

Machpelah, and Its First Tenant

by F.B. Meyer

Abraham's faith and confession are revealed through his actions and words as he purchases the land of Machpelah and holds it in pledge against the coming of his children.

Scripture: Genesis 23:4, Genesis 23:19, Psalm 39:12, Isaiah 63:18, John 11:35, Romans 12:15, 2 Corinthians 5:1, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, Hebrews 11:13, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Faith in God's Promises", "Grief and Mourning"

Description

F.B. Meyer reflects on the profound grief of Abraham following the death of Sarah, emphasizing the deep bond they shared over their long life together. He highlights Abraham's tears as a natural expression of love and sorrow, contrasting it with the stoicism often expected in grief. Meyer also discusses Abraham's acknowledgment of his status as a stranger and sojourner in the land, revealing his faith in God's promises for a future home. The sermon culminates in the significance of Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah, symbolizing his faith in God's covenant and the eventual fulfillment of the promise to his descendants.

Transcript

"Give me a possession of a burying-place with you; that I may bury my dead out of my sight." -- Genesis 23:4.

"And Abraham buried Sarah, his wife, in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre." -- Genesis 23:19.

When Abraham came down the slopes of Mount Moriah, hand in hand with Isaac, fifty years of his long life still lay before him. Of those fifty years, twenty-five passed away before the event recorded in this chapter. What happened in those serene and untroubled years which lie between these two chapters, as a valley between two ridges of hills, we do not know. In all likelihood one year was as much as possible like another. Few events broke their monotony. The river of Abraham's life had passed the rapids and narrows of its earlier course, and now broadened into reaches of still water, over which its current glided with an almost imperceptible movement.

The changes that mark the progress of our year are unknown beneath those glorious skies which rain perpetual summer on the earth; and the equitableness of the climate is symbolical of the equitableness of the simple patriarch life. The tending of vast flocks and herds; the perpetual recurrence of birth, marriage,

and death, among the vast household of slaves; the occasional interchange of hospitality with neighboring clans; special days for sacrifice and worship; -- these would be the most exciting episodes of that serene and calm existence, which is separated as far as possible from our feverish, broken lives. And yet, is there so very much that we can vaunt ourselves in, when we compare our days with those? True, there was not the railway; the telegraph wire; the journal; the constant interchange of news. But perhaps life may more fully attain its ideal, and fulfill its purpose, when its moments and hours are not dissipated by the constant intrusion of petty details, like those which for most of us make up the fabric of existence.

Perhaps we can never realize how much the members of such a household as Abraham's would be to one another. Through long, unbroken periods they lived together, finding all their society in one another. The course of pastoral life left ample leisure for close personal intercourse; and it was inevitable that human lives spent under such circumstances should grow together; even as trees in a dense wood, wherein they sometimes became so entangled and entwined that no human ingenuity can disentangle one from another. Thus it must have happened that the loss through death of one loved and familiar face would leave a blank never to be filled, and scarcely ever to be forgotten. We need not wonder, therefore, that so much stress is laid upon the death of Sarah, the chief event of those fifty years of Abraham's life; nor need we regret that such ample details are given of her death and burial; since they enable us to get a glimpse of the patriarch, and see if he has altered at all during the quarter of a century which has passed over him.

(1) WE ARE FIRST ARRESTED BY ABRAHAM'S TEARS

"And Sarah died in Kirjath-Arba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan." Abraham seems to have been away from home, perhaps at Beersheba, when she breathed her last; but he came at once "to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her." This is the first time we read of Abraham weeping. We do not read that he wept when he crossed the Euphrates, and left for ever home and kindred. There is no record of his tears when tidings came to him that his nephew Lot was carried into captivity. He does not seem to have bedewed his pathway to Mount Moriah with the tears of his heart. But now that Sarah is lying dead before him, the fountains of his grief are broken up.

WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

Ah! there is all the difference between DOING God's will and SUFFERING it. So long as we have something to do for God -- whether it be a toilsome march; or a battle; or a sacrifice -- we can keep back our tears, and bear up our attention from our griefs. But when all is over; when there is nothing more to do; when we are left with the silent dead, requiring nothing more at our hands; when the last office is performed, the last flower arranged, the last touch given -- then the tears come.

