

TILL DEATH DO US PART

by Ray C. Stedman

What a bitter day it is when a man buries his wife! It is perhaps the lowest point ever reached by the human spirit, and the sunset for him of all earth's hopes and expectations. In Genesis 23 we stand beside Abraham now, as he weeps at the grave of Sarah. He is walking through the valley where death has cast its shadow, but we shall see as we read this chapter that there is a light which always shines in the dark shadows in the life of a man of faith. As we sometimes sing in the old hymn, "There is a light in the valley of death now for me, since Jesus came into my heart."

The first two verses of Chapter 23 bring us into the shadow of heartache and death:

Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died at Kiriatharba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. (Gen 23:1-2 {RSV})

Probably about seventeen years have passed between Chapter 22 and Chapter 23. These accounts of Abraham's trials follow consecutively in the sacred record, but they are separated by many years of blessing, tranquility and peace. Sarah was one hundred and twenty-seven years old when she died and Isaac, and her son, is now thirty-seven. By this time the little family of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac had moved back from Beer-Sheba to Hebron, under the oak of Mamre, where they had first lived when they came into the land of Canaan -- rather like going back to their honeymoon cottage -- and here Sarah died. In one respect this was a wonderful place to die. As the place names indicate, it is in the place of "fatness" of soul and richness of fellowship with the Lord that Sarah, this woman of beauty and faith, dies.

As was customary in those days, the body of Sarah was placed in a tent all by itself and into that tent goes Abraham alone to weep and mourn. It is remarkable that this is the only time we are ever told that Abraham wept. This old man has gone through many, many bitter disappointments and times of heartbreak in his career. He was disappointed when Lot left him. He was heartbroken when Ishmael was sent out. His heart was torn with anguish when he had to offer Isaac upon the mountain. But the only time the record reveals that he wept was when Sarah died. I think this reveals the depth of his grief and love for this woman.

It may be very instructive for us to spend a few moments here with Abraham as he bows over the body of Sarah. As you perhaps already know, if you have wept with Abraham, the well of grief is fed by the springs of memory. All the dear, sweet days come crowding in upon us again as they must have to Abraham here. I think he saw in his mind's eye that beautiful girl who captured his heart long, long ago. I think it was in the spring, for even back in those days in the spring a young man's fancy turned to what the young women had been thinking about all winter! "Boy meets girl" was the same wonderful story back in the days of Abraham some 4,000 years ago as it is today. As the old man wept over the body of Sarah, he must have remembered all those wonderful times.

Memories passed through his fingers like pearls on a string. He remembered the sunlight glittering in her hair when he first saw her, the radiance of her face on her wedding day, the softness of her touch, and the grace of her caress. Each remembrance brought a heartache in the darkness of his grief at this hour. He recalled the high adventure of their life together, and especially that supreme, compelling call from God that sent them out as a couple together into an unknown land. He remembered how Sarah went along with him, sharing hardships, accepting the unsettled life without a murmur or complaint.

How his heart must have been wrung with anguish as he remembered anew the perfidy he showed in Egypt when he exposed her to danger and dishonor with his lie before Pharaoh, and again years later before Abimelech! All the bittersweet memories came in upon him as he recalled their long, weary years without a child and how they wept together. He remembered how Sarah cried bitter tears over that barren womb and

how in her desperation to give him a son, she offered her handmaid, even at the cost of her pride, and Ishmael was born. All of this must have filled Abraham's heart and mind as he wept here before Sarah.

He remembered, too, how at long last, glory shone in her face when her own son, Isaac, lay in her arms. His memory ran back through the years and retraced the love that drew them together, through the bad times and through the good, till they were one in body, mind, and heart.

Now death has torn her from his arms though it could never tear her from his heart. It is an hour of darkness and grief in the shadow of death. But this is not the whole story. As we read this account through, we read something further of the life of faith.

And Abraham rose up from before his dead, and said to the Hittites, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." The Hittites answered Abraham, "Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our sepulchres; none of us will withhold from you his sepulchre, or hinder you from burying your dead." (Gen 23:3-6 {RSV})

I love this phrase, "Abraham rose up from before his dead." That signified a squaring of the shoulder, a lifting up of the eye, a firming of the step, a facing of life again, and it is followed by a wonderful confession of faith: "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you." That is the word of a man who looks beyond all that earth has to offer and once more sees the city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God.

