

Osaka International Church
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Series: Patriarchs
Title: The Cave of Machpelah
Scripture: Genesis 23
Key Verse: Hebrews 11:13

I. Introduction

Good morning! Nearly everyone knows that, for the Jewish people, Jerusalem is the most sacred city in the world. But did you know that Hebron is considered to be the second most sacred city? Here is a photo of downtown Hebron. Hebron is a city of about 170,000 people, located about 30 kilometers south of Jerusalem. It is also sometimes called the, "*City of the Patriarchs*," because the three patriarchal couples, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah are all buried in Hebron. As Genesis 49:29-33 records, they are all buried in the Cave of Machpelah.



If we were to go to Hebron, we would be able to visit the place, although no one is allowed to enter the burial cave itself. This photo shows one of several entrances; there are apparently a series of rooms in the cave. There is also a traditional story that Adam and Eve are buried here, but this has no Biblical support and seems extremely unlikely.



The location of the cave of Machpelah has been known for many centuries and is well documented in history. In fact, just before time of Jesus' birth, Herod the Great built these stone walls around the site. At various times in history, the place has been used as a synagogue, a church, and a mosque. Currently it is known as the Mosque of Abraham, and is open to tourists on most days.



Today we will read the story of when Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah as a burial site for his wife, Sarah. The fact that the place is still well-known today is powerful evidence that we can trust the historical record of the Bible. Let's read Genesis 23:1-20.

II. Scripture Genesis 23:1-20 (NIV)

[1] Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. [2] She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her. [3] Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, [4] "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead." [5] The Hittites replied to Abraham, [6] "Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead." [7] Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites.

[8] He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf [9] so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you." [10] Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. [11] "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." [12] Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land [13] and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there."

[14] Ephron answered Abraham, [15] "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead." [16] Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.

[17] So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre--both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field--was deeded [18] to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. [19] Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. [20] So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

III. Teaching

Sarah was 90 years old when Isaac was born, and she died at 127. So she and Abraham had 37 years together with their son, Isaac. Abraham loved Sarah, and he mourned for her. When a loved one passes, we do not need to be ashamed of our tears, it is good and natural to feel sorrow at such times. But those who trust in God's promises do not need to mourn in the same way as the people of the world. Paul writes to the Thessalonians about this saying in **1 Thessalonians 4:13**, "**Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.**" And, then Paul reminds his readers about the resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of resurrection and eternal life in heaven for all who believe.



In **1 Thessalonians 4:16**, he says, "**For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.**" Then Paul explains how believers who are alive at that time will meet the Lord in the air, and we will all be with the Lord together forever. For believers, we have sorry at the death of loved ones because separation is painful, but we also have hope and confidence that we will meet again in the presence of the Lord. This gives us joy even in times of sorrow.

This confidence and joy can be seen on the grave stones of many Christians and also at the church grave site. For example, this gravestone says, "*Serving the Lord, Rejoicing in Hope.*" I am certain that this man, like Abraham, wept when his wife died. And yet, he speaks of rejoicing and of hope. He knows that he will see his wife again in heaven.



Here is a photo of the Japanese United Church grave site at Hattori Park, which OIC also uses. There is a basement room underneath with lockers for each church. Here also we see the same faith that Abraham had. The stone on the right is engraved with **Philippians 3:20**, "**But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.**" In these ways we express our confidence in God's promises, and especially in the promise of the resurrection and eternal life.



At the time of Sarah's death, Abraham expressed his faith in God and God's promises in another way. Abraham bought a grave site from Ephron, the Hittite. God had promised to give all of the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendents. But until the day when Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah, Abraham did not actually own any of the land. Abraham was a sojourner, a traveler who was moving from place to place. In the culture of that time, and in many cultures still today, the family grave site is one of the clearest indications of a person's true home. For Abraham's family, as long as the family grave site was in the old country, there was some possibility of returning to the old place and the old ways. But God had lead Abraham onto a new path and into a new place.



When Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah as a burial site for Sarah, Abraham made a firm commitment to his new home land. Abraham was effectively saying, by faith, *“There is no going back. Neither I, nor my children, will go back to the old land. This is our home. My wife will be buried here. I will be buried here. Our bones and the bones of our children belong here, in this new land that God has promised to give us.”* Depending on your age and your culture, you may or may not have given much thought to such things. But for a man to establish a new family grave site is a huge step. It is a clear break with the past and a firm commitment to a new future.

For us also, this can be an important issue, especially here in Japan. Of course, for the individual Christian, it does not really matter where we are buried or what happens to our remains after we die. Since we have the promise of resurrection and eternal life, what happens to our remains is not that important to the individual Christian. But the Christian life is not just an individual journey. It is also a journey made in community with our brothers and sisters in the church and, we pray, also with our family. Our citizenship is in heaven, but as long as we have family here in this world, the decisions we make about where and how to be buried are still an important part of our Christian testimony, because the decision to be buried in a Christian grave site is a powerful statement about our faith. When we ask for a Christian burial, we are saying, like Abraham, that there is no going back to the old ways. I and my family will follow the Lord.

