

Prayers

Opening prayer

Bring calmness and strength to my soul, O Lord.
Give me patience to wait for answers to prayer,
Courage to face tough times and difficult choices,
Perseverance to discover the truth behind what happens,
And a heart that is always ready to call on You for help.
Thank You Lord God Almighty: AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: HEALING

1. For yourself

Pray for yourself, bearing in mind the fact that you are aging. People do not like to think about this, but aging affects all people. Submit your feelings about this to the Lord

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any of your friends and family who are aging and especially those whose health is failing

3. For the church and its work

Pray for your church and its ministry to the elderly and frail

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

One measure of a society is how it cares for those who are dying. Pray about the way your own country provides for the dying; pray that God's people will lead the way in showing how the elderly and dying can be given love and respect

Meditation

Turn, O Lord, and save us: (*Psalm 6:4*)

Save this planet from the cruel exploitation of its resources,
From the sins of corruption whereby those who control these things
Gain immense riches at the expense of us all - who pay the price.

Save this world from the spiritual nonsense taught by some
That all religions have equal worth, so each can have a personal god,
And faith in Jesus Christ is no more than a God is a 'lifestyle choice'.

Save us from the idolatries of 'today', of selfishness and greed,
The lack of respect given to others, especially the young and the old,
And those of different sex, culture, age and social background.

Save us from the gods of self that rule the little worlds in which we live
And deceive us into thinking we know everything, when truly, we are
Nothing more than armchair experts with little knowledge of our world.

O Lord, re-create humanity, for the sake of humanity!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 23

¹ Sarah lived to be 127 years old, ² and she died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. Now Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her, ³ and when he got up from beside his dead wife, he said to the Hittites,

⁴ 'I am a stranger, living among you as a foreigner; give me some of your property as a burial ground, so that I may lay to rest my dead.'

⁵ The Hittites answered Abraham,

⁶ 'Listen to us, my lord; you are regarded by us as a great prince. Bury your dead in the best of our tombs; none of us will withhold from you any tomb for burying your dead.'

⁷ Abraham stood and then bowed to the local people, the Hittites, ⁸ and he said to them,

'If you are content for me to bury my dead, hear me, and speak on my behalf to Ephron son of Zohar, ⁹ to sell me his property, the cave of Machpelah, by the side of his field. Let him sell it to me in your sight and for the full price, as a tomb.'

¹⁰ Now Ephron the Hittite was sitting among the other Hittites; and he answered Abraham in the hearing of all who had gathered at gate of his city.

¹¹ 'Not so, my lord, listen; I give you the field, and also the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people; bury your dead.'

¹² Then Abraham bowed down to the local people. ¹³ He then said to Ephron in the hearing of everyone,

'Please listen to me! I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there.'

¹⁴ Ephron answered Abraham,

¹⁵ 'Listen to me, my lord. Now between you and me, what is a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver? Bury your dead.'

¹⁶ Abraham agreed with Ephron; and he weighed out for him the silver he named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the current market value.

¹⁷ So Ephron's field in Machpelah, to the east of Mamre; the field, the cave, and the trees within the boundaries of the field, passed ¹⁸ into Abraham's possession in the sight of the Hittites, in full view of all gathered at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ The field and the cave within it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a place of burial.

Review

The beginning of this passage describes the death of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, chosen by God to bear Isaac, the son of promise. She was a remarkable woman, whose strong and lively character (eventually revealed in Genesis 21) illuminates the whole of Genesis. Her death was a significant event, and Sarah is the only woman whose death and burial is formally announced and recorded in scripture. After her death and burial the narrative of Genesis (ch.24 onwards) moves on swiftly to focus on the life of Isaac and the next generation of God's People, but Abraham still has one problem; where can he bury Sarah? As a nomad, Abraham owned no property, and in the course of his life, he had moved around through Canaan and eventually settled in Beersheba, tending his flocks by agreement with local people (see 21:22f.). He owned no property which he could use for burial, and this chapter resolves all these issues in anticipation of what the ownership of land will mean for future generations.

The purchase of the plot of land for burial takes up most of the chapter, and purely in terms of length, it is as long as the previous chapter about Abraham's sacrificial offering of a ram instead of his son Isaac! It is also full of repetitions and contains a considerable amount of details about how land was purchased in ancient times. From a spiritual point of view, this does not excite us in the same way as the previous chapter, and for this reason, it may well make the casual reader feel rather bored. However, the more we study this passage, the more we realise its importance, because scripture does not tell us extensive stories unless they are important. The death of Sarah and her burial is in fact the starting point for the description of something central to scripture, the ownership of property in the 'Promised Land'. Abraham's deal to purchase land was

an act of faith which God took as a confirmation of Abraham's own belief in the promise that Canaan would one day be the home for his descendants.

