is a reminder to us that our faith enables us to bury our loved ones as those who anticipate the resurrection.

This brings up the question concerning the appropriate preparation of the body for burial. Is cremation appropriate? There are increasing instances of cremation among us today. In the Catholic Church, it is my understanding that a priest will not participate in a burial if cremation has taken place. Is this a matter of superstition or is it a matter of Christian conviction? It is obvious that the Scriptures do not answer this question. The thing we must take into consideration is does the way we’re burying our loved one suggest that we believe in the resurrection of the dead? Or does it suggest that we believe this is the end? Without answering your question, I would suggest that my own impression would be that cremation is not the best way to reflect a hope of the resurrection of the dead. That is not to speak a word of judgement of those who may have chosen cremation for their loved ones, but would be simply an impression of my own heart. I want the burial of my loved one to say to the world here is someone who believes that Jesus is coming again and that the dead in Christ will rise when He comes.

IV. THE PERSON OF FAITH PREPARES TO MOVE ON WITH LIFE.

There are cultures in which the family members respond to the death of a loved one as though their death has brought an end to life. In some cultures the wife of the deceased husband is expected to commit suicide because her life is over. Our faith in God and the resurrection saves us from that kind of error.

One of the practical reasons for burial is at this very point. The dead are buried so that life can continue. God has other things for Abraham to do so he must bury Sarah and be prepared to move on. This will be true in your own life when death comes to your family. While you will be emotionally and physically impacted in ways words cannot express by the death of your loved one, your faith in God sustains you. It sustains you with the conviction that God's purpose is not completed for your life yet. There may be other tasks to be done and other burdens to be borne. So you bury the loved one, and with confidence in God you face the future.

It is my sincere prayer for you and for me that when death comes into our families we will respond to it like Abraham as persons of faith. It provides us with a unique opportunity to give evidence of our faith to the world about us. There could be no question among the Hittites who dealt with Abraham after the death of Sarah concerning Abraham's faith. Abraham's faith was something he lived by and something that enabled him to handle the death of one that he loved. Faith in the Living God prepares us for facing whatever experiences life may bring to us – including the death of people that we love as much as life itself.