Last week we saw how Abraham’s faith in God’s promise to give him descendants through Isaac was proved in the story of Abraham and Isaac. This week, through the story of the Cave of Machpelah, we see how Abraham demonstrated his faith in the promise of God to give the land to his descendants. The testimony of Abraham in his decision to establish a new family grave site at the Cave of Machpelah is powerful. I think that this testimony must have helped to sustain the people of Israel during the long years of slavery in Egypt. The people of Israel were in Egypt for 400 years, but they knew that their ancestor Abraham had established a family grave in the Promised Land. The field and the cave that Abraham purchased are a symbol of hope and a prophetic sign that this would one day be the true home of Israel.

We should also take a moment to look at the negotiations between Abraham and Ephron, the Hittite. First of all, we see that the business is conducted in public, with witnesses present who can verify everything. After courteously speaking of his need for a burial site and after receiving a courteous response from the Hittites, Abraham makes a proposal. (Genesis 23:8-9), **“He said to them, “If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.””**

Abraham does not address Ephron directly; instead he asks through others. Abraham desires to buy the Cave of Machpelah, and he offers to pay full price. Now that negotiations have begun, Ephron makes a counter-offer. **Genesis 23:11**, **““No, my lord,” he said. “Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.””** Ephron makes a generous offer, but it is not quite as generous as it sounds. And, when a deal sounds too good, there is usually a catch. This is where some historical background is helpful. I’ll give you a hint. In the USA, we have a saying, *“Nothing is certain except death and taxes.”*

This was before the time of the Hittite Empire, and at that time the Hittites were probably a small tribe. But their laws may have been the same as those of the later Hittite Empire, and, according to historians who have studied those laws, there are probably two hidden catches in Ephron’s proposal. First, if Abraham bought just the cave, a small portion of the land, then he probably would not have had to pay any property taxes. But if Abraham accepts Ephron’s offer to give him the cave and the field, in other words, the whole tract of land, then Abraham will have to pay the property taxes. Second, under Hittite law, a gift of land was not necessarily permanent, if Abraham accepted the land as a gift, it would be Abraham’s while he lived, but when Abraham died it would probably revert to the original owner. Ephron’s offer would have allowed Abraham to bury Sarah, but it would not have provided a permanent family grave.

So, Abraham insists on buying. But now Abraham offers to buy the field with the cave. **Genesis 23:13**, **“and he said to Ephron in their hearing, “Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there.””** Ephron names a price of 400 shekels, and Abraham pays it. Abraham gets a permanent family grave site, and Ephron gets the money and escapes the taxes.

Abraham pays, and the transaction is finalized. **Genesis 23:17-18**, “**So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre--both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field--was deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city.**”

There are some useful things to learn here about how we should conduct business as Christians. Abraham has apparently prepared himself with a good knowledge of the local law, and he conducts the business with courtesy, fairness, and prudence. Abraham does not try to take advantage of Ephron, but Abraham also makes sure that he gets what he needs. The deal is a win for both sides, and I imagine that Abraham and Ephron both went home satisfied. However, I should mention that some people say that Ephron took unfair advantage of Abraham by charging too high a price. But I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, we do not know how large the field was, or what its fair value was at that time, so the price Ephron named may have been quite reasonable.

In any case, Abraham has achieved his purpose and Sarah is buried in the new family grave. Later on, Abraham himself, and also Isaac and Jacob and their wives, Rebekah and Leah will be buried here also. Abraham's family grave site remains until this day as a witness to Abraham's faith in God's promises.

By the way, did you notice that at the beginning of the negotiation, Abraham said that he was an, “**alien and a stranger,**” in the land? The author of Hebrews explains this in more detail in **Hebrews 11:13-16**. After listing the ancient heroes of the faith, including Abraham, Hebrews says, “**All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.**”

Abraham trusted the promises of God and foresaw the fulfillment of the promises. But Abraham was not trusting in earthly rewards; he was looking for a better country, a heavenly one. Abraham established a family grave in the Promised Land as a testimony to his faith and for the needs of his family. But Abraham himself was already looking further on, to a heavenly country, and so he considered himself as an alien and a stranger in this world.

IV. Conclusion

Like Abraham, we also are aliens and strangers in this world, because our citizenship is in heaven. God gives this heavenly citizenship to all who trust in Him and who receive salvation through faith in Jesus, the Lamb of God that He has provided. Our heavenly citizenship does not exempt us from responsibilities here in this world; on the contrary, it makes our actions here even more meaningful, because our testimony can help bring others to faith so that they too can gain heavenly citizenship through faith in Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.



V. Let's Pray