

Genesis 23:1-20

by John Calvin

Abraham purchases a sepulcher for Sarah, demonstrating his hope in the promise of God and the importance of sepulture.

Scripture: Genesis 23:1-2, Genesis 23:6, Genesis 23:8, Genesis 23:16

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Resurrection Hope"

Description

John Calvin preaches about the death and burial of Sarah, highlighting Abraham's faith and reverence in securing a burial place for his wife, emphasizing the importance of honoring the dead and the hope of resurrection. Abraham's humility and integrity in negotiating for the cave of Machpelah with the sons of Heth demonstrate his trust in God's promises and his commitment to proper burial customs. The interactions with Ephron reveal Abraham's adherence to justice and fairness in the transaction, showcasing his refusal to accept gifts and his willingness to pay a fair price for the burial site.

Transcript

1. And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah.
1. Fuit autem vita Sarah centum anni et viginti anni et septem anni: anni vitae Sarah.
2. And Sarah died in Kirjatharba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.
2. Et mortua Sarah in Cirjath -- arabah: ipsa est Hebron in terra Chanaan. Et venit Abraham ad plangendum super Sarah, et ad lugendam eam.
3. And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying,
3. Deinde surrexit Abraham a facie mortui sui, et loquutus est ad filios Heth, dicendo,
4. I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.
4. Peregrinus et advena sum vobiscum: date mihi haereditatem sepulchri vobiscum: et sepeliam mortuum meum a facie mea.
5. And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him,

5. Et responderunt filii Heth ad Abraham, dicendo ei,
6. Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead.
6. Audi nos, domine mi, Princeps Dei es in medio nostri: in electis sepulchris nostris sepeli mortuum tuum: nemo e nobis sepulchrum suum prohibebit a to, ne sepelias mortuum tuum.
7. And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth.
7. Tunc surrexit Abraham, et incurvavit se populo terrae, filiis Heth.
8. And he communed with them, saying, If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar,
8. Et loquutus est cum eis, dicendo, Si est in animis vestris, ut sepeliam mortuum meum a facie mae, audite me, et intercedite pro me apud Ephron filium Sohar:
9. That he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall give it me for a possession of a buryingplace amongst you.
9. Ut det mihi speluncam duplicem quae est ei in fine agri sui: argento pleno det eam mihi in medio vestri in haereditatem sepulchri.
10. And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth: and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying,
10. Et Ephron habitabat in medio filiorum Heth: et respondit Ephron Hitthaeus ad Abraham in auribus Heth, in auribus omnium ingredientum portam civitatis suae, dicendo,
11. Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury thy dead.
11. Non, domine mi, audi me, Agrum dedi tibi, et speluncam, quae est in eo, tibi dedi eam in oculis filiorum populi mei, dedi tibi: sepeli mortuum tuum.
12. And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land.
12. Et incurvavit se Abraham coram populi terrae:
13. And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, But if thou wilt give it , I pray thee, hear me: I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there.
13. Et loquutus est ad Ephron in auribus populi terrae, dicendo, Veruntamen si tu: utinam audias me: dabo argentum agri, cape a me, et sepeliam mortuum meum ibi.
14. And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him,
14. Et respondit Ephron and Abraham, dicendo ei,
15. My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that betwixt me and thee? bury therefore thy dead.

15. Domine mi, audi me, terra quadringentorum siclorum argenteorum est inter me et to, quid est? et mortuum tuum sepeli.

16. And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.

16. Et obedivit Abraham ipsi Ephron, et appendit Abraham ipsi Ephron argentum quod loquutus fuerat in auribus filiorum Heth, quadringentos siclos argenteos transeuntes per mercatores.

17. And the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders round about, were made sure

17. Et confirmatus est ager Ephron, qui erat in spelunca duplici, qui erat coram Mamre: ager et spelunca, quae erat in eo, et omnis arbor, quae erat in agro, quae erat in omni termino ejus per circuitum:

18. Unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city.

18. Ipsi Abraham in possessionem, in oculis filiorum Heth, omnium ingredientum portam civitatis ejus.

19. And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan.

19. Et postea sepelivit Abraham Sarah uxorem suam in spelunca agri duplici coram Mamre: haec est Hebron in terra Chanaan.

