

Session 3

LETTING GO OF GRIEF

Genesis 23:1-20

Memory Verse

Now Sarah lived ¹²⁷ years; these were all the years of her life. ² Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

– GENESIS 23:1-2, CSB

Letting Go of Grief

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God's sovereignty extends even over the painful season of death. Because this is true, God can be glorified when grief is properly observed.

In his 2013 book, *Hope for the Brokenhearted*, Dr. John Luke Terveen described the grief and difficulty in the wake of his 14-year old daughter's heart attack. The book grew out of his own frustration in seeking books that offered direction on how to deal with his grief. After reading over two hundred books, he became burdened at the lack of books that focused on the biblical passages that offered insight and comfort to those going through the most difficult of spiritual seasons. As a result, he decided to write his own book that highlighted what Scripture says about mourning and addressed the difficult questions that believers ask about grief.

In his description of his and his wife's own journey out of perpetual grief and mourning, he mentioned the importance of worship. With no particular rose-colored depiction of the recovery journey, Dr. Terveen chronicled their discipline of attending worship:

Over time, as again and again we came to worship in God's house, we sensed that we had come into his very presence. We entered worship – usually weakly, sometimes awkwardly, and frequently tearfully. Yet in the community of his people we experienced the Scriptures read, the songs sung, the sermons shared... and bit by bit, through these humble acts of worship, I encountered God's real presence with me again, and I embraced anew both God himself and eternal realities about the life of faith here and life hereafter. Hope was reawakened. Though such a struggle has ebbed and flowed, at that time I experienced a real turning point in the renewal of my faith and a reawakened hope for the future.¹

? Why do you think it is important to emphasize and understand that healing from grief is a slow, gradual process? How would you explain to someone who is grieving what to expect in the days ahead?

? What has been the most helpful thing someone has done for you in a season of loss or grief? Why do you think that particular act was so helpful?

Session Summary

In this week's session, we see that Abraham experienced the death of his wife, Sarah. Her loss was appropriately grieved, as Abraham mourned his wife and then made preparations for her burial. All the while, the Scriptures indicate the continuing redemptive work of God, even in the painful season of the death of a loved one. Realizing that God is mindful of the deep sorrow of mourning empowers believers to grieve appropriately without being paralyzed by sorrow.

1. Sarah's Death at Hebron (Genesis 23:1-2)

At the opening of Genesis 23, the writer of Genesis recorded the death of Sarah. The initial description of Sarah's death might seem simply biographical. However, the writer noted two things of considerable importance. First, Sarah lived 127 years which indicated a long life that was richly blessed by God. The 127 years would have been 37 years since the time she gave birth to the covenantal-promised child, Isaac, at age 90. Factoring in the 25 years of their pilgrimage in the land of Canaan (the promised land), Sarah had followed God's covenantal call for 62 years. Those 62 years were significant in God's redemptive history under His omnipotent direction.

Second, Sarah died in Canaan—the land God promised that Abraham’s descendants would ultimately call home after a 400-year stay in Egypt under oppressive slavery (Gen. 17). According to Kenneth Matthews, “The importance of the geographical notice is the reference to Canaan as the patriarch’s residence and burial, reminiscent of the promises made to Abraham (12:5;17:8). Mention of ‘Mamre’ in v. 19 further identifies the site of burial as Hebron, which is the south Canaan home where many important patriarchal activities concerning the promises occurred.”² Her life and, now at this point, her death were consistently marked by the faithful lovingkindness of God.

? How does remembering the numerous ways God has shown His favor and covenant faithfulness to Sarah inform the way you understand her death? What does it tell you about God that even the location of her death evidenced His work in her life?

? Why is it important for the Bible to describe the reaction of its key and prominent figures in seasons of loss or brokenness? How does Abraham’s reaction to Sarah’s death set a model for the way God’s people are to mourn?


Having established Sarah’s life of blessing and the significance of her place of death, the writer described Abraham’s response. Specifically, he mourned and wept for her. Such a description clarified any potential inaccurate belief that, because of God’s evident blessing on Abraham’s life, he would be spared any further seasons of difficulty. Instead, the patriarch was deeply and appropriately sorrowful. The text’s language graphically described Abraham’s audible cries, which would typically have been accompanied by the tearing of clothes, wearing sackcloth, or even shaving one’s head. Even more to the point, there is no sense in the Scripture that this level of mourning and sorrow was in any way sinful. In fact, it was quite the opposite.


