

“4.0 on the Richter Scale”
 Sermon for 17 November 2019
 Text: Genesis 23; Isaiah 53:10-12

A few observations: this chapter covers Sarah’s death and burial but only two of the eighteen verses deal with the emotional freight of this event. The rest are taken up with business practice! There are three notable firsts in this chapter: 1. a graveyard is the first real estate transaction; 2. silver, or precious metal, is first noted as currency; and 3. this is the first recorded instance of mourning and burial. The etymology of the English word “scale” (for weighing derives from the word shekel (used here, 23:16)) and both come from the Hebrew “shakal” meaning *to weigh out, and so measure*. Those firsts duly noted, I have a powerful recollection of doing my morning’s devotions in ancient Corinth. I was seated in the agora, marketplace, on a paving stone and meditating on Acts 16, the chapter which relates **a great earthquake** (v.26). And, as I did, an earthquake actually occurred. The timing and the tremors were both upsetting. A tour guide noticing my dismay, laughed, and said, “It’s an earthquake. They happen frequently here.” Still, it was very unsettling to experience the earth’s untrustworthiness first hand. Everything fixed was moving, the earth surface shuddered fluidly—**a fluttering terror!** Some year or two later, I was in Sweden, Maine watching the news with Dad when we experienced an earthquake, 4.0 on the Richter Scale, and I was able, on the basis of my prior experience to nonchalantly inform my father, who had exclaimed, “What was the that?! The furnace must have blown up!” “It’s only an earthquake.” I think my father was skeptical of my knowing anything because it was only when a notice flashed across the tv screen that he grunted, “Hmm, I guess you were right.”

The death of Sarah was like an earthquake in Abraham’s life. Sarah who was ten years younger than Abraham, died thirty-eight years before him and thirty-seven years after the birth of Isaac. 1 Peter 3:1-6 cites Sarah as a positive model of wifely obedience, a model of godly living. Being godly makes you different, requires discretion compels separation—necessarily so:

3 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, 2 as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. 3 Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; 4 but let it be the hidden person of the heart, *with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit*, [the meek and humble traits] which is precious in the sight of God. 5 For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; 6 just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

Our goal in life should be to be *fearlessly good!* We have acquainted ourselves with Sarah’s faults somewhat: she seems intemperate and rash, complicit in deception, skeptical and quarrelsome. But I should eulogize her upon consideration of her death. She was largely sober, and lived a life of unadorned simplicity (the pattern of 1 Peter

3:1-6). She was holy, modest, meek and quiet most of the time. She was dear to Abraham; he called her “my princess” every time he used her name! She was private, unostentatious, naturally beautiful and unassuming. . . dutiful and hospitable. She tarried at home—housekeeping in a tent! She yielded intelligent companionship and service to her husband through out their eventful and adventurous marriage. She was, scripturally, mother to the Ishmaelite’s and the Hebrews—and, most pointedly, mother to **the seed of promise**, Isaac, second only to Mary the mother of Jesus! She was bonded to Abraham by their intimate and domestic life together—a help-meet in word and deed. A sister who could stand up to a comparison with the Proverbs Thirty-One Woman as **an excellent, or virtuous wife**. She “sojournered” with her husband.

It is no wonder that he *entered* her tent, *viewed* her dead body, and then **mourned** and **wept**. He had liberty to grieve. He also had *duties due the dead to perform* and the chapter details Abraham’s **business dealings surrounding her decease**. The business that surrounds a funeral is both a helpful distraction and part of moving on—by which I mean, dealing with one’s grief and honoring the dead. Abraham refers to **my dead** eight times in this chapter. While the death of a loved one is an awful and arresting thing—the procurement of a grave and the attendant ceremonies do establish some continuity between the living and the dead.

