

Genesis 23 (2011)

- The story of Abraham is drawing to a close in Genesis
 - We still have a couple of chapters before we note Abraham's death
 - But Moses is preparing us even now to move to the next patriarch, Isaac
 - And it's worth noting that the occasion for this transition was Abraham's success on the mountain
 - Having passed the test, Abraham's faith has been demonstrated and the promises of God are secure in his heart
 - But before Abraham may leave the earth peacefully, he knows he must attend to two important details
 - First, he must prepare a place for he and his wife to be buried
 - Proper burial was an important sign of respect, but Abraham has nowhere he can claim for his resting place
 - He has remained a wanderer in the land
 - He has never bought any land or even allowed someone to give him a portion of land as a gift
 - The most he has obtained is the right to sojourn in the land of Gerar
 - But Abraham wants to be buried in a place he can rightfully call his own
 - And this will also be the resting place for his wife
 - So he must make arrangements to buy a plot of land
 - The second thing Abraham must attend to is finding a wife for his son
 - This was the most important duty of a patriarch
 - Fathers selected wives for sons and arranging marriages was of supreme importance

- Abraham had Isaac late in life, and so he feels a sense of urgency to find Isaac a wife soon
- Today we learn how Abraham handled the first priority
 - And in coming weeks we'll learn how Abraham finds Isaac's wife
 - But interestingly at the end of Chapter 22, Moses inserts a moment of insight concerning finding Isaac a wife before he begins the story of Abraham's burial place

[Gen. 22:20](#) Now it came about after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor:

[Gen. 22:21](#) Uz his firstborn and Buz his brother and Kemuel the father of Aram

[Gen. 22:22](#) and Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph and Bethuel."

[Gen. 22:23](#) Bethuel became the father of Rebekah; these eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.

[Gen. 22:24](#) His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah and Gaham and Tahash and Maacah.

- After Abraham returns from Mt. Moriah with Isaac, he receives some welcome news
 - Abraham learns that his brother Nahor has also been raising a family back in Ur
 - We remember from Genesis 11 that Abraham's father, Terah, had three sons: Abraham, Nahor and Haran
 - Haran died in Ur before having any daughters
 - Abraham married Sarah and left Ur with his father, headed to Canaan according to God's instructions
 - That left Nahor as the last living relative of Abraham back in Ur
 - It's been about 65 years since Abraham last heard anything about his brother back home
 - But now Abraham learns that Nahor's wife, Milcah, has given Nahor a large family
 - Nahor has eight sons
 - And then Nahor took a concubine and produced four more sons

- But Moses is careful to note that one of Nahor's sons, Bethuel, born to Nahor's first wife, was the father of Rebekah
- This news might have given Abraham reason to return to Ur
 - First, it would be natural for Abraham to want to be near his family, especially as he entered the last years of his life
 - Not only could he find a wife for Isaac among friends and family members, but Abraham could also expect to be buried on the family land
 - Instead, Moses carefully records Abraham's determination to remain living in the land but not joining with its people
 - Abraham is going to find a burial place in a land that is not his home
 - And he's going to find a wife for his son that won't call Canaan home either
 - A woman from Ur who sees Canaan as a foreign place as well

Gen. 23:1 Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.

Gen. 23:2 Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

- Sarah dies at the age of 127
 - Sarah is the only woman in Scripture to have her age at death noted
 - At this point Abraham is 137 old himself
 - They've been married for probably over 100 years
 - And Abraham goes into the tent where Sarah had been lying and weeps for her
 - We understand how hard it is for someone to lose a spouse after a long marriage
 - But how hard is it to lose someone after over 100 years of life together?
 - The separation must have been unbearable