2. Purchasing the Burial Site (Genesis 23:3-18)

The longer second section of this passage is not longer due to its significance, but rather, due to the dialogue and interplay as Abraham sought to honor Sarah by providing for her a suitable burial. Verse 3 opened with a transition in the grief process: “Then Abraham got up from beside his dead wife...” The transition was stark, but it served to notify the progression of Abraham’s mourning. He had moved from grieving his loss to seeking to provide for his wife one final time, honoring her as he did so. Abraham sought an audience with the Hethites who were the inhabitants of Canaan in that region.

So evident was God’s blessing on Abraham’s life that even in spite of his status as an “alien” he was honored by the Hethites. The matter of requesting land for burial had deep significance for redemptive history. Abraham had been promised by God that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan and now, after 62 years of nomadic travel, Abraham was about to acquire land in Canaan to honor the life of the mother of his descendants.

The exchange between the Hethite leaders and Abraham was respectful and filled with cultural tradition. In the exchange, the foreigner motif that was so prevalent in Abraham’s story reappeared. To minimize the potential perceived threat from his considerable wealth, Abraham introduced himself to the Hethites as an “alien” who needed land for burial, not a homestead.

 While grief is certainly not a linear process, what is the significance of the writer noting Abraham’s transition? What adjectives would you use to describe Abraham’s character based on chapter 23?

 What did it mean for the future people of Israel that Sarah was buried in Canaan? What did that indicate about the condition of Abraham’s faith in the face of his beloved wife’s death?

While the Hethites initially offered Abraham a free burial site of his choosing, Abraham would hear none of it. Scholars have debated over the reason for Abraham's refusal. Some suggest that his refusal was a negotiating tactic, as were the decorum and complementary tone of the verbal conversation between Abraham and the Hethites. The idea would be that the offering of a free plot of land for burial would not connote complete transition of ownership because no compensation exchanged hands. That would leave the Hethites legally open to reclaim the land at a future date, should they desire to do so. Abraham's insistence on paying for the land in full would prevent any future forfeiture of the land.

Certainly, the formality of the conversation seems to indicate that such a commonplace form of haggling might have been at work. Between verse 9 and verse 10, Abraham traveled with the Hethite contingent to the city where Ephron lived to personally ask him about the sale. The fact that the group met at the city gate where major business transactions and political conversations were held only elevated the formality of the negotiation. When pressed by Abraham for the full price, Ephron mentioned the full price, only to dismiss this based on their newfound relationship.

In order to prevent the interplay between the two parties from spiraling downward into increasingly quarrelsome haggling, Abraham agreed on the full price of the field and willingly paid it. The entire conversation is similar to the conversation King David had with Ornan regarding his threshing floor upon which David intended to offer sacrifices to God (1 Chronicles 21:21-26). Abraham was not attempting to make a lucrative business deal. Abraham was seeking to honor his deceased wife in such a way that demonstrated his faith in God's covenantal promise to his descendants.

3. Sarah's Burial at Hebron (Genesis 23:19-20)

Finally, the burial details were completed and Abraham could bury Sarah properly. Verse 19 intentionally reflected much of the wording of verse 2. The similarity of phrases indicated the author's use of a literary device called *inclusio*, which was a visual sign that a section of text had been sectioned off as one unified body. The content mirrored in verses 2 and 19 was that which was to be emphasized. Specifically, Abraham—the father of God's covenant people—buried his wife, through whom the covenant people was inaugurated, in the land that was promised to Abraham by God over six decades earlier.

The importance of recognizing the occurrence of Sarah's death within the framework of God's redemptive history was that it placed the glory of God and His gracious work in creation at the center of the narrative. That would obviously not be to say that her death was just a detail.

The description of Abraham's grieving at the opening of chapter 23 would make such callous thoughts all the more appalling. Rather, it was to underscore that, even during the seasons of greatest heartache, God still reigned supreme and His purpose in the lives of His people could never be thwarted—even by death.

