

Grief and Memorial

By

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“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

In the previous chapter, Abraham willingly offered up Isaac to God and had a direct encounter with Him that re-established God’s covenant with Abraham, preserved the life of Isaac, and resulted in Abraham being commended by God Himself for his faithfulness. But now, directly after that amazing encounter with God, Abraham suffers the tragedy of losing his wife Sarah. From this account, we can learn a lot about how to respond to the death of a loved one and the Christian hope of life after death.

Although death is a reality that we will all have to wrestle with sooner or later, it remains a morbid topic that most people will do everything in their power to avoid. This is especially true for the culture that we live in today. For most of human history, while death was tragic, it was also, seemingly, more common. In order to eat you had to butcher your own animals, children had about a 50 percent chance of making it past the age of 10 in the ancient world, and wars were far more common. In fact we read in 2 Samuel 11:1 that there was a specific time of year “when the kings go out to battle...” Beyond that, there were no hospitals, or hospice care that allowed for people to die in a distant place. Apart from random accidents, people died in their homes with their families. All of this made death a more familiar, albeit unwelcome, visitor.

In the modern age, it isn’t that people die less, we obviously die at the same rate as the ancient world, it’s just that through modern innovations death is almost exclusively something that occurs in old age in a sanitized environment far from public view. It used to be very common for parents to lose children at young ages, now it is a rarity. Soldiers dying in war used to also be very common, now the vast majority of our armed soldiers will not see combat, and even those who do see combat, (since the last couple wars have been against a massively inferior enemy), they have relatively low rates of mortality. We also don’t butcher our own meat, and we have places far from the public vision where people go to die. When you put all these factors together, you can see why the topic of death is one that we actually can keep out of our minds for the majority of our lives.

However, no matter how assiduously someone avoids the topic of death, eventually death will visit every home. And if we don't know how to approach this topic well, and prepare ourselves to face our own mortality, we will be unprepared for death when it comes. If that happens, we will take an event that will be painful and tragic, and turn it into something so horrible that it might completely undo us and our families.

The Unexpected Nature of Death

“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.”

-James 4:13-14

Which leads to the first truth we learn from the death of Sarah: no matter what, death will always be unexpected. It can easily go beneath our notice when we read this story, but Sarah died in an area called Kirjath Arba, which was quite the distance from where Abraham ended up in the previous chapter, Beersheba. Which leads to the obvious question, why was Sarah separated from Abraham when she passed? Since we are not given that information by the author of Genesis we simply don't know, but a few different theories have been offered over time. Some believe that maybe Sarah and Abraham were planning on moving towards that area, but Abraham was settling affairs in Beersheba when Sarah passed. Some believe that Sarah's health may have been fading and so she went to the higher climate of Kirjath Arba in hopes of recovery, but unfortunately passed away up there. Still others believe that Sarah, under the belief that her only son was about to be sacrificed to God, went to Kirjath Arba to mourn his loss and passed away before she could return to Beersheba.

While we don't know the specific reason for this separation, we are given no indication by the author that this separation was due to something negative, like marital strife or something like that. However, the odd choice of the author to not include the reason is conspicuous by its absence. In fact, when we read through this chapter, the whole thing can seem very strange to a modern reader. For a modern author, they would spend more time explaining the reasons behind Sarah's absence, then they would spend the rest of the time talking about the emotional reaction of Abraham and Isaac. Instead the author chooses to focus, almost exclusively, on Abraham buying the field that contains the cave that he buries her in. When an author who is both incredibly talented as well as inspired by the Holy Spirit makes a decision this strange, it should at least hint to us that something more important is hiding behind the surface.

For this first decision, to leave out the specifics of Sarah's absence, I think that the main truth we can take from this is that the Bible wants us to know that death is unplanned and unexpected. This might sound like an obvious point, but one that often gets overlooked. We tend to think that death will only occur when it is convenient. Because of this we treat our relationships, and even our own existence, casually because we feel as though we have an infinite amount of time to make things right and fix mistakes, but this is never the case. When the specter of death enters someone's life, whether that is through a terminal diagnosis or a sudden accident, we all find that we are woefully unprepared to deal with its presence.

