

# **Christian Burial**

**Scripture: Genesis 23**

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof  
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

**September 19, 2010  
Evening Service**

---

People of God: The act of burial can be one of the most difficult moments of our funeral rituals. Especially the point, where we have to leave the casket behind at the cemetery while we depart, often back to the church or a hall for a time of fellowship and refreshment.

It is to be expected that there would be such difficult moments. After all, death has occurred. Even if the death was expected, if even the death came after a long life, there is always a loss. Someone whom we knew, someone who was part of our lives, some whom we loved is gone. There is a loss. And when that death was sudden and unexpected, then that loss is intensified.

And at the time of burial that loss is acutely felt. A separation is formalized. Our loved one is buried, while we return to the realm of the living. No wonder, burial is a difficult, though necessary, thing to do.

But for the Christian, the act of burial is also a sign of hope. We bury our loved ones as an act of faith. After all, we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting—words that as part of the Apostles Creed, I often recite at the time of burial. As a result, we bury our loved ones, knowing that not only is their soul with the Lord, their body will one day be resurrected. And with this new glorified body, we will live forever with the Lord, in the renewed creation—this earth, cleansed of all sin and evil. This is the Christian hope for those who place their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

As a result, Christian burial is also a sign of hope. A sign that we believe God will fulfill his promises. Death is not the end of our loved ones. Burial as a sign of hope is also the message of Genesis 23.

In this chapter, Abraham, the father of all God's people, has to deal with the death of Sarah, his wife. The importance of Sarah is shown in the fact that she is only woman, whose age at the time of her death is recorded in the Bible. She lived to be a 127 years. A ripe, full-age, who in her old age gave birth to the promised son of the covenant—Isaac. As a result, at the time of her death, Abraham could give thanks to the Lord for her.

But the text does not mention that. It does mention that he mourned for her and wept for her. This indicates he carried out the traditional rituals of grief in the ancient world: tearing his garments, disheveling his hair, cutting his beard, scattering dust on his head and fasting. No matter how long Sarah lived, her death is mourned. Because death is an intrusion in our world.

We tend to forget that, thinking that death is natural to our existence here on earth. But death was not part of the original created order for humanity. Death is the result of the fall into sin. Death is an enemy. Even after a long-lived, blessed life. As a result, at death, there is mourning. Our rituals of mourning may be different than the days of Abraham, but like Abraham we still mourn.

But Abraham faces a problem. He has no place, no property of his own, in which to bury Sarah. Why is that? Because he is an alien and a stranger in the land in which he was living. Remember that after the flood, God had restarted his plan of salvation by calling Abraham to become the father of God's people. Abraham left the city of Ur and became a nomad, a wanderer in the land of Canaan. This land of Canaan God promised Abraham to become the possession of his family. God promised in Genesis 17: "The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendents after you; and I will be your God."

But this promise of God was not yet fulfilled. Abraham, despite his wealth, didn't own any property. He did not possess any land. As a result, he wanted to buy a piece of property to bury Sarah.

Now the people who did possess the land, the Hittites made a generous offer to Abraham. They recognize that Abraham was a mighty prince and so they wanted to do him a favor. They offered a tomb in their own burial plots. But Abraham refused.

Why? Because he would not have received ownership to the land. Abraham wanted his own burial plot for Sarah and his family. If Sarah was buried in a Hittite tomb, after awhile it would have reused by the Hittites—as was the custom. Instead, Abraham wanted his own family plot, with clear possession of ownership.

And he already had a location in mind. A cave owned by Ephron. Abraham is willing to buy that cave. Ephron offers both the cave and the field. He's willing to give it away. But Abraham doesn't want a gift. Because again, clear ownership would be in doubt.

Ephron then makes a shrewd move. With a masterstroke, he manages to mention a highly inflated price, without asking for it. 400 shekels was 8 times the amount David would pay for the site for the temple. Clearly, this was an excessive price. But that's typical Middle Eastern custom. The expectation was that Abraham would begin to negotiate. But Abraham doesn't. He does not want to risk losing the sale of the land. He pays the high price. He gets to bury his wife in the cave in the land of Canaan.

Abraham finally owns a piece of property, legally, in the land of Canaan, the land God promised that he and his descendants would possess. And so verse 20 is significant, though the NIV's translation misses the point. The RSV captures the key Hebrew word, possess: "The field and the cave in it were made over to Abraham as a possession for a burying place by the Hittites."

This is first possession of the Promised Land. God's promises are beginning to be fulfilled. It is a small beginning, just a field and a cave. But it is a start. Soon, others will be buried here. Abraham will be next. Then Isaac, Rebekah, Leah and Jacob. For centuries this burial plot was all there was to God's greater promise of the entire land to be given to God's people as a possession. It was a silent witness to the promises of God. Death will not bring an end to God's promises.

Instead, the burial plots of the patriarchs and matriarchs of God's people are a testimony of the hope that God's people had that God would fulfill his covenant promises. And indeed, God would fulfill the promise of land under Joshua, when God's people would take possession of the entire Promised Land.

Now that possession of the land was never fully complete or secure. But the burial plots always remained as a testimony to God's promises.

And God would finally secure those covenant promises through the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Son of Abraham, as the beginning of Matthew's gospel reminds us, was born in the land of Canaan. But Jesus' vision of the Promised Land was much larger than Canaan.

Jesus expands the promise given to Abraham to include the whole earth. Actually, that was already the intent in the OT. Psalm 2:8 says, "I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." And so, Jesus promises his followers: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

I need to stress this point, because too many Christians are confused on this crucial point. Heaven is not our final destination. The new earth is. We were created to live in God's creation and we will be given a glorified body so that once again we will be able to live in the restored and renewed creation.

But that new creation is not fully realized here and now. While the new order of things in Jesus Christ is already present, the old order of things still plague us, like sin and death. As a result, we long for the day of final renewal, when all things will be made new.

In the meantime, we bury our dead. Like Abraham who buried his dead in the hope of God's promises being fulfilled, Christians bury their dead in the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. As Abraham clung to the promises given to him, so we cling to the promises given to us in Jesus Christ.

Christian burial, then, is an indication that we believe in the resurrection of the body. We bury in the hope—and hope in the Bible is not a wish (like saying I hope it will be sunny tomorrow but I really don't know). Instead, biblical hope is a certainty (like counting on the sun to rise tomorrow—it will, even if the clouds cover it). And so, we bury in the Christian hope of the resurrection of the body. As Paul writes in I Corinthians 15, “For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable.” We bury our dead, with the expectation that the dead will become unburied.

Christian burial, then, is also an indication that we believe in the life everlasting and that this eternal life will be experienced in the renewed creation. That's why the concept of the land is so important in the Bible. It's why Abraham wanted to own, to possess, the burial plot of his wife. Because it would be a sign that his descendents would inherit and possess the entire Promised Land—as they did. So now, we bury as a sign that believers will one day inherit and possess the renewed creation through what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us in his death and resurrection. And one day, we will.

As a result, Christian burial can be and should be an act of hope. Because we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. And that's why we bury our dead. Amen.