

“A Piece of the Promise” (Genesis 23:1-20)

[Play *The Jefferson's* theme song] “Well we’re movin’ on up...To the east side...To a deluxe apartment in the sky. We’re movin’ on up...To the east side... We’ve finally got a piece of the pie.” I grew up watching *The Jefferson's*. I loved George & Louise Jefferson and their maid, Florence. I learned some of my best “trash talking” from the Jeffersons. But of course what has stayed with me all of these years is their theme song. The last line is what grabs me: “We’ve finally got a piece of the pie.” You’ve heard the expression “a piece of the pie,” right? Everybody wants a piece of the pie. The Jefferson’s certainly did. They wanted to experience the “lifestyles of the rich and famous.” They wanted to be successful in their business, family, and personal lives. If we’re honest many of us also want our “piece of the pie.” Yet, I’d like to challenge each of us and ask a question of priority: What is more important to you—a “piece of the pie” or a “piece of the promise”?

Think of a promise you have from God, something you believe God will bring about. It may be heaven, forgiveness for your darkest sins, the comfort of never being alone, the special purpose He has for your life, the salvation of a loved one, or an answer to prayer. What do you do when that promise is unfulfilled after years of waiting? What do you do when something you felt God was committed to now seems less likely? When God’s promises are still in the future, what can we do to show that we believe?

God promised Abraham many things, the most remarkable being a son in his old age, and it happened. But God also promised him a land for his people forever, yet Abraham didn’t own so much as an acre. He was living in tents and moving from place to place. This promise of land was not coming to pass. In Genesis 23, we are going to discover how Abraham responded when it seemed that God was not fulfilling His promises. This is a most unusual chapter, one that has perplexed Bible students for centuries. At first glance, the primary thrust of this episode appears unclear. The first two verses record Sarah’s death and the next eighteen verses have to do with the purchase of the plot where Sarah is buried.¹ Thus, many pastors preach sermons on how the Christian can cope with the death of a loved one or engage in business practices. I do not think either of these topics is the main message of this chapter. Rather, we must seek the greatest part of our instruction from the greater part of the passage; in this case, the purchase of the plot of ground in which Sarah is buried.² The focus of this story is that Sarah was buried “**in Canaan**” (23:2, 19), and that Abraham went to great lengths and cost to make this a certainty. This demonstrates how Abraham’s actions reflect a faith for the future.

In 23:1-2, Moses writes, “**Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron)³ in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.**”⁴ As commentators over the centuries have noted, Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose age is revealed.⁵ And at 127 she is no young woman. But the death of Sarah would have seemed untimely because of her apparent youthfulness. Even at the age of ninety she was a woman attractive enough to catch the eye of King Abimelech (20:1-2). Sarah must have appeared to find the fountain of youth. She was Mrs. *Oil of Olay*. Her youthfulness and beauty would have concealed the fact that death was coming upon her.⁶

Note that Sarah died “**in the land of Canaan.**” Abraham mourned and wept, meaning that in addition to the crying he went through the traditional mourning customs of his day: tearing clothes, cutting his beard, spreading dust on his head, and fasting.⁷ This was all done in the presence of the body. The Jews had a very elaborate and intense process that they went through when someone died. Genesis 50 tells us about Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. When he died there was a period of 40 days that his family was at hand. As he was being embalmed, the family had a time of grieving and then he was buried. After he was buried, for another seven days they continued to grieve.

Genesis 23:2 is the first record of a man's tears in the Bible. It is fitting that it should be a husband weeping and mourning over the death of his loyal wife of 60 years. It is remarkable that this is the only time we are ever told that Abraham wept. He had been through so many bitter disappointments and heartaches in his life: He was disappointed when Lot left him (13:5-12). He was heartbroken when he sent Ishmael away (21:9-14). He was devastated when he had to offer Isaac (22:1-10). But the only time the Scriptures reveal that he wept was when Sarah died. This reveals the depth of his grief and love for this woman.⁸ I would also add that a willingness to put Isaac to death enabled Abraham to accept the passing of his wife, Sarah. God used the offering of Isaac to prepare Abraham for the death of his wife.

The death of a loved one has always been a time to think about the eternal. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart." In light of this eventuality, two of the most profound and beneficial questions I think we can ask ourselves are: (1) How would you like to be remembered at your funeral? (2) What steps do you need to take for that to happen?