"So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

-Psalm 90:12

The balance that the Christian is trying to achieve is to live in the shadow of eternity. This means, that on one side of the coin, we don't want to be so obsessed with death that we fail to enjoy our life, but we also don't want to be so caught up in the joys of life that we forget about the reality of our own mortality. Those who become obsessed with death can easily think that this life is ultimately meaningless because it will be swallowed up by eternity. What they fail to realize is that things are always made more precious when they are limited. To put it another way, if you think about something like sand, the reason why sand has very little value is because it is so prevalent and easy to come by, but gold on the other hand is very valuable specifically because it is so rare and difficult to find.

The most valuable resource that we have been given by God is time. Each of us have only been given a small amount of it, and once we use any of the time we have been given, it is lost forever. Each second that we get on this earth is a gift that was given to us by our Father, and one that has more value than we could ever calculate. However, when one doesn't number their days, they fail to realize the value of the time they are given, and might spend their time frivolously. Only someone who has truly reckoned with this invaluable truth will actually use the time that they were given well, and invest it in what matters most. Which leads to the obvious question, if time is such a limited and valuable resource, how ought we to spend it?

Memorial and Legacy

"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 answer to that question can be found in the practice of memorials. The reason why memorial is a synonym for a funeral is because this is a more apt description of what we are trying to accomplish when we bury our dead. It is at the funeral that we recount the important memories that we carry of our loved ones, and it is in their obituary that we condense down decades of life into a few short lines. It is within these lines however that we learn the importance of our days, and we learn the things that make life precious and important and cause us to think in eternal terms. To put it another way, the importance of a memorial can be broken into two categories, the first is reminding us of our eternal hope, and the second is reminding us of someone's legacy.

One of the main reasons why the author spends so much time on Abraham buying a burial plot for Sarah is to use the symbolism of burial itself to drive a point home to us. When you stop and think about it, ritually burying our dead makes very little sense. In the ancient world, both pagans and Jews alike had elaborate funeral rites that were often very costly. Within these rituals you would have a religious figure oversee the proceedings, you would pay a lot of money for a casket of sorts as well as a place to bury your dead. You would usually wash and anoint the body itself, dress them in their best clothes, in some pagan cultures you would even place money on the eyes or under the tongue as a fare for the boatman to carry them to the afterlife. All of this can seem superfluous to us today. If the body is dead, why spend so much time and money caring for the corpse? Why not just bury the body in a shallow patch of earth, or cremate them, and be done with it?

For ancient man, these rituals carried a lot of significance, and for Jews and Christians it should carry even more. Ancient man did believe in a type of unity between body and soul that continued into the spiritual afterlife. Therefore, the treatment of the corpse was both significant to someone's eternal state and indicative of the kind of life that someone led during their time on earth. In fact, someone's entrance into the afterlife was, in some ways, dependent on how people treated their dead body. This is why it was considered to be unthinkable to let someone's body decay without being buried.

Death and Resurrection

"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming."

-1 Corinthians 15:20-23

For Christians the significance is even more. We believe that eternal life is not going to be spiritual, but instead physical. The reason why the resurrection is so important to our faith is that it proves that the afterlife will be a unification of the body and the soul for all eternity. While this idea seemed really strange to the surrounding pagans, it is this belief that caused Jews and Christians to treat the corpses of our dead with such respect. A story in the bible that shows this pretty well is when a group of Israelites fight their way into enemy lines to recover the bodies of Saul and his sons at the end of the 31st chapter of 1st Samuel. We see in this story how the pagans saw hanging the bodies of Saul and his children as the ultimate insult, and how the Jews saw recovering these bodies was worth risking their lives.

So when Jews and Christians bury our dead, whether this burial includes cremation or not, the hope is that what is buried will be raised again at the return of our Lord and Savior. We know from other passages like 2 Corinthians 5 that there is an interim period that exists right now where the soul can exist without the body, but these same passages tell us that this is not the eternal Christian hope.

“For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.”

-2 Corinthians 5:1-8

This is why the Bible refers to the dead as “sleeping”, take this passage as one example:

“After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.”