? In your experience, how does being able to grasp a greater purpose for seasons of difficulty change your perception of that season? Can you provide an example?

? Chapter 23 closes with Sarah's burial. Chapter 24 opens with the quest to find a wife for Isaac. Keeping that in mind, what does the author seem to infer about Sarah's burial?

Family burial sites carried immense importance in the days of Abraham, in which it was not uncommon for multiple generations to be buried in the same plot of land. For the land to be officially and permanently deeded over to Abraham meant that all of his descendants would be rooted in the Promised Land. Aside from redemptive history, however, the personal meaning of Sarah's burial for Abraham was the needed closure in the grieving process. The author clearly had that in mind when placing the search for Isaac's wife immediately after the burial of Sarah. The next generation of God's covenantal faithfulness was already at hand and Abraham had to look forward to the continuation of faithfulness in his offspring.

Conclusion

There was no shortage of flaws in Abraham's life at any juncture, and Sarah had been there for all of it. As she died, Abraham was depicted as a heartbroken husband who had lost his lifelong love. The relevance of God's Word is sometimes so clear that it can cause heart heaviness even to read its pages. Here are some considerations when prayerfully applying this text:

First, mourning is not only permissible for the believer, it is necessary. There is no question that seasons of deep loss and grief will enter everyone's life—believers and unbelievers alike. While it is absolutely important to celebrate the eternal life of those who die in Christ, to deny the heart its need to grieve the physical loss of those who are deeply loved is nothing short of cruel. Not only does appropriately grieving loss contribute to one's ability to cope with that loss, the biblical precedent for doing so is all over the pages of Scripture.

Second, mourning is necessary, but it is not perpetual. Like Abraham, grief has its appropriate period, but must not be the final destination for the believer. Everyone grieves differently and at different paces. However, grieving has its end as the healing of God's comfort, the presence of the Body of Christ, and the assurance of resurrection for those who die in Christ take the place of sorrow.

Third, biblical community is a crucial part of healing and letting go of grief. One of the greatest gifts of being relationally connected to other believers is the ministry believers have to one another. The compassion and mercy that exists within the body of Christ provides a God-honoring forum for the expression of grief and sorrow. Those who choose to isolate themselves from others in seasons of grief tremendously heighten the likelihood of depression and becoming stuck in a perpetual cycle of grief.

Fourth, recognizing how God used the life of the one lost and worshiping Him as a result is a powerful tool for letting go of grief. God ceaselessly works through His people. Grief, on the other hand, has the tendency of turning a person inward and focusing on his or her own sorrow. Regular participation in corporate worship gradually works to recalibrate one's focus on who God is, how God is working, and how He has blessed through the life of the loved ones who have been lost.

? Why do you think some people discourage grief and mourning? What biblical examples can you think of that provide a model for doing so?

? Who in your life offers you the gift of relationship that would allow you to honestly process grief with them? How can you cultivate other relationships that may grow to that depth? Why is it important to act in that direction now?

? How does understanding how God has used another person in times of loss help alleviate grieving and sorrow? What memories of your life do you want people to remember about how God used you? How often do you tell those stories?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Christ's death and burial assures the believer that God is familiar with grief. However, because of the resurrection, the believer's grief is one laced with hope.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Believers have a tremendous opportunity to bear witness to the hope in Christ by grieving in such a way that both honors loss and anticipates resurrection.



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Once and Future King

Main Passages

- Luke 1:26-33; 23:38

Memorize

Now Sarah lived ¹²⁷ years; these were all the years of her life. ² Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

- Genesis 23:1-2, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Matthew 2:13-15
- Tuesday - Matthew 2:16-18
- Wednesday - Matthew 2:19-23
- Thursday - Matthew 3:1-13
- Friday - Matthew 27:11-14
- Saturday - Matthew 28:18-20

References

¹Terveen, John Luke. *Hope for the Brokenhearted: God's Voice of Comfort in the Middle of Grief and Loss*. David C. Cook Publishers, 2013.

²Mathews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 11:27 – 50:26*. NAC, vol. 1a. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005.