Although Abraham has been weeping in the valley of the shadow of death, he somehow senses there can be no shadow without a light somewhere. Have you learned that? When shadows come into your life, it is a sign that there must be light somewhere. Of course, if we turn our back on the light, then we ourselves are the ones who cause the shadow. I think thousands of people today are living in a constant shadow because their back is turned toward the light and they themselves cast a pall upon their own existence. But if we face the light, as Abraham did all through his life, looking at that light streaming from the city whose builder and maker is God, then the only shadow comes temporarily when some object obscures the light for a moment.

After all, that is what death is; it is simply a temporary obscuring of the light. But the man of faith lifts his eyes and looks beyond the shadow and sees the light still shining and he says to these people, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you. Nothing satisfies me down here. I can never settle down among you." The whole land had been given to him by the promise of God, but the dead body of his wife before him reminds him that it is not yet God's time. His faith is not weakened by the death which occurred here, but rather, it is strengthened by it.

If Abraham had not remembered that he was a pilgrim and a stranger, his heart would have been crushed to despair by the death of his beloved life's companion. So many, many people just seem to come to the end of existence when some loved one passes on, someone with whom their hearts are closely bound. But Abraham lifts his eyes beyond this to the light from the city beyond. He remembers that nothing in this life was ever intended to fully meet the needs of the heart of the pilgrim stranger passing through. He confesses that fact here again in his hour of grief.

I recall hearing Dr. Barnhouse relate an interesting incident that illustrates this very point. He told of a girl whose husband had been killed in action during the war. When the telegram came, this Christian girl read it through and then said to her mother. "Mother, I am going up to my room and please don't disturb me." Her mother called the father at work and told him what had happened and he came hurrying home and immediately went up to the room. He opened the door quietly. The room was carpeted and the girl didn't hear him come in, and he saw her kneeling beside her bed. The telegram was spread open on the bed before her. She was bowed over it. And as he stood there, he heard her say, "Oh, my heavenly Father, Oh, my Father, my heavenly Father." Without a word the man turned around and went back down the stairs and said to his wife, "She is in better hands than mine."

This is what faith does in the hour of grief. The very strength of Abraham's faith in the midst of anguish is that

he is a stranger and a sojourner, a pilgrim passing through to that city which can alone satisfy the human heart.

Now in the following verses we see something of the independence of the man of faith:

Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. And he said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Mach-pelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying place." Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, "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." Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "But if you will, hear me; I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." Ephron answered Abraham, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave which was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Mach-pelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as a possession for a burying place by the Hittites. (Gen 23:7-20 {RSV})

Why does it go into all this detail? Well, for one thing, this is the one place among many doubtful sites in the land of Palestine that has been authenticated today. We can still visit the cave of Mach-pelah in Israel. There Abraham and Sarah lie buried together. There Jacob and Leah lie together. There has been a great mosque erected above it, but it is very certain that this is the cave in which Abraham lies buried and where he buried Sarah.

The Alphonse-Gaston rigmarole that they go through in this account is very oriental; they carry on like this today in eastern market places. Abraham's pagan friends do have, however, a genuine sense of respect and honor for the man of faith. "Thou art a prince among us," they say. "Although we recognize that you are different and perhaps this caused many questions in our hearts at first, yet we know that you are a man of great honor." They pay respectful deference to him, and are quite willing that he have the land.

I think this is very instructive, though the difference that being a Christian makes may create a feeling of estrangement and even dislike in people's hearts for awhile, it always results at last in the highest respect and honor from those same people. Young people, who are under so much pressure to conform, especially need to hear this. The world is constantly trying to squeeze us into its own mold, and we don't like to be different. Yet the one thing that Christ demands of us is that in the essentials of our lives and attitudes we be different. There are many areas in which we don't need to be different and may even be offensive by being unnecessarily different. But there are other areas where we must not conform.

When Abraham first came into the land he was a pilgrim and a stranger, and they must have looked upon him as a wandering nomad. It may have taken him a long time to win their respect, but here at the end, all these pagan friends gather around and say to him, "Thou art a prince, a mighty prince among us. You can have anything you want. We respect your integrity, your heart, even though you are still a stranger and a sojourner."

Yet, I think the supreme lesson here is to show us the thorough independence of the man of faith. Abraham will not consent to own one foot of ground without paying for it. He courteously insists on taking nothing from the world, though he is ready to take everything from God. He shows a great independence here; he will not allow the world to make him rich in any degree. God had promised him this land, and no stratagem of the

enemy, no temporary expedient, will satisfy his heart. It must come from God, and until it does, he insists on paying for this segment of it even though they offer it to him. At the end of his career, although he owned the land by promise, the only part he actually possessed was the field and a cave where he buried his wife. This is a picture of the man of faith.

