



Letting Go of Grief

Summary and Goal

Abraham teaches us how to deal with faith and the death of a loved one.

Main Passages

Genesis 23:1-20

Session Outline

1. Sarah's Death at Hebron (Genesis 23:1-2)
2. Purchasing the Burial Site (Genesis 23:3-18)
3. Sarah's Burial at Hebron (Genesis 23:19-20)

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.

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.

Historical Context of Genesis

Purpose

Genesis lays the groundwork for everything else we read and experience in Scripture. Through Genesis we understand where we came from, how we got in the fallen state we are in, and the beginnings of God's gracious work on our behalf. Genesis unfolds God's original purpose for humanity. Genesis provides the foundation from which we understand God's covenant with Israel that was established with the giving of the law. For the Israelite community, the stories of the origins of humanity, sin, and the covenant relationship with God helped them understand why God gave them the law.

Author

Since pre-Christian times authorship of the Torah, the five books that include the book of Genesis, has been attributed to Moses, an enormously influential Israelite leader from the second millennium BC with an aristocratic Egyptian background. Even though Genesis is technically anonymous, both the Old and New Testaments unanimously recognize Moses as the Torah's author (Jos 8:35; 23:6; 1Kg 2:3; 8:9; 2Kg 14:6; 23:25; 2Ch 23:18; 25:4; 30:16; 34:14; 35:12; Ezr 3:2; 6:18; Neh 8:1; 9:14; Dn 9:11,13; Mal 4:4; Mk 12:19,26; Lk 2:22; 20:28; 24:44; Jn 1:17,45; 7:19; Ac 13:39; 15:21; 28:23; Rm 10:5; 1Co 9:9; Heb 10:28). At the same time, evidence in Genesis suggests that minor editorial changes dating to ancient times have been inserted into the text. Examples include the mention of "Dan" (14:14), a city that was not named until the days of the judges (Jdg 18:29), and the use of a phrase that assumed the existence of Israelite kings (Gn 36:31).

Setting

The Torah (a Hebrew term for "law" or "instruction") was seen as one unit until at least the second century BC. Sometime prior to the birth of Christ, the Torah was divided into five separate books, later referred to as the Pentateuch (literally, five vessels). Genesis, the first book of the Torah, provides both the universal history of humankind and the patriarchal history of the nation of Israel. The first section (chaps. 1-11) is a general history commonly called the "primeval history," showing how all humanity descended from one couple and became sinners. The second section (chaps. 12-50) is a more specific history commonly referred to as the "patriarchal history," focusing on the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants: Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons. Genesis unfolds God's plan to bless and redeem humanity through Abraham's descendants. The book concludes with the events that led to the Israelites being in the land of Egypt.

Special Features

The book of Genesis is the great book of beginnings in the Bible. True to the meanings of its Hebrew and Greek names (Hb bere'shith, "In Beginning" [based on 1:1]; Gk Geneseos, "Of Birth" [based on 2:4]), Genesis permits us to view the beginning of a multitude of realities that shape our daily existence: the creation of the universe and the planet earth; the origins of plant and animal life; and the origins of human beings, marriage, families, nations, industry, artistic expression, religious ritual, prophecy, sin, law, crime, conflict, punishment, and death.

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Session Plan

Letting Go of Grief

Introduction

- ❓ 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?

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. 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).

- ❓ 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?

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.

- ❓ 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?

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.

- ❓ 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?

Conclusion

- ❓ 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?

❓ For Further Discussion

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?



Expanded Session Content



Letting Go of Grief

Introduction

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?

Kiriath Arba

"'Kiriath Arba' means 'city of four', which may originally have referred to a group of four related cities (Aner, Eschol, Mamre, and Hebron...)." The men whose names the cities bore were mentioned as Abram's allies in the matter of Lot's abduction in Genesis 14:13.

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.

Seeking to Show Honor

Read 1 Chronicles 21:21-26. What was David's reasoning for refusing to take Ornan's land for free? How is it similar to Abraham's situation?

- ❓ 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?

Prayer of Response

Thank God that he does not dismiss our sorrow but has given many examples of sincere grief and sorrow in the Bible. Pray that he would help you to properly grieve losses in your life while also continuing to place faith in Him through hardship.

Additional Resources

- *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis
- *Suffering* by Paul David Tripp
- *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* by Timothy Keller

For Next Week

Session Title

- 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 23:1-20

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

Extended Commentary

Genesis 23

23:1-6. Upon the death of Sarah, Abraham decided not to return her to their ancestral home in Mesopotamia but to secure a burial space in this land of God's promise. She died in Hebron, and we read that Abraham went to mourn for Sarah. Went where? Since 22:19 tells us that "Abraham stayed in Beersheba," we assume this trip took him from Beersheba to Hebron. Abraham recited words that became characteristic of the Hebrew nation from the moment of Sarah's death to the present hour: I am an alien and a stranger among you. Abraham's people would wander in and out of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, and around the Roman Empire.

Kidner elaborates the uniqueness of Abraham's position:

A stranger (ger) was a resident alien with some footing in the community but restricted rights. In Israel, for example, the ger would be granted no land of his own, and in this chapter the keen question under the elaborate courtesies was whether Abraham was to gain a permanent foothold or not. The flattery in v. 6 was an inducement to remain a landless dependent. Abraham's rejoinder, naming an individual, made skillful use of the fact that while a group tends to resent an intruder the owner of an asset may welcome a customer (Kidner, 145).

This point is central to the land grant of earlier chapters. If Abraham had accepted the first offer, he would have buried Sarah in the Hittite tomb—and still not owned an acre of Canaan. That would have been the wrong choice.

23:7-16. Since the Hittites had agreed that Abraham could bury Sarah in their territory, the only question was where and under what conditions. Apparently Abraham already had a spot in mind because he immediately defined with great specificity the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him [Ephron] and is in the end of his field. Although Ephron was sitting right there, Abraham addressed the request to the entire group of Hittite leaders. This kind of specific request began the Bedouin bargaining which concludes in verse 16 as Abraham placed four hundred shekels of silver on the table.

23:17-20. What did Abraham buy? The text leaves nothing in doubt: Both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field. For Abraham, Mesopotamia was now history; the new homeland would be built around this burial plot. The humble beginnings of the

Abrahamic estate represent a symbol of the great geography of Israel described in earlier chapters. Sarah was the first of four generations buried at Machpelah. Only after the death of his wife did Abraham actually own any portion of the land.

Abraham was buying the field not only as a burial place for Sarah but also to express his confidence in God's promises. He had lived for sixty years in the land as a nomad. But before he himself died, he mingled the dust of his love with that of the land of promise as a sign of his expectation that God would fulfill the promise to his descendants. This purchase was a testimony to his children, since they did not possess the land for some four hundred years. And the lesson was well learned. Abraham himself, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah were buried there, even though Jacob died in Egypt. His sons took his body back to Canaan and buried him beside his father and grandfather.⁴

References

1. Terveen, John Luke. *Hope for the Brokenhearted: God's Voice of Comfort in the Middle of Grief and Loss*. David C. Cook Publishers, 2013.
2. Mathews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 11:27 – 50:26. NAC, vol. 1a*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005.
3. Ibid.
4. Gangel, Kenneth O. *Genesis*. Edited by Max E. Anders. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002.