Still, this world is more a graveyard than a home to the saints¹. And the grave is more a waiting place, a resting place, a temporary arrangement . . . it reflects a certain degree of *the precariousness of abode* signaled by the pilgrim life, the metaphor of journey. Some have developed this thought further. S. D. Burton wrote the lyrics for “This World Is Not My Home,” and John Bunyan’s Pilgrim is a depiction of the saint as a *stranger* and *an alien/sojourner* in **his great allegory** of the Christian life. Verses 3-4: **Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, “I am a sojourner and a foreigner among you, give me property among you for a burial place, that I might bury my dead out of my sight.”**

Before we delve into this deeper, I should explain who these Hittites, these sons of Heth, the son of Canaan, the grandson of Ham, were. *We are not very far removed from Noah here generationally!* They were **Canaanites**, the race, or people group from whom Esau, Abraham’s grandson, would choose his wives—at least initially. Later he would marry into Ishmael’s family. Canaanite women displeased both Sarah and Rebecca. Rebecca sent Jacob back to the family of Bethuel, her own family, where he found Rachael and Leah, the daughters of Laban, the son of Bethuel and brother to his mother! So, the Hittites were Canaanites; those who would eventually be evicted from Canaan to make space for God’s Chosen People, Israel under the leadership of Joshua. David had Hittites serving in his army such as Uriah even after the occupation of the Promised Land.

That clarified, let’s explore Abraham’s use of *foreigner/alien/stranger and sojourner (to maintain his godly distance from others)* in negotiating for the first real estate transaction(!) in Scripture: the procurement of a graveyard², the cave and field known as

¹ Perhaps a distinction of land use? A parking lot which is filled up to be emptied seems apt.

²It is our heavenly mindset that makes us most useful in worldly affairs. **We are all called to live our present lives in the light of our future lives.** Always. With regard to death, we are to deal with death as

Machpelah. He initiated the deal by asking to purchase the cave only. According to Hittite law (as found at Hettueas, Bogaskoi in Asia Minor), of which Laws 46-47 are most pertinent, the cave³, a small portion of Machpelah's field, could have been acquired as "a gift" and he would have incurred no feudal obligations. A later version of this law "stipulates that notice of the sale be made to the king and only those feudal services stipulated at the time are to be given. The holder of an entire field, however, was liable to these obligations. (Namely, fealty/loyalty, aid, counsel, maintenance, rent of fief and military service all fell into this category. This arrangement represents a agrarian society ruled by reciprocity.) A second relevant Hittite Law (#47) bears directly on this real estate deal. Lands held by gift incurred no obligations, but the sale of "all a field" did carry them. In fact, the larger portion of a field conveyed the feudal obligation to the buyer. Or, those "given a field by the people" (no sale) automatically incur the obligations *which means that the land itself bears the obligation*.⁴ These laws represent the constituted authority (Hittite) which Abraham was obliged to honor. Therefore Abraham's purchase is not the first real estate transaction; it is the first one recorded in scripture! And these laws underscore our dual citizenship: both heavenly and worldly.

These interactions take us into the realm of Oriental culture: the ceremonialism, the courtesies, the conventions and customs of the ancient Near East. We really cannot make sense of the business at hand if we do not take certain things into consideration. We need someone to interpret scripture who understands the culture, the setting. (Many apparent misunderstandings to away if we pay attention to the setting. (This is one reason that an educated clergy has maintained its value over the centuries.)

First of all, in the ancient Orient, there existed a tendency toward flattery, superlative phrases, like **prince of God** (v. 6) are high sounding, but they are not necessarily meant literally, nor are they referring to the God of Abraham here. It is more likely verbal puffery. *Extravagant speech aimed to disarm the victim of their flattery*. What we know is that the children of Heth had absolutely no expectation that their words would be taken seriously, literally, or at face value—that they should really mean what they appear to be saying.

Then, secondly, there is the Eastern custom of engaging/inserting many intermediaries—we call them middle-men—between the purchaser and the object to be

those who have a hope, who have the assurance of future life, of resurrection to that life. **We also affirm that God provides for the future in advance.** So Abraham's real estate deal gives him a legal claim to land in the Promised Land—and it secures a resting place for Sarah at the very site which will be the locus of her eventual, physical resurrection! The grave, for saints/ believers is an abode for the body until the return of Christ—then all the graves of all the saints will be as empty as the Lord's "borrowed" tomb on Easter morning! *There is no finality to the grave for believers at all!*

³ Tomb of Adam and Eve.—In Rabbinical Literature:

The name of "Machpelah" (= "the doubled one") belongs, according to the Rabbis, to the cave alone, their reasons for the name being various: it was a double cave, with two stories (Rab); it contained pairs of tombs (Samuel); it had a double value in the eyes of people who saw it; any one buried there could expect a double reward in the future world; when God buried Adam there He had to fold him together (Abahu; 'Er. 53a; Gen. R. lviii. 10). **Adam and Eve were the first pair buried there** and therefore Hebron, where the cave was situated, bore the additional name of "Kirjath-arba" (= "the city of four"; i.e., of the tombs of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah ('Er. 53a; Soṭah 13a; comp. Gen. R. lviii. 4). None of this has explicit biblical authority behind it.

