

The Death of Sarah

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church
Sunday, July 16, 2023

❖ Introduction

- A couple months ago, I shared with y'all about the tragedy in my family that took place back in the 80s. It involved my sister dying in a car accident. Unexpectedly. At the age of 14.
- I was two at the time. And for a period of time after my sister's death, I had these recurring nightmares that would happen to me from time to time.
- It was of this gigantic ball of some sort, rolling behind me, about to crush me as I tried to escape from its path. I don't know what it was. Just kept happening to me in my dreams.
- It was as if I was running for my life.
- Grippped by the fear of death.
- Fast forward to the time I turned 14. I actually have this memory of me thinking that there might be something like a curse on me. And that it might be my turn to die when I turned 14. Like my sister.
- Death has been a reality for me for much of my life.
- How often do you think about death?
- I know it's uncomfortable. I know it's not something people typically want to talk about over coffee. I know it's something most of us would rather put off thinking about until later.
- Even if you don't think about it very much, there are three ways you could approach the realities of death and dying.
- First, you could live as if death doesn't exist. The late pastor and author, Tim Keller, once said that "everyone knows they're going to die." But he talked about how people "really in some ways...repress that" knowledge and "live as if they're never going to die."¹

¹ Justin Brierley and Ruth Jackson, "Tim Keller Q&A on Cancer, Prayer & Forgiveness," *Premier Unbelievable?*, 1:04:11, January 6, 2023, <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/unbelievable/unbelievable-tim-keller-qanda-on-cancer-prayer-and-forgiveness/14638.article>.

- Or second, you could live with this ever-present anxiety about dying. You're gripped by this all-consuming fear of death. You try to avoid it at all costs. And it drives you to live life in painful and unhealthy ways.
- Or, third, you could let the reality of death shape the way you live in a positive way. You're not ignoring it. You're not living as if it doesn't exist.
- But at the same time, you're letting the reality of death lead you to a life of greater wisdom, of deeper levels of humility, because you know you've only got so much time on this earth.
- For some of you here today, death is a present reality. You might've just lost a loved one not too long ago. Or there might be someone in your life who's approaching death and you're having to deal with end-of-life issues, head on.
- For others of you, death is a present reality because you or a loved one have been struck with a diagnosis of cancer or another terminal illness. And you're having to think about appropriate therapies and doctor's visits and coming to grips with how many weeks and months, possibly, one has left to live.
- Since April, we've been taking a deep dive into the life of Abraham and his journey of faith. There've been lots of twists and turns. But now, we're at a juncture, a milestone, a point in Abraham's life where he's confronted with the reality of death where it hurts the most.
- It's the death of his own wife, Sarah. The love of his life.
- And where I want to take us this morning as we study Genesis 23 together is to put this question out there for all of us:
- How should we face the reality of death, either for ourselves or for our loved ones down the line, when it's just such an uncomfortable topic to begin with?
- I'm sure many of us would rather spend the morning talking about practically *anything* besides death. I mean, what a downer.
- But this highlights yet again the benefit of hearing God's Word preached through books at a time, section by section.
- Because you come across issues that might get easily looked over if a preacher were to just come up with a sermon series based on his favorite Bible verses or move from section to section in the Bible, skipping over parts that are hard or don't seem really relevant.

- The truth of the matter is that the author of Genesis chose to devote an entire section of the book, an entire chapter's worth, to the story of Sarah's death and her subsequent burial. I mean, think about it. This entire section could easily be summed up in a few verses.
- But instead, we find the Holy Spirit working through the author of Genesis to put the emphasis where he did, carefully explaining what happened when Abraham lost his wife.
- And so, back to the question: How should we face the reality of death, either for ourselves or for our loved ones down the line?
- I see two things in this passage that I want to point out as we try to answer this question.