Throughout the story of Abraham, we have followed the Lord's Covenant promises; that Abraham would be blessed, have many descendants, and be a blessing to other nations. This was partly fulfilled in the birth of Isaac, and when Abraham eventually accepted Isaac as his heir, and laid him on an altar of sacrifice (21:9,10), this was also accepted by God as proof of Abraham's faith, who confirmed the Covenant promises (22:17f.). Now, at every stage of this story from Genesis 12 to 23, immediately after God promised Abraham the blessing of descendants, he went on to speak to him about the land that these descendants would one day occupy for themselves (13:15, 15:7, 17:8). We should therefore expect that after the great and climactic story of the offering of Isaac, scripture will tell us something very important about the Promised Land. This chapter is not a story of marginal interest, but one that fits the pattern of God's revelation of Himself in a faithful and consistent way throughout scripture. Abraham's purchase of a plot of land was an important 'guarantee' for future generations that God had a 'Promised Land' for His people.

Christians do not easily associate faith with land, and our interest in the nation of Israel and its territory remains one of respect and love, because God still loves His people Israel, and their land. However, Jesus taught us that God's love was ultimately available for everyone, not just the Jews, and he preached about the Kingdom of God as the place of God's rule on earth (see the Sermon on the Mount). It was something not so much linked with actual land, but with real hearts and lives where God was able to rule because people had been saved through the death of Jesus Christ. Our promised land is the Kingdom of God we experience now, but only partially. In the same way that Abraham owned a part of the Promised Land but looked forward to its full possession, we too can take hold of the Kingdom now, through Jesus, and look forward to its completion when Christ comes again in glory.

Going Deeper

Sarah's death and burial were highly symbolic occasions. Most of the rest of this study looks closely at the bargaining which took place to enable Abraham to gain possession of the field at Machpelah where there was a cave he wanted for Sarah's burial. The story of the sale appears to us to be polite, but with careful attention, we can see that it was a great feat of negotiation by Abraham against considerable odds, and it is worth understanding why this was so.

Sarah's death

Sarah's death was a great tragedy for Abraham. We can see that because of the description of Abraham's mourning (23:2,3), and the fact that scripture records few women as being mourned. She died in Hebron, one of the places where Abraham had previously settled in their travels (13:18), and the place where the Lord had first promised Abraham that his descendants would possess the Promised Land. Nowhere could be more apt, and a burial at Hebron would be an everlasting reminder of the promises of God.

We do not know why Sarah and Abraham were in Hebron and not in Beersheba, especially since the previous chapter had made it clear that they had settled firmly there; living in peace with the local Philistines (see ch.21). Anything we say is conjecture, but it may be that Abraham, as a rich nomad with an extensive household and cattle interests, retained outlying encampments at places where he had previously lived in order to buy and sell cattle and also explore the land for the best pasture. Abraham is nevertheless described as 'going in' to mourn for Sarah, which may reflect on the nomadic practice of laying out a dead person in the tent in which they had lived, and paying respects to someone's life as symbolised by their tent as well as the person who had died and lay within it.

When Abraham rose from his mourning, his immediate concern was to bury his wife in a suitable tomb, and this now became a great test of faith for Abraham. He had to show confidence in God's promise that this was indeed the land his descendants would occupy in perpetuity, and it was an enormous step for Abraham to take to move away from the culture that had governed all his life (as it would do for anyone in such circumstances) and purchase a plot of land for burial.

Ephron's field and the Cave at Machpelah

Abraham immediately made his interest in buying some land known locally (23:4). Much of the story which follows is subject to an enormous variety of interpretations, but the best way we can understand what went on is to compare it with practices amongst nomads and people in the same region, to this day. Scholars who have looked into this tell us that the expression 'give me ...' something is a polite equivalent of 'I would like to buy ...' and in this way Abraham made it clear he wanted to purchase a tomb. When we read what happened next, we think everything sounds quite agreeable, because the local Hittite people apparently replied kindly, and in a flattering manner (23:6). In fact, they offered Abraham the facility of any of their

existing tombs but did not wish to sell him a site where he could make his own tomb. As the negotiations continue, you will see how the tension is resolved through bargaining.

At this, Abraham rose to his feet (23:7), a sign that he was intent on pursuing his request. Having bowed down to show respect and avoid any discourteous implications from his actions, he then used what may have been prior knowledge of the land and its ownership to make a specific bid for a cave owned by a man named Ephron, a man who was present in the group of elders with whom he was negotiating. He also asked that the negotiations be done through intermediaries (23:8); again, this was a way of trying to take the sting out of any personal issues involved in the sale. But what we should note at this point is that all Abraham asked for was the cave by itself.