⁴ Source: bible.org/seriespage/dealin-death-genesis-231-20. Citing Harold Stigers, A Commentary on Genesis, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976; p.193.

purchased. Everyone has to have his cut; *nothing is straightforward*. They say “gift” but they mean the “commodity” and it is assumed that everyone knows that “everything has its price.” However, it is just “rude” to say what it is plainly—or to be too forward in seeking to make a deal! You are eager to make a profit, but you mustn’t appear to be eager! No one says what they mean; that would be stupid, like showing your hand at poker and then bidding. So the exquisite dance of bargaining unfolds in Chapter 23. It’s the plain dealing Abraham . . . sparring with the Hittites.

Abraham is rather as the Christian ought to be today: **Let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no”** . . . interestingly, Jesus says, **Anything else comes from the Devil**. It may sound harsh to denounce these Oriental conventions as lies; but lies they are—white lies? socially acceptable lies? They are rather like signing a letter, “Your Humble Servant,” when you are not humble, not a servant and not even “theirs” at all. Or when you say, “I am at your command,” you probably aren’t; and do not intend to be. Oh, these are *just polite things to say*—no one means them. We fill the air with “How are you’s?” when we have no interest whatsoever in their response. Or, “Bless you” . . . “I wish you well” . . . “I’ll give you a call” . . . “I’ll pray for you.” These phrases are empty words. We have no blessings in mind, and don’t have anything in particular we would wish on each other, or to bless with. Or, we have no intention of ever following up with a call and we forget about praying as soon as we walk away!

Christians ought to say what they mean, and mean what they say; but they commonly don’t and, even worse, they don’t expect anyone else, even fellow Christians, to be sincere, or have integrity either. We tend to be *spendthrifts* with our tongues and *misers* with our follow-through. For me it’s a toss-up as to whether “clean” speech, or “sincere: speech is the greater attainable social good. ***However, and this is the critical piece, there is simply no way that we can get on with others, live peaceably with all, or avoid misunderstanding and disputes, unless we learn how to negotiate with the sons of Heth in our world.***

It is possible to maintain both our identity and our integrity. Abraham shows the way. He knows they cannot be changed—apart from being born again—so *he adapts* his approach to the context; he **accommodates**⁵ them.

He reminds the Hittites, **I am a stranger and a sojourner in your midst**. I do not operate in flattery and polite conventions but I see that you do. So I will take your word *with a grain of salt*. I will steer us through the bargaining phase where you say, “Gift, gift, gift . . . and I respond, “I want to purchase some land for a burial ground.” What’s your price?” (**But if you will, hear me; I give the price of the field**—for it is quite clear that the cave alone is not for sale.) Ephron replies, **a piece of land worth four hundred shekels⁶, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead**. (The graveyard is yours, for a price, go for it.) Hearing one another takes work!

⁵ This is similar to living with one’s wife **in an understanding manner**—vital to domestic tranquility.

⁶ For a day’s work, 8 hours, that’s \$80. Therefore, a shekel would have had \$320 worth of purchasing power. The field, at 400 shekels, then sold for the equivalent of \$128,000, a very possible amount. 600,000 square cubits; or 31 acres. (Another estimate runs to 305 English acres—making the price less high.) A 30 acre parcel in Hebron would be considerable for such an ancient city, east of Mamre.

