

It sometimes seems as if the world is filled with those who choose to live in denial of their mortality. Even though multitudes of people pass from this life each day, there are many who seem to live as if they never expect to die. Then a friend, family member, or celebrity passes away, and we are inevitably confronted with the fleeting nature of life.

Psalm 89:48 tells us that ***“No one can escape the power of death and the grave” (CEV)*** and our text from Genesis chapter twenty-three highlights that grim reality. You see, Genesis chapter twenty-three records the death of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. In doing so, this chapter serves as a poignant reminder that our time here on earth is limited.

“Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:1-2).

Seventeen years have now passed since the conclusion of Genesis chapter twenty-two and the commencement of Genesis chapter twenty-three. Unfortunately, this chapter begins with the sad announcement of Sarah’s passing at 127 years old. It is worth noting that the Bible records the death and age at death of one female figure. That person is Sarah. This serves to reflect a high regard for the position she holds within the Scriptures.

Sarah died in a town called Kirjath (or Kiriath) Arba. Kirjath Arba (also known as Hebron), was located about twenty miles (thirty-two km) from the city of Jerusalem. ⁽¹⁾ This place was familiar to Abraham, for he had spent a considerable amount of time there at various points throughout his life.

For example, Abraham lived in that area following his departure from his nephew Lot, according to [Genesis 13:18](#). It was also Abraham's place of residence when he heard Lot had been captured and taken hostage ([Genesis 14:13](#)).

Perhaps most importantly, Kirjath Arba was the place where God spoke to Sarah and Abraham regarding the future birth of their son Isaac ([Genesis chapter eighteen](#)). With these things in mind, we can say that God graciously permitted Sarah to depart from this life in the comfort of a familiar residence.

After expressing his grief over the death of his wife, Abraham was faced with the need to make her funeral arrangements. But this was no mere formality, for those arrangements will go on to impact on Abraham's descendants for generations to come.

(1) “Hebron” *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. Originally published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois. Copyright © 1988.

“Then Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ‘I am a foreigner and a visitor among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight’” (Genesis 23:3-4).

The “sons of Heth” are commonly known as the Hittites in Biblical literature. The Hittites would eventually grow to establish a great empire in the area of the world we associate with the modern-day nation of Turkey. However, the ancient kingdom of the Hittites was something that lay in the future. In Abraham’s time, the sons of Heth represented a smaller group who lived near Kirjath Arba where Sarah died.

So Abraham approached this people group with a simple request: *“I am living as a foreigner in your land and I don’t own any property here. Please let me buy some land to use as a burial plot.”* While Abraham could have buried Sarah [in the land where they were married](#), there is a reason to explain why he didn't.

Remember that God had earlier directed Abraham to “...*Leave your country, your family, and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you*” (*Genesis 12:1 CEV*). That land was the place where Abraham and Sarah were living at the time of her death. It was also the place that God promised to Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, according to [Genesis 12:7](#). So for Abraham, a return to their original homeland was out of the question. Instead, Sarah’s final resting place was destined to be in the place of God’s future for her family.

“And 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 burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place, that you may bury your dead'” (Genesis 23:5-6).

It seems clear that the Hittites regarded Abraham as an important and influential person. In fact, the original language of this passage indicates that the Hittites viewed Abraham as a “prince with God” as reflected in some other translations of this verse. ⁽¹⁾ Abraham had such an excellent reputation among others that they offered to allow him to bury Sarah in one of their personal family tombs.

But Abraham wasn’t looking for a single burial plot; he was also thinking about the future generations of his descendants as well. And there was one particular place Abraham had in mind.

(1) *The American Standard Version (ASV)* and *English Standard Version (ESV)* are two examples

“Then Abraham stood up and bowed himself to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, 'If it is your wish that I bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and meet with Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he has, which is at the end of his field. Let him give it to me at the full price, as property for a burial place among you'” (Genesis 23:7-9).

It’s important to notice how Abraham treated these negotiations. Remember that the Hittites regarded Abraham as “a prince,” so they clearly recognized him as a person of great social status. Yet we’re told that Abraham bowed himself or “*gave honor*” (*CEV*) to those very same people.