-1 Corinthians 15:6

Just as a sleeping body is stationary but will eventually wake up and be animated again, so Christians believe that the bodies of the faithful will eventually rise again at the second coming of Christ. This is why we treat those bodies with respect, and why we

leave a “memorial stone” or as many put it today a “tombstone”. Christians genuinely believe that the body that is buried is in a state of “sleeping” and will be “awakened” when Jesus returns and they will live eternally with Him on this earth.

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

-Revelation 21:1-5

This is unfortunately a truth that most Christians are ignorant of nowadays. They tend to have the traditional pagan view that the afterlife will be merely spiritual, but when most people stop and think about that possibility, it isn't as appealing as we tend to think. Every experience we have ever had has been experienced through our bodies. We don't know of any existence outside of our bodies and therefore, as Paul puts it, we don't want to be unclothed but further clothed. Meaning, that our issues in the present life are not due to our hatred of the body, but due to the limitations and the frailties of our current bodies. We don't actually want to be without our bodies, we actually want better bodies, and that is what we are promised in Christ.

Eternal Meaning

Because of this, when a Christian attends a memorial service, this is one of the most important truths that we are supposed to be remembering. This gives hope after death, and meaning to our current lives. Because, many of the ancients argued, that if eternal life is spiritual, then physical life is meaningless. We will talk more about this when we discuss the other purpose for memorials, but the logic of this conclusion is unavoidable. If all that matters in this life is whether or not you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then every other decision you make is ultimately meaningless. The career you choose, the person that you marry, the hobbies that you pick up, all of these will die with your body and your eternal soul will have no reason to even retain the memories of all these things. This is how the writer of Ecclesiastes puts this.

“Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your

might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”

-Ecclesiastes 9:9-10

It is only in the knowledge of the resurrection that our lives gain eternal meaning. That the bodies that accomplished all of these deeds will be translated into the heavens, and therefore our deeds will also find eternal meaning in the presence of God. This is why the Biblical authors spoke of crowns. This is not to say that we will literally receive crowns when we go to heaven, but that the deeds done in the flesh, if they are done with a worthy heart, will be translated into heaven along with your body. This gives your life meaning and significance and makes the next part of the memorial significant.

Remembering the Dead

“Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”

-1 Corinthians 3:12-15

However, as important as these practices are to assuring our grieving hearts of our eternal hope, as mentioned before, there is another practical reason why we observe these burial practices. For the pagans, a person's deeds were the totality of who they were. Their memorials were a testament to their great deeds and the foundation for their eternal state. Which meant that remembering our ancestors and memorializing them had eternal significance for them. There was also an idea that the souls of our ancestors could bring aid to the living and from this belief many forms of ancestor worship emerged. This is why mediums and seances became so popular in the ancient world. There was an innate belief that the souls of our ancestors watched over us and could help us in our present condition.

For the Jews and the Christians, the reason for these memorials was quite different. While we share the belief that the souls of our loved ones carry on after death, we are forbidden from trying to contact them:

“And when they say to you, “Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter,” should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?”

-Isaiah 8:19

The reason for this is quite simple. While the dead are conscious in God's presence, God's desire for His people is that we go to Him directly and not seek the wisdom or the intercession of the dead on behalf of the living.

"Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

-1 Peter 5:6-7

And yet, the importance of memorializing the dead is no less significant for Christians over pagans. The reason is because while contacting the dead goes against our belief, remembering the dead has even more significance for us than even the pagans.

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints."

-Psalm 116:15

For us, the reason why we memorialize our dead is because the thing that persists on this earth is their legacy. Unless we become incredibly famous, the majority of our lives will be forgotten in a very short time after our passing. This means that what remains, our legacy, will be carried on, not really through our actions per se, but through the overall impression that we left on the relationships that remain. This is what people are trying to accomplish when they eulogize the dead and write their obituary and the engraving on their tombstone. They are trying, not to preserve every aspect of that person's life, but the effect that this person had on their life. Since each of our lives will be a mixture of good and bad, the main impression that will be left is the overall goal and intent of our lives.