I believe these verses remind God's people that, as we go through this life awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises in the future, we will undergo difficulties. We are told this in Acts 14:22 which says, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." We will endure difficulties but we can endure them in faith as Abraham did. Abraham did not just mourn but also reflected on God's promises concerning the future and this is what motivated him to make the effort to purchase a tomb in the land of Canaan. We are to do the same when we encounter difficulties—we are to have faith for the future. We are to keep our faith and our focus on eternity because *God's promises to us are primarily future realities.*

Abraham recognized and believed that God's promises are still in the future.⁹ Sarah's death would have been a reminder to him of how little he had actually received of God's promises to this point. He would also have been reminded that his death could not be very far away. This could be a very trying moment for Abraham's faith. Yet this story demonstrates that he continued to believe faithfully for the future and act accordingly, despite many difficulties. He expected God to fulfill every one of His promises. In this way, Abraham serves as an example to Christians today who also have been given "precious and magnificent promises" that we must wait to inherit (2 Pet 1:4). In other words, most of the great things that God has promised His people will not be received in this life. This was true of Abraham and most of the other saints of God (Heb 11:9-10, 13-16, 39).¹⁰ We must have a faith for the future; we must have a confidence in God that goes beyond even this life for the fulfillment of His promises. We need to remember Abraham's example and keep our faith by remembering that *God's promises are primarily future realities.*

In 23:3-6, Moses writes, "**Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth,¹¹ saying, 'I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight.' The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, 'Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead.'**" Abraham's first words are "**I am a stranger and a sojourner among you**" (cf. Lev 25:23; 1 Chron 29:14-15; Ps 39:12). Abraham realized that Canaan was not his home! He was living for his future home beyond the grave (Heb 11:13-16)! Do you live as if your home is here in Thurston County? Are you so caught up with your life here and now that you don't live for the eternal? It's easy to live for today, but God wants us to live for tomorrow. Therefore, it is always appropriate to remind ourselves that our goal here is not to build up a sizable estate, but to live our life as a pilgrim on the way to our true home—the heavenly Jerusalem.¹² Life rushes by at such a fast rate. It is therefore essential that we live for the world, which is to come.

Before we move on, please note that the sons of Heth call Abraham “**a mighty prince among us.**” Apparently, Abraham’s influence counted for something (cf. 21:22-23). Does yours? When God does something supernatural in your life people will sit up and take notice. I am convinced that one of the reasons we make such a small impression in our present world is that God isn’t doing anything in our lives; we are on spiritual autopilot. If God were really working supernaturally in our lives, transforming us into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29), it would be so obvious to those around us that we would have many opportunities to share our lives and experiences with them. There is an old saying that people will drive from all over to see a fire burn. The same is true in regard to our churches and personal lives: If we are allowing God to work in our lives, people will drive from all over to see us on fire for God.¹³

In 23:7-11, we read these words: “**So Abraham rose¹⁴ and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, ‘If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site.’ ‘Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, ‘No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.’**” Abraham, in faith, wishes to “stake his claim” in the Promised Land by buying a cave which was used traditionally as a tomb. The sons of Heth are currently in control of this area of Canaan so Abraham proceeds to make the request of them. Again, this is a reminder of how little of the promises of God that Abraham had actually received to this point. He did not own even enough land to bury his wife, but rather he had to buy it from a people who were cursed by God (see 9:24; 10:15). The same is true today: It often seems that unbelievers are better off than believers, but God’s people should not be discouraged about their current situation because *God’s promises to us are primarily future realities.*

In 23:6, the sons of Heth offer to “loan” Abraham any tomb he desires, but Abraham clarifies that he wishes to purchase a tomb at “**full price**” and therefore “own” the land (23:7-9). This is important. Abraham could have saved a lot of money by borrowing a burial site. Why did he insist on purchasing a tomb? Because when we borrow something it is only temporarily ours and must be returned, but when we own something it is a permanent possession. Abraham wished to express that the land of Canaan was to be his home and not merely a stopping-off place. This was an act of faith in the future fulfillment of God’s promises. Abraham’s planning demonstrated his faith! We too are to live with the same certainty of God’s promises being accomplished despite how impossible and distant they may seem at the present. We are to have a faith for the future because *God’s promises to us are primarily future realities.*