20. And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the sons of Heth.

20. Et confirmatus est ager, et spelunca que erat in eo, ipsi Abraham in haereditatem sepulchri a filiis Heth.

1. And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old 450 It is remarkable that Moses, who relates the death of Sarah in a single word, uses so many in describing her burial: but we shall soon see that the latter record is not superfluous. Why he so briefly alludes to her death, I know not, except that he leaves more to be reflected upon by his readers than he expresses. The holy fathers saw that they in common with reprobates, were subject to death. Nevertheless, they were not deterred, While painfully leading a life full of suffering, from advancing with intrepidity towards the goal. Whence it follows, that they, being animated by the hope of a better life, did not give way to fatigue. Moses says that Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years, and since he repeats the word years after each of the numbers, the Jews feign that this was done because she had been as beautiful in her hundredth, as in her twentieth year, and as modest in the flower of her age, as when she was seven years old. This is their custom; while they wish to prove themselves skillful in doing honor to their nations they invent frivolous trifles, which betray a shameful ignorance: as, for instance, in this place, who would not say that they were entirely ignorant of their own languages in which this kind of repetition is most usual? The discussion of others also, on the word **■ ■ ■ ■**, (lives ,) is without solidity. The reason why the Hebrews use the word lives in the plural number, for life , cannot be better explained, as it appears to me, than the reason why the Latins

express some things which are singular in plural forms. 451 I know that the life of men is manifold, because, beyond merely vegetative life, and beyond the sense which they have in common with brute animals, they are also endued with mind and intelligence. This reasoning, therefore, is plausible without being solid. There is more color of truth in the opinion of those who think that the various events of human life are signified; which life, since it has nothing stable, but is agitated by perpetual vicissitudes, is rightly divided into many lives. I am, however, contented to refer simply to the idiom of the language; the reason of which is not always to be curiously investigated.

2. And Sarah died in Kirjath-arba . It appears from Jos 15:54, that this was the more ancient name of the city, which afterwards began to be called Hebron. But there is a difference of opinion respecting the etymology. Some think the name is derived from the fact, that the city consisted of four parts; as the Greeks call the city divided into three orders, Tripoli , and a given region, Decapolis , from the ten cities it contained. Others suppose that Arba is the name of a giant, whom they believe to have been the king or the founder of the city. Others again prefer the notion, that the name was given to the place from four 452 of the Fathers, Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were buried there with their wives. I willingly suspend my judgment on a matter of uncertainty, and not very necessary to be known. It more concerns the present history to inquire, how it happened that Sarah died in a different place from that in which Abraham dwelt. If any one should reply, that they had both changed their abode, the words of Moses are opposed to that, for he says that Abraham came to bury his dead. It is hence easily inferred, that he was not present at her death; nor is it probable that they were separated, merely by being in different tents; so that he might walk ten or twenty paces for the sake of mourning, while a more important duty had been neglected. For this reason, some suspect that he was on a journey at the time. But to me it seems more likely that their abode was then at Heron, or at least in the vale of Mamre, which adjoins the city. For, after a little breathing time had been granted him he was soon compelled to return to his accustomed wanderings. And although Moses does not say, that Abraham had paid to his wife while yet alive, the due attentions of a husband; I think that he omits it, as a thing indubitably certain, and that he speaks particularly of the mourning, as a matter connected with the care of sepulture. That they dwelt separately we shall afterwards see: not as being in different regions, but because each inhabited separate, though contiguous, tents. And this was no sign of dissension or of strife, but is rather to be ascribed to the size of the family. For as Abraham had much trouble in governing so large a herd of servants; so his wife would have equal difficulty to retain her maids under chaste and honest custody. Therefore the great number of domestics which it was not safe to mingle together, compelled them to divide the family.