❖ **The first is this: Entrust yourself to a God who knows the number of your days.**

- Look down at verse 1 with me. "Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah" (Gen. 23:1, ESV).
- It's been a long journey for both Abraham and Sarah. They've seen a lot over the years.
- In Genesis 12, God speaks to Abram and calls him to leave his "country" and his people to a land "he was to receive as an inheritance" (Gen. 12:1; Heb. 11:8, ESV).
- In Genesis 15, God promises that he's going to give Abram offspring as uncountable as the stars in heaven, through his "very own son" (Gen. 15:1-6, ESV).
- In Genesis 16, Sarai, still struggling with infertility, takes things into her own hands and comes up with a plan for her husband to have a son with Hagar, her Egyptian servant (Gen. 16:1-4).
- A chapter later, we see God graciously promising Abraham a son being born through Sarah herself, even though she was nearing ninety years old (Gen. 17:16-17).
- Sure enough, in Genesis 21, we find Sarah giving birth to Isaac, the child of promise, the child through whom God promises that Sarah will "become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen. 21:1-2; 17:16, ESV).
- This was all part of the original promise to Abraham that he received from the Lord in Genesis 12. "And I will make of you a great nation," God says to Abram, "and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3, ESV).
- It's been a long journey for Abraham and Sarah.

- And now, the time has come for one of them to depart the earth. Sarah goes first. And Abraham has to undergo the pain of losing his wife who's traveled this journey of faith with him all these years.
- The Bible says that there's "a time for everything," including "a time to be born, and a time to die" (Ecc. 3:1, NIV 1984; Ecc. 3:2, ESV).
- Sarah dies at the age of 127. Thirty-seven years after Isaac was born (Gen. 17:17).
- And what I see here is that God knows the number of our days. He knows the number of years that we'll live on this earth. Whether that means three more years for you, or thirty.
- God knows the number of our days. Which means we have a set number of days. We just don't know how many. Now this isn't meant to scare us or keep us living in fear.
- But I think there's something both helpful and humbling about recognizing that our days are numbered.
- There's a connection here to Psalm 139, where Scripture tells us, "My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (139:15-16, ESV).
- And the Bible says in Job 14:5 that man's "days are determined, and the number of his months is with" God (ESV).
- So what's the point of spending all this time thinking about this? What good does it do to dwell on the fact that God knows the number of our days and that our days are numbered, whatever they may be?
- Listen to Psalm 90: "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (90:10-12, ESV).
- There's a kind of wisdom that comes when we take the time to meditate on the fact that we won't always be around here on earth, at least the present earth.
- Even if you've been walking many years in your journey of faith, there comes a time that God has appointed for your death. It was true for Sarah. And it'll be true for you and for me—unless, of course, Jesus returns first.
- And instead of repressing this truth about death, like Tim Keller was talking about, God calls us to allow the reality of death to shape the way we live for the better, aligned with wisdom in the truest sense of the word, which is wisdom that comes from God himself.

- Back when I was a sophomore in college, my discipler at the time gave me two CDs with two different John Piper sermons on them. One of them was a message, titled “Don’t Waste Your Life.”
- Piper’s point in his message was essentially that not only do we not know how long we have left to live, but there are ways to live your life that lead to you either wasting it or not wasting it.
- He says this: “Your life is in God’s hands. Your life hangs by a slender thread of sovereign grace...you belong to God. He made you. You exist for him. God made life. He knows what life is for. And he has a right to take it and a right to give it whenever he pleases.”²
- He goes on to say: “The unwasted life is the life that puts Christ on display as supremely valuable.”³
- I think God has used both the memory of my sister dying early on in my life and this message of “Don’t Waste Your Life” to free me to take certain risks that I might not have otherwise.
- With my sister dying at the age of 14, I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that God could take my life anytime. I can’t presume that I’ll live another twenty years, or thirty years.
- And the time that I do have left, I don’t want to waste it.
- I want to spend it all on what matters most. On what pleases God the most. On what gives God the most glory with my life.
- And so, I really do think that these two things (my sister’s early death and Piper’s call to not waste my life) have been pivotal in freeing me from feeling the need to walk the path of the American Dream.
- I’ve been keeping a running series of journal entries specifically related to the journey I’ve been on towards going into ministry and becoming a pastor. I started it back on February 20, 2014 while I was still a resident and training as a medical doctor.
- I started it out like this: “The last several years have been for me the continuation of a long lesson God has been teaching me. Here is a summary of what I now know of myself and see in my heart.”

² John Piper, “Don’t Waste Your Life,” sermon (Campus Crusade Christmas Conference, December 29, 2003), <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/dont-waste-your-life--2>.

³ Piper, “Don’t Waste Your Life.”