In the book of Hebrews we are told that none of these men and women of faith in the Old Testament ever really gained the promise for which they were looking. They are still moving toward it, because without it they will not be made perfect. We are called upon to enter this same attitude of life and heart. Remember, nothing on earth satisfies the pilgrims and strangers passing through this land.

There is a great dearth of rugged individualism in our world today. We are missing it in our American scene. What is the secret of it? We learn from the life of Abraham that the secret is essentially fixing our eye upon another place and not being satisfied with anything that earth offers. Then we can be quite indifferent to the appeals, the claims and the pressures which come from every side. If our hearts are really wrapped up in this scene down here, we are sitting ducks for all the pressures that come, in whatever form. If our eyes are fixed upon that over there, off yonder, where the man of faith looks, the city that God alone makes, then we can be very independent here. This is what we see in Abraham.

As a boy, my heart was mightily stirred when I read the accounts of the Scottish Covenantors in their resistance against the tyranny and totalitarianism of the Roman Catholic church. Their very lives were in danger as they were hounded and hunted throughout the glens and hills of Scotland. Many of them were put to death as martyrs for their faith. It was back in those days that dear old Samuel Rutherford lived, one of those who were subjected to the wrath of the king because of their Protestant faith.

The letters of Samuel Rutherford are a wonderful treasury of the devotional life of the heart that is enthralled and captured by Christ. He was a great, sturdy man. I remember reading about how when he lay dying in prison in St. Andrews, Scotland, the king sent a messenger to summon him to appear in the court in London to answer to the charges of high heresy. When the messenger came in before the old man, as he lay there on his death bed, and announced that the king had ordered him to appear in court, he said to him in his Scottish fashion,

"Gane and tell yere master, I have a summons from a higher court and ere this message reaches him, I'll be where few kings or great folk ever come."

It was a stirring rebuke to a man of earth who thought he could summon a man of faith.

This is the kind of individualism that lifting your eyes from the paltry, temporary, transitory, every day happenings and setting them on those eternal issues that alone satisfy the heart can give you. This is so beautifully demonstrated in this scene from the life of Abraham. Abraham owned a burial cave in the end. That was all. It is a reminder to us and to all men and women of faith in all times, that all we can ever really own down here is a burial ground in which we may lay to rest all the hopes and expectations of this life. Isn't that true? All we hope for and all the fine things we hope to have someday, all the experiences we would like to live over again, all these expectations are buried in the grave. If this is all we have, what an empty, pitiful life this has been.

What a wonderful inspiration it is to look at these men of faith in the Old Testament and read again that stirring account in Hebrews 11 of men and women who, "went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated -- of whom the earth was not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth," (Heb 11:37b-38 {RSV}). They had none of the comforts that the world counts of great value, but God has recorded of them that they have a great and wonderful future ahead. For them, like Abraham, even the crushing sorrows of earth, the separation from loved ones cannot dim the light of that hope which streams from the city to come.

We are made to be creatures of eternity. In the book of Ecclesiastes it says that God, "put eternity into man's mind," (Eccl 3:11 {RSV}). We are not made to be creatures of time. We are not made to be satisfied with this brief period of life and then to pass into the endless, silent realms of death. God has set eternity in our hearts.

But the great tragedy is that we can so easily lose sight of the goal. We begin to be wrapped up in the problems of time, and we lose the broad view of eternity.

Yet the power available to us enables us to lift a face radiant with life in the midst of the deepest sorrow, and to be strong when others are weak, to refuse to give way to panic and fear when the world is trembling and afraid. It all comes from the fact that like Abraham, we too are pilgrims and strangers. As Paul says, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth," (Col 3:2 {RSV}). It is this attitude, this state of mind, that gives strength and grace and peace to the grieving heart.

Prayer

Our Father, as we have looked together at this scene of Abraham, bowed in grief for the moment over the dead and lifeless body of his dear life companion, our own hearts enter with sympathy into that scene. We know life can often strike with terrible blows, that we feel the thrust of it, the hurt of it, the loneliness of it. We know that we can be shaken sometimes by the things which take place. But we thank you, Lord, that though there are things about us that can be shaken, there are also things that cannot be. When our faith is resting upon the finished work of our Lord Jesus, and our hearts have been captured by one who has said that we can never be fully satisfied with what is here below, but our eyes are caught by the light that streams from the city beyond and we press on toward that, anxious Lord, that we may be here fitted and made ready for that place, we may learn lessons to prepare us to be used over there. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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