

READ

Genesis 23

REFLECT

In the midst of a back and forth between Abraham and various Hittites about purchasing a burial plot for Sarah, who had died (and very suddenly, it seems), is a lesson about how to treat one another. Abraham knew he was still a stranger in the place God said would be his, and he treated his position in the community delicately. Because he was not a Hittite, he could not own land, thus could not have a place to bury his beloved wife. Translations might make it seem like Abraham demanded land from the Hittites, but Hebrew imperatives (which “give” is in verse 4) may also imply “please.” The interaction following that imperative makes it clear that this is such a case where it is not a demand, but a request. The initial request was seen favorably, he was given the choice of whatever plot he wished, but it wasn’t really what Abraham wanted. Instead, he asked permission to have Ephron’s own burial cave – with the caveat that he’d pay full price for it, not receive it as a gift. Ephron said that Abraham could simply have the cave and the field around it, but Abraham wouldn’t back down from paying for it. He relented and took Abraham’s money. This was done in full view of many people at the city gates, so he had witnesses to see that he had successfully purchased land. With that land he was no longer an immigrant, but a citizen, solidifying his standing with the people. It was a smart move by Abraham, the first step for him to take claim of the land God promised.

You might ask, where is the lesson about how to treat one another? Throughout the series of requests, the Hittites were fully in their rights to deny Abraham’s request. Instead, they offered him a great privilege out of respect, knowing it do honor to Sarah but also leave Abraham subservient to them since she would be buried on borrowed land. Their relenting and allowing Abraham to purchase land among them, they knew, made him a full citizen. It was a huge move in a world where people were very wary of strangers. But they respected Abraham enough to allow it, and he honored their respect by doing justice to them, giving a fair price for the land and offering the same respect to them. That kind of mutual respect is a lesson for us all.

REACT

- It's hard for modern peoples to grasp just how big a deal it was for a foreigner to be given the right to purchase land. Communities were incredibly closed off; it's why it was so common for cousins and even siblings to marry – it made sure outsiders were kept away. That Abraham was given this right shows a tremendous amount of respect and trust given to him, a trust and respect he had built over the course of years. We're wary of foreign people in our own ways, giving sideways glances at strangers who come into small towns, people of different cultures or religions that we don't understand, or people who look or act differently. How might we develop the same kind of trust and respect for others?
- Abraham's ability to leverage Sarah's death for the right to purchase property shows a kind of foresight unfathomable for most of us. Losing a spouse, or any beloved family member, is difficult enough, but to be able to think clearly enough to know that it also provided an opportunity is both brave and remarkable. He trusted that God was providing a way forward even amid the pain he felt. He chose to take that way, despite his grief, and it allowed him to get one step closer to the fulfillment of God's promise. How have you seen a difficult path forward in your own times of grief? Do you trust that God still makes a way?

RESPOND

Making a way: Sarah's death led to life for Abraham and Abraham's descendants – life in the form of a plot of land to call their own, grounding their future. God is always working for us, with us, and through us for God's purposes to win. Sometimes it's hard to see how God is paving the way, but it is there. Spend time this week walking and praying. If you have the ability to walk a labyrinth, do it – but any walk will do. As you walk, focus on your breathing, on taking each step, and the path before you. Through it all, talk to God. Don't worry about formality or having the right words, just speak from your heart. Allow God to hear whatever it is you have to say. Let it be an experience that tunes your ear to God's presence in every moment, that you may begin to trust that God does, indeed, make a way.