

## Genesis 23: Cave of Machpelah 7-15-18 PM

The shrine at the cave of Machpelah (called the cave of the patriarchs) is arguably the oldest shrine in the world in continual use for the original purpose it was created. It was built by Herod the Great, and is revered by many denominations and religions. Whether this is the actual resting place of the patriarchs is not certain, nor is it relevant; the true memorial to their death is found in Genesis 23 and the burial of Sarah. There are four lessons to consider in the burial of Sarah.

(As an aside, this is a good place to discuss the question of cremation versus burial. Some say that a Christian ought not to be cremated. They point to the Old Testament and the New Testament examples that the funerals we do see (Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebekah, Jesus, Stephen) the bodies are buried. They also point out that the only cremations that occurred were as a sign of evil (Genesis 38:24, Leviticus 21:9, Leviticus 10:9, 1 Kings 13:2). There is also a judgment against the King of Moab for "*burning the bones of the king of Edom to lime*" in Amos 2:1. This may refer to the event in 2 Kings 3:27. In which case, that was not a cremation, but a human sacrifice.

On the other side of this debate, there is the fact that the only actual funeral/cremation in the Bible was Saul and his sons in 1 Sam. 31:12-13. It does not seem to have been a sin or frowned upon. There is also the issue that many Christians were burned to death against their wishes. Paul mentions this possibility in 1 Corinthians 13:3. Certainly being consumed by fire, especially in testimony to Christ, would not be wrong.

It was not cremation that was considered inappropriate to the Jews so much as it was mishandling the body. When Jeremiah pronounced judgment on Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 22:18, it seems not being buried was the great shame (and it seems that way in Jeremiah 8:1-2 as well). The abuse of a body after death that was the thing that they disliked.

Is Cremation a sin? No. First, God never said that it was necessary to preserve our physical forms at death. There are no clear examples for us that this was the only way to handle the dead. There is at least one example that it was used as a positive example. Since the Gentiles of the New Testament commonly reduced the body to ash, it would seem that this would be addressed if it was important. Second, since we have little control over it (again 1 Cor. 13:3), it is not something that affects our resurrection. Otherwise, an atheist could avoid the judgment of God by cremation. Third, the Bible tells us that our bodies are meant to return to dust (Gen. 3:19). The word for dust is the same as the word used to describe the ashes of the burnt sacrifice in Numbers 19:17 and elsewhere. Thus turning the body to ash is not contrary to God's plan for our physical form.)

### 1. When a Godly person dies

It is strange to consider God's view of death. In regards to His people, God says "*Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints*" (Psalm 116:15). In regards to sinners, God says "*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live*" (Ezekiel 33:11). When a Godly person dies, they give us the gift of hope (that they are indeed resting in contentment with better things to come). They give us an example of how to live, and they make us want to go to heaven.

### 2. It is Good to Mourn

We are told that it is good to see mortality and death in Ecclesiastes 7. There (and Psalm 90:12) we are told that being aware of our mortality is immensely important. That being said, death brings mourning,

even if we know that they are not lost. Abraham mourned Sarah, the girl he loved since he was 10 years old. Mourning is not a sign of a lack of faith; Godly people mourn, as seen in John 11. Broken hearts are God's specialty in healing.

### 3. Home in a Lost World

Canaan was a land which was condemned. God had promised it to Abraham, and in time his descendants would wipe out the people there. So why would he buy this place, and insist on a fair price? Indeed, this is the one place that Abraham bought, and later Jews might point to that and say it was one of only two places that they bought, and did not conquer. But perhaps there is a parallel to our world. This world is like Canaan; it will soon be destroyed. Yet we must have a place in it for our dying bodies while we are here. Therefore, we are permitted to live in the world, to have homes and lives in this place. As Jesus said in John 17, we are not of the world, but we must live in it.

### 4. Hope of the Resurrection

We are given hints that in all of his actions, Abraham looked to the resurrection. Hebrews 11:8-19 speaks of the faith of Abraham, and the constant theme was of a man who did not see this world as his home. Ultimately, all of his actions spoke of one who looked to a resurrection of the dead. Resurrection in the Old Testament was only dimly seen; there are hints of it in Job 19, Daniel 12, Psalm 17:15. There was no mention of a hope of resurrection in the law of Moses. Instead, it was the promise of Abraham (that all nations might be blessed) where the hope of resurrection lied.

We have all buried loved ones, and we will do so again. When we mourn, we need to remember three things:

Mourning is a time to turn to God - 2 Corinthians 1:3-6

Mourning is a time to turn to one another - Job 2:11-13

Mourning is a time to turn to God's word - 1 Thessalonians 4:18