This is one way to interpret the above Psalm. It isn't that God loves it when His saints die, but instead, there is a preciousness in a life that really was aimed at knowing and honoring God. I'll use the metaphor of money in order to explain this point. Although we will spend a lot of our money on innocuous things, like rent, insurance, car payments, taxes, and so on. There is usually at least one thing in life that most people will drop big money on. This is the area that they actually save money for, and the area that they get most excited for. Due to this fact, most of their other expenditures are in some way related to this particular area that they are ensuring they will have enough money for.

For some, this will be their appearance, beauty products, facials, or expensive clothes, for others it will be on a hobby like fishing, hunting, cooking, or some craft, still others it will be on gadgets like fancy cars, all terrain vehicles, or watches. But, you can always tell a lot about what someone values based on the areas that they try to search out the cheapest option, and the areas that they look for the highest quality option.

How we spend our time works about the same way. Most of our time will be spent on innocuous things like sleeping, working, or traveling, but there will be one thing that tops our priority list and everything we do will be in service to that one thing.

*“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”
-1 Corinthians 10:31*

For the Christian, the answer to this question should be God. I really love how the Westminster Catechism puts this when it answers the question, what is the chief end, or the highest good, of man?:

*“Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”
-The Westminster Catechism*

Even though we will spend the majority of our lives not directly thinking about God or worshiping Him, everything we do should be in service to God. The kind of worker that we become, the way that we treat our loved ones, and even the small innocuous joys of our daily lives should all be done with some reference to the One whom we love most. And it is this valuation that will ultimately be remembered by the ones that we leave behind.

Although a life is made up of many different events and actions, when someone is committed to something and really orients their life around it and finds incredible joy and fulfillment in something, it becomes obvious to those around them. If someone is obsessed with money, fame, sex, religion, relationships, or anything else, this higher goal will be retained by the family and will color their memories of you. This is the preciousness of the death of the saints. The ones who truly put God first and then demonstrated that commitment in the way they acted and the joy that they had in their pursuit of God.

As a pastor I do attend a lot more memorials than the average person, and this truth will present itself in the stories that are told by the people present. If you have to share a story about someone at a memorial, whether consciously or unconsciously, you usually select a memory that carries the significance of someone’s life. For those who ultimately wasted their lives on frivolous pursuits, the stories will usually be short, pointless, and sometimes humorous. But when someone’s life was profound, the stories carry that significance, even when the stories are humorous. What animates our actions, and brings us the greatest joy, this is the legacy that we leave behind and the one that will be remembered by those that survive us.

For Sarah, we know that the answer to that question was God and His calling. The way that we know that is because of the actions that Abraham takes right after her death. Although the whole land of Canaan was promised to Abraham, it is significant that the only piece of property that he ends up owning is this one field that has the cave on it. Abraham never buys any other land, but when it comes to burying his wife, he knew that this action would honor her memory. That he would buy, not just a small tract of land to bury her in, but a field that contained a large cave that he and his descendants could be buried in, in fulfillment of God's promise to give them the land. In this same cave, we know that Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel were all buried at this site, and a memorial still stands to this day.

And in the next chapter, Abraham seeks a wife for his son. Even though Isaac is a grown man at this time, Abraham had been seemingly dragging his feet on finding his son a wife. But after Sarah dies, a strong motivation springs up in Abraham's heart and he immediately sends out his servant to find Isaac a wife in fulfillment of God's promise that in the seed of Abraham the world would be blessed. These simple actions of Abraham tell us so much about the kind of woman that Sarah was and the legacy that she left on her family.

It does remind me of a funny, albeit raunchy, comedy called "Shallow Hal". In this film, Jack Black plays a character who spends his entire life trying to play the field with as many beautiful women as he can. The reason why he does this, is because his dad on his deathbed, (although his dad is delirious at the time), tells his son that pursuing beautiful women is the most important thing that you can do. This is presented as a funny moment, but its message is true. We are setting up a legacy for those who follow after us, and this legacy is built in the passion and drive of our life. God wants to be our ultimate end and our most joyous pursuit, and the one who makes that a reality is the one who will leave the most worthy legacy behind.