Often, Christians view being a Christian as an insurance policy to save us from hell and make sure that we have a good life here on planet earth, but that is not the correct view of salvation. We must not act as if God’s blessings for us are entirely for our life in this world. Peter said, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you” (1 Pet 4:12). Jesus said, “In the world you have tribulation” (John 16:33). We are not to expect an easy life. Our sights are to be set on glory beyond the grave.¹⁵

Ephron offers to give Abraham the field (23:10-11). In fact, he makes three “**I give**” statements (23:11). Abraham ought to be feeling good. I would be licking my lips at this prospect. After all, even the wealthy appreciate a “free lunch.” But we shall see that apparently Abraham knows something that we the readers do not.

In 23:12-13, our story continues: **“And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, ‘If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me that I may bury my dead there.’”** Abraham sticks to his guns. He is bent on purchasing this land. Why is this so important to Abraham? The answer will become clear in a moment.

In 23:14-15, Ephron answers Abraham, saying to him, **“My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead.”** If Abraham had been given to quick retorts, he could have answered Ephron’s **“what is that between me and you?”** with “A whole lot, Ephron! You’re taking me to the cleaners.”¹⁶ Now we can see that Ephron’s “gift” is not really a gift in the sense that it costs nothing. He is saying what many television evangelists say, “Give me a hundred dollars, and I will give you this free book.” The evangelist is not really giving you anything. Like the evangelist, Ephron said, “I will give you this.” But he had a price in mind.¹⁷ Even though Ephron offers to give Abraham the land free of charge, he places a value on the “gift” that is offered. This accomplishes two things. (1) It names his inflated asking price. (2) It makes it almost impossible for Abraham to bargain over the price without looking like a cheapskate. After all, if Ephron is so generous as to offer to give the land to Abraham, how could Abraham be so small as to dicker over the price? Ephron is extorting Abraham. All he wanted was the cave but Ephron added the field. More real estate, more money! Abraham knew it but there was nothing he could do. He had been sincere in his offer to pay “full price” (lit., “full silver”) for the grave, but Ephron had just a wee bit more in mind.¹⁸

But instead **“Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. So Ephron’s field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border,¹⁹ were deeded over to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah²⁰ facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth before all who went in at the gate of his city”** (23:16-18). Ephron was certainly not being generous to a grieving man. In fact the price and terms of the sale indicate that Ephron was greedy and unfair. This Gentile “gentiled” Abraham out of some money, but Abraham regarded the land as priceless because of what it meant to him spiritually. He now had a part of the land promised to him. First, Ephron insists that the cave *and* the field be sold to Abraham. Abraham only needed the cave at the end of the field (23:9) but Ephron gives Abraham a raw deal. Secondly, the price Ephron asks for the field is exorbitant. Many centuries later Jeremiah buys a field for only seventeen shekles of silver (Jer 32:9). David paid only one-eighth that amount—50 shekels of silver—for the purchase of the temple site from Araunah (2 Sam 24:24).²¹ Nevertheless Abraham bought the field according to those extremely unfair terms and price.

Ephron likely anticipated that Abraham would bow again and make a counteroffer but Abraham accepted Ephron’s price...and he got just what he wanted. First, the deal was transacted at the city gate in full public view and full disclosure. Second, the agreement was struck in the hearing of the sons of Heth who watched as the money was measured out. Third, the price was high, so that no subsequent city dweller could dispute Abraham’s ownership.²² It was important for Abraham to have uncontested ownership and he was willing to pay top shekel for it.²³ If you have ever purchased a house you may understand this. If you want to the house bad enough you will pay top dollar to make sure your offer is accepted. This is the first spot of land Abraham owned in the Promise Land. God promised all of the land to him (12:7; 13:13) over 77 years ago; now he buys a small burial plot. What faith! Abraham believed *God’s promises to us are primarily future realities*.

Obviously, this passage is not telling Christians how to do business! Why would Abraham make such a bad deal? For one reason and one reason only: because he had faith for the future. He firmly believed his descendants would own it all one day so he was willing to invest quite heavily in this portion of the land, by faith. He was determined to pay *any* price for Sarah to be buried in Canaan, because he really believed God's promises. The way we spend our money is certainly one indicator of the health of our faith!