But it may be asked, what end could it answer to approach the body for the sake of mourning over it? Was not the death of his wife sufficiently sad and bitter to call forth his grief, without this additional means of excitement? It would have been better to seek the alleviation of his sorrow, than to cherish and even augment it, by indulgence. I answer; if Abraham came to his dead wife, in order to produce excessive weeping, and to pierce his heart afresh with new wounds, his example is not to be approved. But if he both privately wept over the death of his wife, so far as humanity prescribed, exercising self-government in doing it; and also voluntarily mourned over the common curse of mankind; there is no fault in either of these. For to feel no sadness at the contemplation of death, is rather barbarism and stupor than fortitude of mind. Nevertheless, as Abraham was a man, it might be, that his grief was excessive. And yet, what Moses soon after subjoins, that he rose up from his dead, is spoken in praise of his moderation; whence Ambrose prudently infers, that we are taught by this example, how perversely they act, who occupy themselves too much in mourning for the dead. Now, if Abraham at that time, assigned a limit to his grief; and put a restraint on his feelings, when the doctrine of the resurrection was yet obscure; they are without

excuse, who, at this day, give the reins to impatience, since the most abundant consolation is supplied to us in the resurrection of Christ.

3. And spake unto the sons of Heth . Moses is silent respecting the rite used by Abraham in the burial of the body of his wife: but he proceeds, at great length, to recite the purchasing of the sepulcher. For what reason he did this, we shall see presently, when I shall briefly allude to the custom of burial. How religiously this has been observed in all ages, and among all people, is well known. Ceremonies have indeed been different, and men have endeavored to outdo each other in various superstitions; meanwhile, to bury the dead has been common to all.

And this practice has not arisen either from foolish curiosity, or from the desire of fruitless consolation, or from superstition, but from the natural sense with which God has imbued the minds of men; a sense he has never suffered to perish, in order that men might be witnesses to themselves of a future life. It is also incredible that they, who have disseminated certain outrageous expressions in contempt of sepulture, could have spoken from the heart. Truly it behoves us, with magnanimity, so far to disregard the rites of sepulture, -- as we would riches and honors, and the other conveniences of life, -- that we should bear with equanimity to be deprived of them; yet it cannot be denied that religion carries along with it the care of burial.

And certainly (as I have said) it has been divinely engraven on the minds of all people, from the beginning, that they should bury the dead; whence also they have ever regarded sepulchres as sacred. It has not, I confess, always entered into the minds of heathens that souls survived death, and that the hope of a resurrection remained even for their bodies ; nor have they been accustomed to exercise themselves in a pious meditation of this kind, whenever they had laid their dead in the grave; but this inconsideration of theirs does not disprove the fact; that they had such a representation of a future life placed before their eyes, as left them inexcusable.

Abraham however, seeing he has the hope of a resurrection deeply fixed in his heart, sedulously cherished, as was meet, its visible symbol. The importance he attached to it appears hence, that he thought he should be guilty of pollution, if he mingled the body of his wife with strangers after death. For he bought a cave, in order that he might possess for himself and his family, a holy and pure sepulcher. He did not desire to have a foot of earth whereon to fix his tent; he only took care about his grave: and he especially wished to have his own domestic tomb in that land, which had been promised him for an inheritance, for the purpose of bearing testimony to posterity, that the promise of God was not extinguished either by his own death, or by that of his family; but that it then rather began to flourish; and that they who were deprived of the light of the sun, and of the vital air, yet always remained joint-partakers of the promised inheritance.

For while they themselves were silent and speechless, the sepulcher cried aloud, that death formed no obstacle to their entering on the possession of it. A thought like this could have had no place, unless Abraham by faith had looked up to heaven. And when he calls the corpse of his wife his dead ; he intimates that death is a divorce of that kind, which still leaves some remaining conjunction. Moreover, nothing but a future restoration cherishes and preserves the law of mutual connection between the living and the dead. But it is better briefly to examine each particular, in its order.