Now, the dickering phase behind them both, Abraham must decide if the field and cave is worth four hundred shekels of silver to him. A considerable amount, if not a high price—possibly even a greedy price; or, and this is possible, it is a price that indicates that Ephron, the king of the city, didn't really want to sell the land at all. Ephron, being king of ancient Hebron, makes the Laws pertinent and considerations I mentioned above totally relevant. And the purchase brings Abraham under some obligation to Ephron. *But the land is his in perpetuity.*

This piece of land becomes Abraham's ***stake in the ground***. It provides a legal claim, far exceeding the ownership of a well south in Beersheba. This transaction is done in public and is thus attested to by both witnesses and agents. For **Ephron was sitting among the Hittites . . . at the gate of his city.** (v.10)

By maintaining his *separation* (stranger and sojourner), Abraham avoids the cultural pollution potential in this interaction. *He maintains his identity as a believer anchored by his faith, defined by his covenant relationship by which the promises of God are secured and, pre-eminent among those the hope of eternal life after the resurrection.* There will be further separation by virtue of the filling of his graveyard with **his dead!** Abraham mentions **his dead** eight times in the passage. Funeral pyres, cremation and the mingling of ashes in the sacred river (such as the Ganges in India) cannot fulfill the functions of this Hebraic burial ground. He achieves this purchase through good manners, sincere respect and, we note, those manners/courtesy commend to others the majesty of our God in the eyes of unbelievers.

Abraham also maintains his separation by not allowing avarice to draw him into the barter and bargaining world of his neighbors.

He keeps equity and justice in the mix. He pays "sound money" and he determines what price he is willing/able to pay. So, being respectful, clear and exact—he certainly knew what he was getting and paying in the day. We are not actually in a position to say whether he paid too much, or too little for we don't know the comps (the price of comparable real estate in that neighborhood) and the exact boundaries are lost to us! But we can say that clarity of intention and clear agreements avoid future misunderstanding, disputes and trouble.

Abraham reminds us, in this business of a burying ground, of the business-like covenant that secures our salvation. We read about this in Isaiah 53:10-12. Before Creation, and therefore ***from all eternity***, we know that God delighted in us before we were! *Putting that delight outside of human history is very freeing! He delighted in us before we did anything, whether right, or wrong—prior to sinning. **It is not about what we did, or didn't do.*** And that He delighted in saving us despite knowing, *in his infinite mind and purposes*, what we would be fully enmeshed (damning sin!) in when the Son would be dispatched to attain our rescue from said sin:

It was the will of the Lord to crush him . . . to put him to grief . . . in order that when his soul makes an offering for guilt (the guilt of our sin no less!), he shall see his offspring (and by resurrection from the dead become the firstborn of many brethren!). **He shall prolong his days** (even to all eternity future).

This work of redemption, **the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.** (v. 10) He, the Son of God, **shall see . . . out of the anguish of his soul,** the unquestionable success of his intercession, **the fulfillment of all righteousness(!) which is our redemption.** He will know, experientially, this **righteous One,** even **My servant,** that **many shall be accounted righteous . . .** that he shall have borne **their iniquities** (v.12) and he utterly removed the penalty (paid in full) from them. Great will be his reward! **I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with transgressors . . . he bore the sins of many** and now in his resurrection glory **makes intercession** for those whom he came for and **who**, by their faith, **are saved.** (v.13)

It is the success of this plan, this divine covenant, THE SOUL-SAVING BUSINESS PLAN OF GOD yields abundant **assurance** to all who believe. You are saved by Christ's redeeming work and not by anything you could, or didn't do!

We were secured by this redemption plan of God before the world began. Jesus was indeed about his Father's business! And that both sovereignly and freely. And their covenant stands firm forever. It has nothing to do with your experience, your consciousness or your feelings even—we are not saved by feeling saved, nor are we assured by feeling sincere about our faith!

"How man could be restored to happiness, to blessedness intended," without prejudice to God's honor, justice, mercy or truth? . . . that was the business before the Godhead and the gospel accomplishes their plan! That was the enterprise that God undertook to save us. Jesus, the agent of the plan, anointed with his three-fold office of prophet, priest and king was anointed to this work. It could not and did not fail! Jesus became flesh, was emptied of glory, born under the Law, avoided no necessary suffering, was made a suitable offering and satisfied God the Father who set the terms of the deal. So, just as Abraham successfully procured Machpelah's field and cave, he buried Sarah there (stands to this day!). And as for Jesus, the purchaser of your soul and the procurer of our salvation, he has obtained a place for us, forever, with him, in the realms of eternal glory.

May God open your eyes to see it, your heart to claim it and your mind to affirm it.

Amen