

## Genesis 23

This is the first of three transitional chapters. These chapters contain the death of Sarah (23), the finding of a wife for Isaac (24) and the death of Abraham (25). These chapters move the story of the promise forward from the first to the second generation.

On the surface this chapter appears to be no more than the story of Sarah's death and burial. But hovering just below the surface there are echoes concerning the promise that should not be missed. A straightforward telling of the tale lets us know that Sarah lived one-hundred and twenty-seven years. As a Biblical character she left behind a significant, yet conflicted, legacy. On the positive side, she was the one who agreed to travel with Abraham and seek a new life with a new God. She twice kept Abraham's secret that she was his wife, in order to save his life. On the less than positive side, she laughed when she was told that at an old age, she would have a child. She also allowed her jealousy of the maid Hagar to pressure Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael (the son of Abraham and Hagar) into the wilderness to die (though God saved them). In many ways, she becomes the prototype for Biblical mothers; a woman torn by real fears and emotions, yet in the end faithful to God and to the promise.

When she died she was deeply mourned by her husband, Abraham, who desired to bury her in the land in which they were living. The problem with this desire (as we have seen in previous chapters) was that they were aliens and strangers in the land in which they were living. What this meant was that Abraham had to negotiate the purchase of the land from the Hittites (1700-1200 BCE), who were masters of the land. Abraham engages in the elaborate ritual of land purchase for a cave at Machpelah, which is near modern day Hebron in Israel. He ultimately purchases not only the cave, but the land around it for four-hundred sheckles of silver. There he buried Sarah. Again, on the surface this is a simple story of land acquisition, but what is hovering below the surface is the realization that this is the first purchase of "the land" which had been part of God's promise to Abraham (remembering that Abraham had been promised land, children and blessing).

This account becomes significant in two critical moments in the future. The first is when the prophet Jeremiah, knowing that the Babylonians are about to destroy Jerusalem and send the people into exile, purchased a plot of land outside Jerusalem. He does so as a symbol that God will restore the people to the land, even as the people had been restored to the land after their captivity in Egypt, when they returned to the land purchased by Abraham. The second is for the people who were in exile in Babylon. It was in exile that they recalled both the prophecy of Jeremiah and the purchase of the land by Abraham. For if the land had been purchased by their ancestors, then in some way it was still their land, and they could trust that God would keep God's promise and return them to it.

**Reflections:** Sometimes it is easy to believe that Biblical characters like Sarah are perfect people living perfect lives. What we see however is that Sarah was just like us; filled with faith and doubt; trust and uncertainty; willing to be used and to use others. In a sense then we are like her in that even in our imperfect ways, we try to advance the promise of God that the world will be renewed and made whole. Though we may not be called to journey to far places like Sarah, we still keep the promise alive when we serve at SOS, bring food to the food closet, or pack backpacks for children at Alcott or Orchards Family Services. In each of these we allow the promise of God to shine through our less than perfect lives.

### **Questions:**

1. Where have you made a difference in someone's life?
2. Where do you see God at work in you through your less than perfect life?
3. Where can you relate to Sarah and her struggle with life and faith?