4. I am a stranger and a sojourner with you . This introductory sentence tends to one or other of these points; either that he may more easily gain what he desires by suppliantly asking for it; or that he may

remove all suspicion of cupidity on his part. He therefore confesses, that, since he had only a precarious abode among them, he could possess no sepulcher, unless by their permission. And because, during life, they have permitted him to dwell within their territory, it was the part of humanity, not to deny him a sepulcher for his dead. If this sense be approved, then Abraham both conciliates their favor to himself, by his humility, and in declaring that the children of Heth had dealt kindly with him, he stimulates them, by this praise, to proceed in the exercise of the same liberality with which they had begun. The other sense, however, is not incongruous; namely, that Abraham, to avert the odium which might attach to him as a purchaser, declares that he desires the possession, not for the advantage of the present life, not from ambition or avarice, but only in order that his dead may not lie unburied; as if he had said, I do not refuse to continue to live a stranger among you, as I have hitherto done; I do not desire your possessions, in order that I may have something of my own, which may enable me hereafter to contend for equality with you; it is enough for me to have a place where we may be buried.

6. Thou art a mighty prince among us 453 The Hittites gratuitously offer a burying-place to Abraham wherever he might please to choose one. They testify that they do this, as a tribute to his virtues. We have before seen, that the Hebrews give a divine title to anything which excels. Therefore we are to understand by the expression, 'a prince of God,' a person of great and singular excellency. And they properly signalize him whom they reverence for his virtues, with this eulogium; thereby testifying, that they ascribe to God alone, whatever virtues in men are deserving of praise and reverence. Now some seed of piety manifests itself in the Hittites, by thus doing honor to Abraham, whom they acknowledge to be adorned with rare gifts of the Spirit of God. For profane and brutal men tread under foot, with barbarous contempt, every excellent gift of God, as swine do pearls. And yet we know with how many vices those nations were defiled; how much greater then, and more disgraceful is our ingratitude, if we give no honor to the image of God, when it shines before our eyes? Abraham's sanctity of manners procures him such favor with the Hittites, that they do not envy his preeminence among them; what excuse then is there for us, if we hold in less esteem those virtues in which the majesty of God is conspicuous? Truly their madness is diabolical, who not only despise the favors of God, but even ferociously oppose them.

7. And Abraham stood up . He declines the favor offered by the Hittites, as, some suppose, with this design, that he might not lay himself under obligation to them in so small a matter. But he rather wished to show, in this way, that he would receive no gratuitous possession from those inhabitants who were to be ejected by the hand of Gods in order that he might succeed in their place: for he always kept all his thoughts fixed on God, so that he far preferred His bare promise, to present dominion over the land. Moses also commends the modesty of the holy man, when he says that he 'rose up to do reverence to the people of the land.' 454 As to the use of the word signifying 'to adore,' it is simply taken for the reverence, which any one declares, either by bowing the knee, or any other gesture of the body. This may be paid to men, as well as to God, but for a different end; men mutually either bend the knee, or bow the head, before each other, for the sake of civil honor; but if the same thing be done to them, for the sake of religion, it is profanation. For religion allows of no other worship them that of the true God. And they childishly trifle who make a pretext for their idolatry, in the words *dulia* and *latria*, 455 since the Scripture, in general terms, forbids adoration to be transferred to men. But lest any one should be surprised that Abraham acted so suppliantly, and so submissively, we must be aware that it was done from common custom and use. For it is well known that the Orientals were immoderate in their use of ceremonies. If we compare the Greeks or Italians with ourselves, we are more sparing in the use of them than they. But Aristotle, in speaking of the Asiatics and other barbarians notes this fault, that they abound too much in adorations. Wherefore we must not measure the honor which Abraham paid to the princes of the land by

our customs.