Ephron appears to have spotted an opportunity to make some money, for he immediately placed himself in the centre of the negotiations (23:10) by speaking directly, and offering both the cave and a field which was attached to it. Again, we should not be deceived by the generous façade of the negotiations; 'I give it to you ...' (23:11). This was an offer of sale, not a free offer! Some have suggested that whereas a cave was a useful property, it carried with it no community land taxes, and Ephron did not wish to have someone freely using a cave adjacent to his own property, thus reducing its value even though he would still have to pay local land and crop taxes on it (remember, all this is possible, but not provable). Abraham responded by saying that he was prepared to buy both the land and the field at the normal price (the full implication of verse 13).

Ephron's acceptance of the deal and stating of the final price is a fascinating example of the conclusion of a sale which is found in that part of the world to this day, even using the words 'what is ... between you and me?' It is impossible for us to be sure whether Ephron demanded a high price for the field, or allowed Abraham to buy at the going rate, as we have no real means of finding out land prices for that region in those days. The only measure we have is that 400 shekels was affordable (Abraham had previously been given 1,000 shekels by Abimelech – 20:16) and Abraham appears to have been completely ready to pay. He did not have to go and get the money, he had it to hand!

The whole saga of Abraham's purchase is on the one hand a fascinating insight into nomadic practice, and on the other, an emphatic story which tells us that there is no doubt that the site has been purchased by Abraham for the People of God in perpetuity. The last few verses of chapter 23 make this point very clearly.

Possession of land is always an emotive issue. The people of Israel claimed most of the Promised Land when they came back from Egypt under the leadership of Joshua, but by the time of the Judges it was reckoned that the occupation was never properly accomplished (see Judges 2:1-5, and the weeping at 'Bochim' on account of this failure). The fullest occupation of the land may be said to have taken place under the great King David and his son Solomon. They extended the borders of Israel and Judah, but many peoples of other races and religions remained in the land, though taking lowly positions in society whilst the Israelites were strong. Other peoples and other religions were never completely driven out of the land as Abraham may well have assumed from the Covenant and as Moses hoped (Deut 11:23) before the occupation, and the history of Israel from its beginnings to this day, including all the history told in the Old Testament, is one of division and difficulty for God's people.

Discipleship

Application

As a matter of note, the site of Sarah's tomb is known and verifiable to this day. It is also the burial place of Abraham (see Gen 49:31). However, the site is covered by a mosque, having been claimed by Moslems in the belief that they are the true inheritors of Abraham's blessing as the 'People of God' (or, as they would say, the 'people of Allah'). It goes without saying that this is a source of great tension to this day, and access to the site is heavily restricted.

What then of God's promise of land for Abraham's descendants? Yes, the people born from Abraham who would eventually be a significantly large nation, both needed and still need somewhere to live. The difference between the Old Testament and the New in this respect is that before the time of Christ, God's people lost their way spiritually and became too focussed on their own land and their laws, when God's purpose for them was to be a 'light to the nations' (Is 42:6, 49:6). After the life and death of Jesus, the disciples knew from His teaching that God's intention was to bless and save the whole world (Matt 28:18-20). The early disciples personally needed a place to live, just like everyone else, but they taught that our place on earth was more like Abraham's, a man who lived in the Promised Land but did not own it, except for a small plot according to his personal needs. The catchphrase now used by Christians which expresses this is 'in the world but not of the world'.

There is much to be said for living in this world like Abraham, owning as little of it as necessary for our personal needs and spending our resources and energy on the spiritual battle to win the world back from the grip of the enemy. Many people would like it if we could live our personal lives as we wished and owned what we wanted, but the call of Christ is to both have faith like Abraham and to live like Abraham. The story of the 'Promised Land' both in the Bible and since the days of Jesus should be enough to tell us that too much of an investment in this world will cause us distractions when we should be looking to God's eternal Kingdom.

Questions for groups

1. Follow through the sequence of events in this passage of scripture a second time, to find out and understand what was going on at each stage of the bargaining.
2. What is your opinion about the significance of ownership of this plot of land today? Does its ownership by Muslims matter?
3. Is the ownership of land a help or a hindrance in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God?

Discipleship challenges

- *Set aside some time for prayer to consider the things you own and whether you are using them in a manner which is worthy of the Lord's love and His guidance of your life.*
- *Contractual laws about the ownership of land are different in different countries. In some places, people do not own land, but rent it for living, farming etc. from landlords or governments. Find out what you can about different forms of land ownership; what do they have to teach us.*

Final Prayer

Praise God! Praise Him for the glories of His everlasting Kingdom! Praise Him for the hope we have of eternal life! Praise Him for the work He has done so that we might join Him in glory! Praise Him for His love by which He guides us now towards His Kingdom! Praise God, both now and for ever! AMEN