Our story ends in 23:19-20, with these words: **“After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.”** We are again reminded that Sarah was buried in Canaan, in a field and cave that Abraham had purchased and possessed the deed for.²⁴ Later Abraham was buried there (25:8-9), so was Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah (49:30-33, 50:13). The very fact that Abraham buried Sarah in the land of Canaan is proof of his unwavering faith. Knowing that his descendants would have to endure four hundred years of bitter bondage in a foreign country (15:13), he looked beyond that to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises. Notice, Abraham buried Sarah facing **“Mamre”** (cf. 23:17). Mamre was where Abraham built an altar and worshipped God (13:18). It was where the Lord appeared to him and repeated the promise of a son (18:1).

Verse 20, the concluding verse of our story says: **“So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.”** This seems strange appearing after 23:19, which would have been a reasonable note on which to conclude. Its placement here points out that the crucial element in this chapter is not Sarah's death, but Abraham's acquisition of land from outsiders. As such, it is an indication of things to come.²⁵

Both of these acts, Sarah's burial and Abraham's legal purchase of the land, remind us that Abraham had a faith for the future. He was not looking at his current situation but at God's promised future. As believers we also should be looking forward in faith not backwards or at the present situation.²⁶ Abraham could have bought something long before this; he was a wealthy man. Instead, he lived in tents, banking everything on the promise. His action here is not about manufacturing the plan, but rather making some tangible act that expresses faith that God is going to come through. The lesson for God's people is: Those who believe invest in God's promises.

- It took a death for Abraham to begin possessing God's promises. We possess the riches of God by our death with Jesus Christ (Eph 2:3-7). We must live daily with a view of death (Gal 6:14; Luke 9:23). We invest in the promise every time we participate in the Lord's Table with understanding and sincerity.²⁷
- Perhaps you are single and looking for the right man or the right woman. On good days you believe God has put this desire in your heart and has the right person for you. Express your faith by purchasing a symbolic diamond as a visible, tangible expression that you believe.
- Paul writes to Philemon: “Prepare me a lodging” or a “guest-room” (NIV, Phlm 22). He is in prison but his hope is that prayer will be answered and he will be freed. Preparing the room is an investment in the promise.
- Maybe you're looking for a job. As you search and wait, invest in the promise. Take some symbolic action that shows you believe God will provide that job. Buy a new briefcase or calendar or something that symbolizes a piece of the promise.

- Every believing loved-one whose body you put into the ground is a piece of the promise. Each one is a seed of the resurrection, demonstrating that because Jesus lives, they also live. Through your tears of sorrow and loss take comfort that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Maybe it's a little one who died—a daughter, son, or sister. Perhaps your child was unborn. In the pain and heartache of that loss, grab a piece of the promise when you believe the Creator of all knows what He is doing and the day is coming when He will wipe every tear from our eyes. You are purchasing a little piece of the promise to come. Take some symbolic action to show you believe. Grab some soil. Keep a memento.
- I believe our church is destined to grow. I am banking on this promise whether it happens in my lifetime or not. At our prayer seminar yesterday I sensed that God gave me a verse to claim for our church. This verse is Acts 16:31 where Paul and Silas proclaimed to the Philippian jailer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Our church has unveiled a vision to reach children, teens, and young adults with the Gospel. Could it be that God is calling us to step out and include in this year's budget a large sum of money to go toward the future growth of our church? Is this a step of faith that God is requiring us to make? I believe so!

These are some ways that you and I can exhibit faith knowing that *God's promises to us are primarily future realities*. Let's face it: If our faith is something that really does not make a big difference, if it is actually not crucial that we or others believe, no wonder it seems boring to some of our young people. Anything we don't care much about can't be very interesting. The things we do care about, however, we inevitably talk about. ...If faith is real, it seeks expression. It will communicate and profess. It will have the energy of passion.²⁸

In Abraham's story we have a preview of the Christian life. It begins with justifying faith. Our call to salvation is at the same time a call to ministry and inheritance. Faith is the master characteristic of the Christian life.²⁹

- We begin by faith (Gen 15:4-6).
- We live each day by faith (Rom 4:18-20).
- We finish by faith (Heb 11:11-13).

Today, will you be a man or woman of faith? Will you live your life in such a way that you could be included in God's Hall of Faith? It begins today by stepping out and trusting in God's promises.