- In fact, Abraham will live another 38 years without Sarah
- And her death also greatly affects Isaac, leaving him sad and desiring a wife to fill the void left by his mother
- We can also assume that Abraham's mourning was greatly lessened by his confidence in knowing he would see her again in the kingdom
 - This is the same hope that comforts all believers in the face of death – that the death process leads to something greater
- We're told Sarah dies in Hebron
 - Hebron is 25 miles northeast of Beersheba, which was the place that Abraham was living in Chapter 22 when he took Isaac to Mt. Moriah
 - The name Hebron came along later, as Moses indicates in the text
 - The name of the place in Abraham's day is Kiriath-arba
 - It gains the name Hebron later from Abraham
 - The word *hebron* means friend, as in the friend of God
 - Hearing that Sarah died in this area tell us that Abraham is still sojourning, not settling down in the land
 - In Chapter 22, he was living in Beersheba but he has left the land of Gerar and has moved into another area of Canaan
 - Just to reiterate...a nomadic lifestyle is very unusual for anyone with the wealth of Abraham
 - Normally, a man like Abraham would have settled down in a city or built his own city
 - But Abraham does not want the world to think that he sees this earth as his inheritance from God
 - He understands that his inheritance in the land will come in a future time
 - But Sarah's death places Abraham in a difficult situation
 - He has nowhere to place the body of his beloved wife

- And one day Abraham will want to join her in death, so he needs to find a place that he can assure will remain available to him forever
- Since he's been careful to avoid setting down roots in Canaan, he has nowhere to turn
- So Abraham turns to the locals seeking to obtain a burial plot

[Gen. 23:3](#) Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying,

[Gen. 23:4](#) "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

[Gen. 23:5](#) The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him,

[Gen. 23:6](#) "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead."

- Abraham immediately left his wife's body and entered the nearest city
 - The nearest settlement was a city of the sons of Heth, a Hittite
 - Abraham goes into the city and meets with the sons of Heth in the gate of the city
 - The "sons" of Heth refers generally to the ruling clan of the town
 - They are the elders of the city and the land
 - All land belonged to a king, but he permitted individuals to own the land provided they paid taxes or rendered service to the king in armies, etc.
 - So Abraham goes to the city elders asking to purchase just enough land to bury his wife
- Any purchase in the Eastern culture followed a very specific pattern of negotiation
 - It was a carefully orchestrated dance intended to ensure that both sides obtained the best possible terms while saving face
 - Neither party could appear to have been taken advantage of
 - Abraham, however, follows the traditions and culture only enough to ensure he obtains the land
 - Otherwise, he doesn't try to negotiate to improve his position

- For example, Abraham begins by announcing he needs to purchase the land to bury his wife
 - Immediately, the sons of Heth and all those listening in the gate know that Abraham is desperate
 - He can't wait long for the negotiation to conclude
 - This is like buying a ticket for an airplane that is already boarding
 - But the sons of Heth themselves would lose dignity if they appeared to gouge Abraham over his misfortune
 - So they play their part in this dance
- They begin in calling Abraham "lord", as a sign of respect
 - They compliment him as a "mighty prince" among them
 - There is certainly plenty of truth to these statements
 - God has indeed blessed Abraham as He promised
 - Abraham is mighty in many ways, and his reputation precedes him throughout the land
 - Then they make their dance move: they tell Abraham he can have any of their choicest graves
 - At first it sounds like a generous offer
 - Abraham gets any plot he wants for free
 - But that's not how things worked in that day, and Abraham knew it
 - Had Abraham accepted this "offer" he would have greatly offended the sons of Heth and probably never received any plot
 - Instead, Abraham must give regard for the gracious offer and then refuse it

Gen. 23:7 So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth.
Gen. 23:8 And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me,
Gen. 23:9 that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site."

- Abraham had been seated on the ground during the discussions, which was customary, but now he rises to bow
 - Bowing in this way was a sign of respect acknowledging the extreme kindness of their offer
 - This was the dance that they expected and Abraham understood
 - In fact, Abraham bows before both the city elders and the people of the land
 - Apparently this negotiation had attracted a crowd in the gate from among those going in and out of the city
 - The elders wanted credit for their fake offer of generosity, and Abraham was giving it to them
 - Abraham continues in the negotiation by ignoring their offer but then taking another step forward in the process
 - He says that if they did want him to bury his wife in their land, then please direct Ephron to sell Abraham the cave of Machpelah
 - Apparently, Abraham knew of this cave and believed it would serve as a good burial place
 - The city elders had the power to broker a sale, and Abraham is asking them to make this deal happen
 - Abraham adds that he wants it given in their presence, meaning right away
 - Here again Abraham is not doing himself any favors, because he makes it clear he must do the deal immediately
 - Then the deals moves forward...