8. If it be in your mind . Abraham constitutes them his advocates with Ephron, to persuade him to sell the double cave. 456 Some suppose the cave to have been so formed that one part was above, and the other below. Let every one be at liberty to adopt what opinion he pleases; I, however, rather suppose, that there was one entrance, but that within, the cave was divided by a middle partition. It is more pertinent to remarks that Abraham, by offering a full price, cultivated and maintained equity. Where is there one to be found, who, in buying, and in other business, does not eagerly pursue his own advantage at another's cost? For while the seller sets the price at twice the worth of a thing, that he may extort as much as possible from the buyer, and the buyers in return, by shuffling, attempts to reduce it to a low price, there is no end of bargaining. And although avarice has specious pretexts, it yet causes those who make contracts with each other, to forget the claims of equity and justice. This also, finally deserves to be noticed; that Abraham often declares that he was buying the field for a place of sepulture. And Moses is the more minute in this matter, that we may learn, with our father Abraham, to raise our minds to the hope of the resurrection. He saw the half of himself taken away; but because he was certain that his wife was not exiled from the kingdom of God, he hides her dead body in the tomb, until he and she should be gathered together.

11. Hear me . Although Ephron earnestly insisted upon giving the field freely to Abraham, the holy man adheres to his purpose, and at length compels him, by his entreaties, to sell the field. Ephron, in excusing himself, says that the price was too small for Abraham to insist upon giving; yet he estimates it at four hundred shekels. Now, since Josephus says that the shekel of the sanctuary was worth four Attic drachms, if he is speaking of these, we gather from the computation of Budaeus that the price of the field was about two hundred and fifty pounds of French money; if we understand the common shekel, it will be half that amount. Abraham was not so scrupulous but that he would have received a greater gift, if there had not been a sufficient reason to prevent him. He had been presented with considerable gifts both by the king of Egypt and the king of Gerar, but he observed this rule; that he would neither receive all things , nor in all places , nor from all persons . And I have lately explained, that he bought the field, in order that he might not possess a foot of land, by the gift of any man.

16. And Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver . I know not what had come into Jerome's mind, when he says, that one letter was abstracted from Ephron's name, after he had been persuaded, by Abraham's entreaties, to receive money for the field; because, by the sale of the sepulcher, his virtue was maimed or diminished: for, in fact, the name of Ephron is found written in the very same manner, after that event, as before. Nor ought it to be imputed to Ephron as a fault, that, being pressed, he took the lawful price for his estate; when he had been prepared liberally to give it. If there was any sin in the case, Abraham must bear the whole blame. But who shall dare to condemn a just sale, in which, on both sides, religion, good faith, and equity, are maintained? Abraham, it is argued, bought the field for the sake of having a sepulcher. But ought Ephron on that account to give it freely, and under the pretext of a sepulcher, to be defrauded of his right? We see here, then, nothing but mere trifling. The Canonists, however, -- preposterous and infatuated as they are, -- rashly laying hold of the expressions of Jerome, have determined that it is a prodigious sacrilege to sell sepulchres. Yet, in the meantime, all the Papal sacrificers securely exercise this traffic: and while they acknowledge the cemetery to be a common sepulcher, they suffer no grave to be dug, unless the price be paid.

Current money with the merchant . Moses speaks thus, because money is a medium of mutual communication between men. It is principally employed in buying and selling merchandise. Whereas

Moses says, in the close of the chapter, that the field was confirmed by the Hittites to Abraham for a possession; the sense is, that the purchase was publicly attested; for although a private person sold it, yet the people were present, and ratified the contract between the two parties.

Footnotes

450

Literally, "The lives of Sarah were a hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years."

451

"Quam quod Latini quadrigas dicant non quadrigam."

452

The word ■■■■ (arba) signifies four.

453

"Princeps es Dei." See margin of English version. Heb., a prince of God. -- Ed

454

"Ut adoraret populum terrae." This is not a correct quotation from his own version of the chapter, which is, "Incurvavit se populo terrae," as in our version, "bowed himself to the people of the land." -- Ed

455

"Ac pueriliter nugantur qui in vocibus duliae et latriae fucum faciunt." -- "Qui pensent farder leur idolatrie par ces mots de Dulie et Latrie." -- French Tr

456

Hebrews ■■■■■■ ■■■■, (mearath hummakpelah ,) 'the double cave.' See Septuagint Our translators have preferred rendering the word Machpelah as a proper name. -- Ed

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-calvin/genesis-231-20/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net