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Notes

¹ We should not be shocked to find the death of Sarah recorded as a part of the biography of Abraham; however, of the twenty verses in this chapter, less than two of them refer to the emotional response of Abraham to his wife's death. No romanticist could tolerate this!

² See also Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 317.

³ Sarah dies in Hebron, the center of the land of promise. Kiriah Arba was its original name, named after Arba, the greatest man of the Anakites, a scary group of warriors (Josh 14:15).

⁴ The ancient Israelites placed great importance in the location of their own or family member's burial site. It was normal and greatly desired to be buried in one's homeland where one's family roots were. Genesis 22:20-24 reminds us that Abraham and Sarah's family roots were in Ur (cf. 11:31). Despite the importance of burial location, family roots, and Abraham's current alien status, he insists on burying Sarah in Canaan, even though doing so is very costly. Why? Because Abraham was not looking backward to where he came from, nor was he looking at his present situation—living in a tent because he did not possess even one acre of the Promised Land. Abraham was looking forward, in faith, to what God had promised! Thus the main point of Genesis 23 is not *what* Abraham did but rather *why* he did it.

⁵ Sarah is also the only woman whose name God changed (Gen 17:15).

⁶ It is worth noting that nowhere in the Bible are we told to look to Mary as an example of a godly woman. But twice we are told to look to Sarah as such an example (Isa 51:1-2, 1 Pet 3:3-6). These facts show us that although Sarah certainly had her faults and failings, she was an extraordinary woman of faith and obedience.

⁷ Even though Abraham was a great man of faith this did not mean that his life was exempt from great difficulties. He still had to suffer hurt, loss, and pain at Sarah's death. We know from the book of Hebrews that Abraham was looking forward in faith to eternity, but this did not keep him from weeping at Sarah's death. It is normal for believers to be sorrowful over the death of a Christian loved one, even though they know and expect to be with them for eternity. Stoicism in the face of the loss of a loved one is not a Christian attitude.

⁸ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Sarah's Death and The Power of the Resurrection": Genesis 23:1-20

http://www.believers-chapel.org/bulletins/genesis/38_Genesis_23_1-20.pdf, 5.

⁹ Waltke comments, "Although the story appears quite secular, making no reference to God, it is highly theological. The absence of God in style matches the seeming absence of God at death." Waltke, *Genesis*, 322.

¹⁰ All of these references from Hebrews 11 on the nature of faith emphasize that the norm for God's people is to look forward in faith for the primary fulfillment of God's promises. They are to look beyond the grave. They are to have faith for the future. This is the very nature of faith, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

¹¹ Some English translations (e.g., ESV, NIV, NRSV) render the Hebrew term "Heth" as "Hittites" here (also in Gen 23:5, 7, 10, 16, 18, 20), but this gives the impression that these people were the classical Hittites of Anatolia.

However, there is no known connection between these sons of Heth, apparently a Canaanite group. See NET.

<http://www.bible.org/default.asp?scid=3>.

¹² Johnson, "Sarah's Death and The Power of the Resurrection," 2.

¹³ Ed Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993), 157.

¹⁴ Bargaining was done from a seated position. When Abraham stood, it signaled something important. Abraham has a specific grave in mind.

¹⁵ Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 126.

¹⁶ Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing*, 310.

¹⁷ Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide*, 160.

¹⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 310.

¹⁹ "Near" means it faced Mamre. This is the same word used of burying Sarah out of his sight, but in sight of Mamre.

²⁰ This cave of Macphelah is very well attested to archaeologically. Abraham is buried there. Sarah is buried there, and their children are buried there. There is a mosque there today and you can go and visit the site. The purchase of this land represents the power of hope for Abraham.

²¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 135.

²² Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing*, 310.

²³ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 111.

²⁴ This is the first grave mentioned in Scripture. How fitting that it would belong to Sarah!

²⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*, 136.

²⁶ The insights of Pastor Larry Sarver were very helpful to me in writing this message. See “Faith for the Future,” Genesis 23:1-20: <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=46128&ContributorID=6030>.

²⁷ Several of these applications came from John Henry Beukema, “Promised Land Living” (Genesis 23:1-20): <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

²⁸ John F. Kavanaugh in *The Word Encountered. Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 12.

²⁹ Eaton, *Genesis 12-23*, 127.