IT IS NOT WONDERFUL THAT ABRAHAM WEPT

Sarah had been the partner of his life for seventy or eighty years. She was the only link to the home of his childhood. She alone could sympathize with him when he talked of Terah and Nahor, or of Haran and Ur of the Chaldees. She alone was left of all who thirty years before had shared the hardships of his pilgrimage. As he knelt by her side, what a tide of memories must have rushed over him of their common plans, and hopes, and fears, and joys! He remembered her as the bright young wife; as the fellow-pilgrim; as the childless persecutor of Hagar; as the prisoner of Pharaoh and Abimelech; as the loving mother of Isaac; and every memory would bring a fresh rush of tears.

There are some who chide tears as unmanly, unsubmitive, unchristian. They would comfort us with chill and pious stoicism, bidding us meet the most agitating passages of our history with rigid and tearless countenance. With such the spirit of the Gospel, and of the Bible, has little sympathy. We have no sympathy with a morbid sentimentality; but we may well question whether the man who cannot weep can really love; for sorrow is love, widowed and bereaved -- and where that is present, its most natural expression is in tears. Religion does not come to make us unnatural and inhuman; but to purify and ennoble all those natural emotions with which our manifold nature is endowed. Jesus wept. Peter wept. The Ephesian converts wept on the neck of the Apostle whose face they thought they were never to see again. Christ stands by each mourner, saying, "Weep, my child; weep, for I have wept."

Tears relieve the burning brain, as a shower the electric clouds. Tears discharge the insupportable agony of the heart, as an overflow lessens the pressure of the flood against the dam. Tears are the material out of which heaven weaves its brightest rainbows. Tears are transmuted into the jewels of better life, as the wounds in the oyster turn to pearls. Happy, however, is that man who, when he weeps for his departed, has not to reproach himself with unkindnesses and bitter words. We cannot always understand what makes people weep, when we stand with them on the loose earth beside the open grave. In many cases their sorrow is due to pure affection; in some cases, however, there is an additional saltiness in their tears, because of unspoken regret. "I wish that I had not acted so: that I could recall those words: that I had had another opportunity of expressing the love I really felt, but hid: that I had taken more pains to curb myself; to be gentle, loving, endearing, and endeared. Oh for one hour of explanation and confession and forgiveness!" Let us see to it that we may never have to drink such bitter ingredients in the cup of our bereavement; and that we may not, let us not fail to give expression to those nobler feelings which often strive within our breasts, but which we too often repress.

And if some should read these words whose tears are the more bitter because they themselves are unsubmitive, let such remember that where they cannot feel resigned, they must will to be resigned, putting their will on God's side in this matter; asking Him to take it and fashion it according to His own; and remembering that our only province is with the will. This is all God asks; and if this is right with Him, He will subdue every other thought, and bring the whole being into a state of glad acquiescence. "I delight to do Thy will, O my God." "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him!"

(2) NOTICE ABRAHAM'S CONFESSION

"Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you; give me a possession of a burying-place with you" (23:3-4). See how sorrow reveals the heart. When all is going well, we wrap up our secrets; but when sorrow rends the veil, the ARCANA of the inner temple are laid bare! To look at Abraham as the great and wealthy patriarch, the emir, the chieftain of a mighty clan, we cannot guess his secret thoughts. He has been in the land for sixty-two years; and surely by this time he must have lost his first feelings of loneliness. He is probably as settled and naturalized as any of the princes round. So you might think, until he is widowed of his beloved Sarah! Then, amidst his grief, you hear the real man speaking his most secret thought: "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you."

These are very remarkable words; and they were never forgotten by his children. Speaking of the land of promise, God said, through Moses, to the people, "The land shall not be sold for ever; for ye are strangers and sojourners with Me." When David and his people made splendid preparations to build the Temple, as their spokesman he said, "Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly?"

for all things come of Thee; for we are strangers before Thee and sojourners, as were all our fathers. Our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding." And, further, in one of his matchless Psalms, he pleads, "Hear my prayer, O Lord! Hold not Thy peace at my tears; for I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were." (Psalm 39:12) So deeply had those words of Abraham sunk in the national mind, that the Apostle inscribes them over the cemetery where the great and the good of the Jewish nation lie entombed: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them; and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13).