Ritual And Mourning

"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

The next thing that Abraham exemplifies for us well is his willingness to mourn. Some Christians make the mistake of believing that since this life is transient, then death

should be met with celebration and not mourning. This is untrue and even damaging to believe.

“Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, each one came from his own place—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. For they had made an appointment together to come and mourn with him, and to comfort him. And when they raised their eyes from afar, and did not recognize him, they lifted their voices and wept; and each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head toward heaven. So they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great.”

-Job 2:11-13

In the above passage, Job has suffered the loss of all the things he loved most, his family, his health, and his wealth. In this moment of loss, his friends come over and simply weep with him for seven days. While they ended up making the situation worse after these seven days, this action was seen as so good that it is memorialized in a mourning ritual that Jews practice to this day called “Shiva” which translates to “seven”, signifying the number of days to mourn.

This doesn’t mean that Jews believe that the whole mourning process should only take a week, only that the first seven days after a loss are the most difficult and carry with it the most pain. As such, they understand that the best thing you can do for someone in that situation is visit them in their grief, help them in practical ways like bringing them food, and pray with them. A house of “Shiva” is also called a “house of mourning” in the scriptures and these houses are spoken of in positive terms.

“Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, For by a sad countenance the heart is made better.”

-Ecclesiastes 7:2-3

Notice that Solomon does not condemn the practice of mourning, but ultimately, in his circuitous format, is arguing that spending our time thinking about eternity will make us wise and intentional in the way that we live. Also, he believed that a heart that is sad must grieve in order to be made better. Since our modern culture has taken away this mourning period and wrongly believes that we should celebrate death as opposed to grieve it, we have lost this lesson. Even Jesus during His earthly ministry visits a house of mourning and look at how He behaved:

“So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. “But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. “And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

-John 11:17-27

He doesn't condemn the people there for mourning, but instead joins them in their sorrow and brings them assurance of the life to come. He does this in an incredibly miraculous way by raising Lazarus from the dead, but He mourns before He does this. Which makes us wonder why He does this. If His intent was always to raise Lazarus, why not just do that immediately as opposed to consoling Mary and Martha? The reason is clear, though the resurrection is a wonderful hope for us, it does not erase the sorrow that death brings.

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

The Christian is supposed to mourn the loss of this life even more than the pagan. The pagan doesn't understand the significance of this life and therefore they don't understand the tragedy of life passing. The Christian on the other hand believes innately that death is the ultimate tragedy that results from living under the curse. This is why Jesus wept in John 11 and is even moved to anger before He raises Lazarus from the dead.

Death and Injustice

This is an aside, but this point is always something that bothered me as an atheist. Most atheists are moved to disbelieve God because of pain and death, I actually struggled from the opposite direction. If atheism is true, then death is not only natural, but it is necessary. We are only here because trillions of previous species all went extinct in a brutal struggle for survival that finally culminated in the evolution of man. And each life

that is born is destined to die with no eternal meaning or significance. While I accepted these things as being true, what I couldn't understand is why I was so bothered by this reality. If death is so natural and necessary, why do we innately feel that it is unnatural, cruel, and awful? Why do we grieve at death and why do we fight so hard to prolong life that is ultimately doomed? I think C.S. Lewis put this best:

"...my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?"

-C.S. Lewis - "Mere Christianity"

Mourning and Comfort

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

-Matthew 5:4

But for the Christian, what is the purpose for mourning? I think Jesus gives us the answer above. Since we live in a world that has rejected God, we live under the consequences of that decision, namely death. And when the Christian experiences death, they will be not only disturbed, but grieved to their core. How can you worship the God of all life and not be despondent at the sight of death? But in our sorrow, we have the opportunity to receive comfort. The comfort we receive from God is not merely an assent to hopeful truths, but it is actually a real experience with the love and affection of God. It isn't that this experience is shut off to those who don't grieve, only that we are most open to this kind of affection in the midst of our greatest sorrow.