This tells us that Abraham didn’t attempt to leverage his social position to get what he desired. Nor did he attempt to use his [army of fighting men](#) to force the Hittites into accommodating his request. Even though the Hittites were not followers of God, Abraham made certain to dignify Him with an attitude of respect.

Now, this may seem like an ordinary business transaction, but several cultural realities were about to come into play...

“Now Ephron dwelt among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the presence of the sons of Heth, all who entered at the gate of his city, saying, 'No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of the sons of my people. I give it to you. Bury your dead!'” (Genesis 23:10-11).

So Ephron offered to give this cave to Abraham along with the field where it was located. While that may seem like a generous offer, things are not always as they appear. You see, some Biblical commentators believe that Ephron was responsible for any municipal assessments on that property unless he sold the entire parcel of land.

If Abraham purchased the cave of Machpelah (but not the field where the cave was located), Ephron was still responsible for those tax assessments. So while it may seem as if Ephron was being generous in his offer to Abraham, a more likely explanation is that he wanted to minimize his financial liabilities by disposing of that asset as a unit.

This exchange also represented the first step in negotiating the price of that property. In the culture of Abraham's day, a seller would respond to a purchase offer by proposing to give that item away as an indicator of his or her supposed generosity. It was then expected that the buyer would demonstrate his or her fairness by insisting to pay for the item that he or she wanted to buy.

The seller then responded by mentioning a value for the item that was more than it was worth. That value served as a cue for the prospective purchaser and initiated the real negotiations. These cultural negotiation strategies add an important element to our study of the next few verses...

“Then Abraham bowed himself down before the people of the land; and he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, 'If you will give it, please hear me. I will give you money for the field; take it from me and I will bury my dead there.'

And Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, 'My lord, listen to me; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead'” (Genesis 23:12-15).

So Abraham followed this standard negotiating procedure by insisting on paying for Ephron's property instead of accepting his offer of a gift. Ephron then responded by placing a value on that “gift.” In modern-day terms, we would identify that value (“***four hundred shekels of silver***“) as Ephron's “asking price.”

That asking price was probably greater than the value of that land, but it was understood that the price was negotiable if the buyer still desired to make the purchase. So Ephron's offer probably represented an inflated value. But instead of negotiating that amount, Abraham did something that was culturally unexpected.

“And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, currency of the merchants.

So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, which were within all the surrounding borders, were deeded to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.

And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave that is in it were deeded to Abraham by the sons of Heth as property for a burial place” (Genesis 23:16-20).

We can learn some important things by looking at the way Abraham conducted this business deal. First, Abraham treated the Hittites in a respectful and professional manner. In fact, we're told that Abraham “bowed down” twice during these negotiations ([Genesis 23:7](#) and [23:12](#)). Abraham also made certain that the terms of the agreement were clearly defined, so everyone knew exactly what each side would receive.

Finally, this passage tells us that Abraham conducted these negotiations in the presence of other witnesses. Those witnesses served to verify the legal and ethical nature of his transaction. So it's clear that Abraham made certain to honor God and represent Him properly in his business dealings with others. This is another area where Abraham provides us with a good example to follow in the concerns of daily life.

Nevertheless, we should also recognize that Ephron did not show much consideration for Abraham in his time of grief. Remember that Abraham was negotiating for a place to bury his beloved wife. If Ephron truly considered Abraham to be a “mighty prince,” he could have chosen to set aside the usual negotiating practice of that time out of respect for Abraham's loss. Unfortunately, Ephron seemed to view the death of Abraham’s wife as an opportunity to make a financial windfall. ⁽¹⁾

Despite these things, Abraham declined to negotiate Ephron's asking price, even though it was probably overvalued. Instead, Abraham paid the asking price immediately without any dispute. As a man who had a reputation as someone who honored God, Abraham made certain to live up to that reputation in his dealings with those who were unfamiliar with Him.

(1) Even though Ephron's offer a gift probably formed part of his negotiation strategy, we should recognize that the Hittites still held Abraham in high regard. If the Hittites had felt differently about Abraham, they may have never entertained his offer to purchase the cave of Machpelah.