We may ask what it was that maintained this spirit in Abraham for so many years. There is but one answer: "They that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country" (Hebrews 11:14). That country is never looked upon by the sun, or watered by the rivers of the earth, or refreshed by the generous dews. It is the better country, even the heavenly; the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God; the land that needs neither sun nor moon, because the Lord God and the Lamb are the light thereof. Uprooted from the land of his birth, the patriarch could never take root again in any earthly country; and his spirit was always on the alert, eagerly reaching out towards the city of God, the home where only such royal souls as his can meet their peers, and find their rest. He refused to be contented with anything short of this; and, therefore, God was not ashamed to be called his God, because He had prepared for him a city. How this elevation of soul shames some of us! In our better moments we say that we are "the burgesses of the skies"; but our conversation is not in heaven, in our practical ordinary daily life. We profess to look for a city; but we take good care to make for ourselves an assured position among the citizens of this world. We affect to count all things dross; but the eagerness with which, muck-rake in hand, we strive to heap together the treasures of earth is a startling commentary upon our words.

(3) NOTICE ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Men are wont to bury their dead beside their ancestors. The graves of past generations are the heritage of their posterity. By them rather than by the habitations of the living do tribes and races of men find their resting-place. The American loves to visit the quiet English churchyard where his fathers lie. The Jew elects in old age to journey to Palestine, that dying he may be buried in soil consecrated by the remains of his race. And it may be that Abraham first thought of that far distant grave in Charran, where Terah and Haran lay buried. Should he take Sarah thither? "No," thought he, "that country has no claim upon me now. The only land, indeed, on which I have a claim is this wherein I have been a stranger. Here in after-days shall my children live. Here the generations that bear my name shall spread themselves out as the sands on the sea shore, and as the stars in the midnight sky. It is meet, therefore, that I should place our grave, in which Sarah their mother, and I their father, shall lie, in the heart of the land -- to be a nucleus around which our descendants shall gather in all coming time. What though, as God has told me, four hundred years of suffering and furnace fire must pass, yet my children shall ultimately come hither again: and I will hold the land in pledge against their coming, sure that it shall be as God has said!"

It is very beautiful to remark the action of Abraham's faith in this matter; and to see its outcome in his utter refusal to receive the land as a gift from any hand but that of God. When the chieftains to whom he made his appeal heard it, they instantly offered him the choice of their sepulchre affirming that none of them would withhold his sepulchre from so mighty a prince. And afterwards, when he sought their intercession with Ephron the son of Zohar, for the obtaining of the cave of Machpelah, which was at the end of his field, and Ephron proposed to give it to him in the presence of the sons of his people, Abraham steadfastly refused. It was all his as the gift of God; it would be all his some day in fact; and in the meanwhile he

would purchase the temporary use of that which he could never accept as a gift from any but his Almighty Friend.

And so after many courteous speeches, in the dignified manner which still prevails amongst Orientals, "the field and the cave, and all the trees, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city" (Genesis 23:17-18). Their witness had the same binding effect in those rude days as legal documents have in our own.

There Abraham buried Sarah; there Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham; there they buried Isaac, and Rebecca his wife; there Jacob buried Leah; and there Joseph buried Jacob his father; and there in all likelihood, guarded by the jealous Moslem, untouched by the changes and storms that have swept around their quiet resting-place, those remains are sleeping still, holding that land in fee, and anticipating the time when on a larger and more prominent scale the promise of God to Abraham shall be accomplished.

Not yet has the Divine promise been fully realized. The children of Abraham have possessed the Land of Promise for "but a little while" (Isaiah 63:18). For long ages their adversaries have held sway there. But the days are hastening on when once more God will set His hand to gather His chosen people from all lands; and the infidel shall no longer desecrate those sacred spots; but once again shall the hills, and valleys, and pasture lands of Palestine come into the possession of the seed of Abraham, the friend of God.

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