Take a child for instance. The loving parent is always open to bond with their child, but usually the child is too distracted by their environment to actually take their parent up on this offer. The only time when this isn't true is when the child is hurt. When a child wails and cries, they aren't necessarily looking for a solution to their trouble, they are looking for a presence to console them. It is during this time of comfort that the greatest amount of intimacy is formed between them and their child. This is also why most men miss out on this time since we are usually not very good at comfort. However, if a parent can learn the importance of this process and make themselves available to not just try to fix a child's problem, but offer them your presence as a consolation for their grief, you will find the deepest level of bonding available to you. This process is so beautiful, that most mothers actually struggle not to egg on injuries incurred by their child and try to make themselves available for this level of comfort even when it is not needed, and even damaging to their child's confidence to do so.

However, for us as believers, God makes Himself available to His people who genuinely mourn. These are the people who are willing to really seek the presence of God in their sorrow, not looking for solutions or answers necessarily, but just for the presence of their God to help them grieve their loss. The Christian who does this will find a level of intimacy with their God that is not accessible to those who don't understand this great lesson.

"...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death..."

-Philippians 3:10

This process is what Paul called the "fellowship of sufferings" a call from our God to draw near to Him not just in our prosperity, but even in our hardships and our trials. And this intimacy is also available to believers in general. If we feel ashamed by death and avoid it at all costs, then we also won't be equipped to show comfort to those who have experienced loss of their own.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

-2 Corinthians 1:3-4

For some of us, it might be easier to avoid grief and try to just move on without seeking comfort, but the problem with this mindset is that not only are you depriving yourself of intimacy with God, you are also making yourself ill-equipped to comfort the grief of those around you. I really do wish that the church retained the ritual of Shiva, you can tell we tried to, which is why people used to symbolize their grief by wearing black, but it never was as formalized as it was for the Jews, and therefore it was much easier for it to pass away. The people of God ought to be those who mourn well, and do so while holding close to the hope of God.

The Field and The Promise

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." 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 23:5-9

I wanted to end on this final point. The other significant point about Abraham specifically buying a field for burial is the symbolic significance behind fields in general.

It would have been easier for Abraham to simply buy a cave to bury Sarah, but instead he chooses to buy a field that has a cave on it. Some have argued that this particular cave carried the bodies of Adam and Eve and that is why Abraham was willing to pay such a high price, but I think this answer is grasping at something that isn't said in the text. The more obvious answer is that there is significance in him buying a field alongside the burial cave. The symbol of the field is one that is used throughout Scripture. Symbolically, a field is a place where seed is planted and crops grow out of it. For this reason, fields have been a picture of sowing and reaping, as well as treasure and harvest.

I think the picture of sowing and reaping is seen many times, including several of Jesus' parables, but the most profound time was after Judas betrayed Jesus and tried to take it back. It says that the Pharisees took the money that Judas returned and bought a field with it and turned it into a burial plot that was nicknamed "The Field of Blood". The Pharisees had sown to their own corruption and greed so much and the result of their corruption was nothing but death and tragedy for the poor souls that followed their teachings. A more poetic action couldn't have been made if they tried. To capture the author of life for a paltry sum, and then to take that same money and buy a field in which literal corpses were sown into it is about as obvious a sign as you can get.

But, there is another picture contained in fields and that is treasure and harvest. A farmer takes his resources and invests it in seed that then goes into the ground and metaphorically dies. This field then becomes invested with all the treasure of the farmer, and becomes valuable at the time of harvest. In a similar way, Abraham purchases a field that represents the hopes of his family. Even though God promised his descendants would be enslaved in Egypt, Abraham believed that this land would belong to his descendants for all time. And so he purchases a field as a symbol of the treasure that God had invested in him and the land itself. This same metaphor is then used by Christ to describe His kingdom:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

-Matthew 13:44

It says in the Scripture that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever should believe in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16). Jesus gave His life for this world, but it wasn’t the world itself that He was buying, it was the treasure that was buried inside. Jesus loves His people and wants to spend eternity with them, at His return, we will be raised with Him to rule and reign on this very earth. This brings great value to the earth itself as well as the lives of those who serve Him. And because of this, all that we “sow” in this life, all that we invest into our lives will be raised with Christ. Making every moment of our lives infinitely valuable through the One who will raise us up with Him.

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”

-Titus 2:11-14