Gen. 23:10 Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying,

Gen. 23:11 "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead."

- The owner of this cave happened to be sitting among the sons of Heth in the gate

- This tells us he was probably one of the elders or leaders of the city
 - Abraham may have chosen that particular cave because he noticed the owner was already present on that day in the gate
 - Thus it would ensure Abraham could make a quick deal
- The cave owner Ephron answered Abraham's request by joining in the negotiation dance
 - He calls Abraham "my lord" also
 - And he says he will "give" Abraham both the cave and the entire field that held the cave
- At first this would seem like a very kind and generous offer
 - But again, this is a negotiation dance
 - Neither the land nor the cave would be free in the end
 - Everyone including Abraham knew that
- Secondly, the offer of the entire field was not a sign of generosity either
 - Under Hittite laws of the day, the king would collect taxes on anyone who owned land
 - But the taxes were paid by the owner of the entire field or plot of land
 - Someone who owned only a small piece of the land would not pay taxes
 - So Ephron wants Abraham to take the entire field so that Ephron will avoid paying taxes on land that Abraham is using
- Now it's Abraham's turn again...

[Gen. 23:12](#) And Abraham bowed before the people of the land.

[Gen. 23:13](#) He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me that I may bury my dead there."

- Once again, Abraham bows to show thanks and recognition of the generous offer (all the while knowing it wasn't sincere)
 - Then Abraham answered by agreeing to pay for the entire field

- And he insists he will pay for the field
 - The insistence to pay was completely expected by the culture
 - But Abraham's quick agreement to buy the field was a concession on his part
 - Abraham isn't interested in playing this game any longer than necessary to obtain a burial place for his wife
- Since Abraham conceded so quickly on the earlier point, Ephron decides to push Abraham harder

Gen. 23:14 Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him,

Gen. 23:15 "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead."

Gen. 23:16 Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard.

- Ephron cleverly asks why should a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver stand between their friendship
 - In effect, Ephron is saying let's not argue over a piece of land that is "only" worth 400 shekels
 - As if that's such a small amount we shouldn't even be talking about payment
 - Just go bury your dead
 - His repeating of that phrase was intended to remind Abraham that the clock was ticking on getting his wife in the grave
 - He wanted Abraham to feel the pressure
 - In reality, an acre of land in Abraham's day was generally valued at about 40 shekels
 - So Ephron is asking Abraham to pay about 10 times the actual value of the land
 - In today's dollars, the land would be worth about \$5,600 but Ephron said why are we arguing about land worth only \$56,000

- Clearly, he was trying to take advantage of Abraham's desperation and gouge him, and everyone knew it
- But again, Abraham can't show it or he would dishonor the other party in the negotiation
- At this point in the negotiation, Abraham would have been expected to find some face-saving way to ask for the price to be reduced
 - This was the most difficult part of the process for the buyer, because it required that he find a way to request a reduction in the price without looking too weak
 - In the end, the buyer was expected to bring the price down but still pay the highest price he could before he lost face
- So what does Abraham do?
 - He simply weighs out the silver according to the commercial standard, meaning Abraham made sure he paid the exact amount
 - And he paid in view of everyone in the gate
 - He makes clear he is not dependent on a good deal nor does he intend to place himself in a position where anyone can say they did Abraham a favor
 - He grossly overpaid for the land

[Gen. 23:17](#) So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over

[Gen. 23:18](#) to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.

[Gen. 23:19](#) After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.

[Gen. 23:20](#) So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.

- And so Abraham now has a place in the land, but only a single field and only because he was required to buy it all
 - Abraham is now able to ensure that his remains and those of his wife will never leave the land God gave him
 - But he bought only what was necessary

- He never buys any more of the land, content instead to wait for the Lord to give Abraham the land promised
- Abraham was willing to buy a little land in Canaan at an exorbitant price rather than returning to the land of his ancestors where he could have been buried for little or nothing
- Notice that the last verse of the chapter seems to be unnecessary, since v.19 puts an end to the story
 - But v.20 is needed because the point of Chapter 23 is not the burial of Sarah
 - The point of Chapter 23 is that Abraham has established once and for all that his family will call Canaan home
 - Isaac and Jacob as well as Abraham used this burial site. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah were all buried here.
- This place is home now