

GENESIS

Chapter 23

The Death of Sarah

Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. ² 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. ³ Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, ⁴ “I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.” ⁵ The Hittites replied to Abraham, ⁶ “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.” ⁷ Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ “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.” ¹² Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ Ephron answered Abraham, ¹⁵ “Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead.” ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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 ¹⁸ to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

23:1 Sarah is the only woman whose age at death is recorded in the Bible. (TLSB)

If Abraham is called the father of believers, then she is the mother of believers. At God’s call she too left a comfortable life in Ur of the Chaldeans to spend the last half of her life as a nomad, living in a tent in Canaan’s inhospitable southland. Her marriage, which may have lasted a century, was marked by the special blessings of God. She stood by her husband faithfully as God led him from one step in the divine training program to another. (PBC)

Sarah, the free woman, is a picture of the church of the NT, whose children are children of the promise, reborn by power of the Spirit (Gal.4:24-31). (PBC)

23:2 SHE DIED – After Sarah lived to see her son grow to be a man of thirty-seven, God called her to himself. (PBC)

Kiriath Arba. Means “the town of Arba” (Arba was the most prominent member of a tribe living in the Hebron area [see Jos 14:15]). It can also mean “the town of four,” referring to the place where Anak (see Jos 15:13–14; 21:11) and his three sons lived (see Jdg 1:10, 20). (CSB)

went. Either from Beersheba to Hebron or into where Sarah’s body was lying. (CSB)

MOURN...WEEP – Abraham not only wept tears of sadness at the death of his beloved, he also gave an audible expression to his grief, in the custom of that day. (PBC)

23:3 *Hittites.* See note on 10:15. They were apparently in control of the Hebron area at this time. (CSB)

They held the city of Hebron; descendants of Heth, a son of Canaan. (TLSB)

23:4 *an alien and a stranger.* The phrase was used often by the patriarchs and their descendants in reference to themselves (see 1Ch 29:15; Ps 39:12; see also Heb 11:13). On this earth Abraham “lived in tents” (Heb 11:9), the most temporary of dwellings. But he looked forward to the more permanent home promised him, which the author of Hebrews calls “the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). (CSB)

Abraham possessed no land in the country. (TLSB)

Now Abraham faced a problem. For reasons which will become clear, he wanted Sarah to be buried in the land of Canaan. But he was an alien, a stranger in the land. He therefore went to the city gate in Hebron, where he had moved after leaving Beersheba, and appealed to the city fathers. We’re surprised to learn these were Hittites members of a Canaanite people who had originally come from what is today Turkey and had migrated south. Abraham’s request shows he realized he was asking for a favor, the right to own land in a country where he was a stranger. (PBC)

23:6 *You are a mighty prince.* Probably intended as words of flattery. (CSB)

He is a prophet of the Lord (20:7), a friend of God. The Hittites honored him as a holy, honorable man because God had blessed him. (TLSB)

NONE...WILL REFUSE – They were haggling, to hold out for more money. They were not eager to give away their land. (TLSB)

23:8 INTERCEDE WITH EPHRON – A ruler who had a city (v. 10). Abraham was seeking allies to support the transaction. (TLSB)

To insure that his request would be granted, he asked the city officials to act for him, instead of dealing with the owner personally. (PBC)

23:9 *cave of Machpelah*. Though inaccessible today, the tombs of several patriarchs and their wives—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah (see v. 19; 25:8–10; 49:30–31; 50:12–13)—are, according to tradition, located in a large cave deep beneath the Mosque of Abraham, a Muslim shrine in Hebron. (CSB)

end of his field. Because buying the entire field would have made Abraham responsible for certain additional financial and social obligations, he wanted to buy only a small part of it. Hittite laws stipulated that when a landowner sold only part of his property to someone else, the original and principal landowner had to continue paying all dues on the land. But if the landowner disposed of an entire tract, the new owner had to pay the dues. (CSB)

FULL PRICE – The parcel of land he chose was a cave, unusable for farming or grazing. And he made it clear he was not asking for a gift. (PBC)

23:10 *in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate*. The main gateway of a city was usually the place where legal matters were transacted and attested (see v. 18; see also note on 19:1). (CSB)

23:11 *my lord*. Perhaps intended to flatter Abraham (see v. 15). (CSB)

More haggling. (TLSB)

give. See NIV text note. (CSB)

Apparently the land was for Abraham's use, but not for him to possess. (TLSB)

23:15 *four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you?* See note on 20:16. Despite Ephron's pretense of generosity, 400 shekels of silver was an exorbitant price for a field (see, e.g., Jer 32:9). Ephron was taking advantage of Abraham during a time of grief and bereavement. He knew that Abraham had to deal quickly in order to have a place to bury Sarah, so he insisted that Abraham buy the entire lot and assume responsibility for the dues as well. (CSB)

We're led to think that Ephron expected a counter-offer from Abraham, after which serious bargaining could begin. (PBC)

23:16 *weight current among the merchants*. Subject to more variation and therefore greater dishonesty than the later royal standard (see 2Sa 14:26), which was carefully regulated and more precise. (CSB)

Ephron must have been surprised when Abraham, an experienced businessman, accepted his initial offer. With the city officials as witnesses, Abraham paid Ephron the full price he had suggested. Since minting coins did not become common for another ten or twelve centuries, Abraham weighed out the purchase price, perhaps in silver bars. The transaction was duly recorded, and the field at Machpelah, including the cave and all the trees on it, was deeded to Abraham. (PBC)

23:17 *the field and the cave in it, and all the trees.* In order to be free of all obligations relating to the field in which the cave of Machpelah was located, Ephron had held out for the sale of the entire field and its contents (see note on v. 9). (CSB)

A legal contract required naming all that was on the field. (TLSB)

23:18 PROPERTY – Abraham made certain that his wife’s and his remains would rest in the Promised Land, a testimony to his descendants that he believed God’s promises. Hebron is on the highest elevation in Canaan from which one may view all the land that Israel would come to possess. Proper care for the bodies of departed believers was important. (TLSB)

23:19 *buried his wife ... in the land of Canaan.* In that culture, people had a strong desire to be buried “with their fathers” (see note on 25:8) in their native land. By purchasing a burial place in Canaan, Abraham indicated his unswerving commitment to the Lord’s promise. Canaan was his new homeland. (CSB)

In due time, the cave would also hold Abraham’s remains and those of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. A clear title to the land was important. (TLSB)

Abraham, “father of believers,” was a man who lived by faith in God’s promises. He never lived to see the fulfillment of most of them. He never saw his descendants grow into a mighty nation or take possession of the Promised Land. And of course he never lived to see his greatest Descendant, through whose perfect life and innocent death all families of the earth would be blessed. But this chapter emphasizes that Abraham believed God’s promises, even though he didn’t witness their fulfillment. And although Abraham could have returned to his relatives in Haran and found a family burial site for Sarah there, Abraham’s actions declared: “Haran is not my home any more. The future of my family lies in Canaan, because God has said so. Here is where God’s great plan will reach fulfillment, and here is where I am determined to remain. (PBC)

Ch 23 Sarah’s death is the occasion for a significant development: Abraham purchases a plot of ground in the Promised Land, a testimony to his confidence in God’s promises and to his concern for his wife’s remains. At times of death, it is important to give clear testimony to our faith in God’s promises, even as God Himself did. God’s testimony at the time of His Son’s death was clear. By raising Him from the dead on the third day, He assured bodily resurrection and eternal life in heaven for all who believe in Him. • O Lord, grant us confidence in Your promises like that of Abraham, a confidence that is reflected in all we do. Amen. (TLSB)