- And I'll just read this first one: "What drives me the most in life is an underlying passion to not waste my life. It stems from the huge influence John Piper has had on my life and I owe a great deal to his own passionate pursuit of God's glory among the nations for the joy of all peoples."
- God knows the number of my days. And so I'm committed to making the *most* of the rest of my days here on earth.
- To not waste my life.
- Even if it means not going down the path of a traditional American doctor. But taking up the path of becoming a church planting pastor, which has its own set of challenges.
- That's what it's meant for me to allow the reality of death and the fact that my days are numbered to give me "a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12, ESV).
- What about you?
- What would it look like for you to not just repress the fact that we're all going to die, but leverage that reality in order to live an unwasted life?
- I know this can all sound really abstract. So let me make this more practical for you.
- Jonathan Edwards, the well-known pastor and theologian from the 18th century, put together a series of resolutions for himself that helped guide the way he lived.
- I want you to listen to resolution number 52, which Edwards wrote on July 8th, 1723, when he was just nineteen years old. "I frequently hear persons in old age say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again:
- Resolved, that I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age."⁴
- Thinking about your death might be a bit abstract. But something more tangible might be to just think about what you might regret doing or not doing in life if you were to live to old age.
- Imagine (and for some of you, there's no need to imagine here) sitting in your living room, with your grandkids. And you're talking about your life. And one of your grandkids asks, "Grandpa or Grandma, if you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?"

⁴ "The Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards (1722-1723)," Open Door Fellowship, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://www.csmedia1.com/odfellowship.org/edwards-resolutions.pdf>.

- And I would add that it's not just about what you'd do differently. But, as a Christian, what would you wish you had done *for the glory of God*?
- And as you think about it, instead of having regret down the line, just do it.
- Do the very things you think would bring God the most glory in every season of your life.
- Thinking like this can also bring a lot of clarity to hard decisions you have to make.
- Because once you see the path forward that would bring God the most glory in that particular scenario, all you need left is to pray for the courage to pursue that path, armed with the knowledge that life is short, and you don't want to waste it.
- So, how should we face the reality of death?
- First, entrust yourself to a God who knows the number of your days.
- Don't repress thinking about your own death. But leverage it. Use this reality to shape the way you live and to help you lead a life of greater wisdom and intentionality. An unwasted life devoted to Jesus.

❖ **And second, entrust yourself to a God who can use even death to fulfill his promises.**

- Look down at verse 2 with me: “And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Gen. 23:2, ESV).
- Now what's significant about Sarah dying in Hebron?
- Hebron is a city also known by two other names, Mamre and Kiriath-arba.⁵
- Back in Genesis 12, as Abram first passes through the land of Canaan, he comes to this place north of Hebron, called Shechem, which is where God first promises to give Abram's offspring the land that was before him (Gen. 12:7, ESV).
- In Genesis 13, God promises land to Abram again, after “he settled in the land of Canaan,” saying, “All the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever” (Gen. 13:12, 15; ESV). And soon after, we find Abram moving his tent and settling “by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron” (Gen. 13:18, ESV).

⁵ Charles H. Wilson, “Hebron,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Logos Bible Software.

- It was at Hebron where God came, in the form of man, with two other men to visit Abraham and Sarah just outside their tent (Gen. 18:1-2). It was there that both of them heard from God’s own mouth that Sarah was going to bear a son the following year (Gen. 18:10).⁶
- So Hebron is the place in the land of Canaan where Abraham and Sarah lived a significant amount of time.
- And it makes sense that this is where Sarah breathes her last.
- We’re told that Abraham “went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Gen. 23:2, ESV).
- One commentator brings out the fact that the use of both the words “mourn” and “weep” leads one to believe that “Abraham did not just weep aloud but carried out other traditional mourning customs, such as rending his garments, disheveling his hair, cutting his beard, scattering dust on his head, and fasting...These rites were carried out in front of the corpse.”⁷
- And in the following section, the author of Genesis tells us what Abraham went through in order to get his wife a burial place.
- It all starts with Abraham approaching the Hittites, who were one of the people occupying the “southern hill country” and “the Hebron area” of Canaan at the time.⁸
- Look down at verse 3 with me: “And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, ‘I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight’” (Gen. 23:3-4, ESV).
- The Hittites answer warmly and offer Abraham basically any tomb he’d like.
- So Abraham, with great formality and respect, asks for “the cave of Machpelah,” which is owned by a man named Ephron the son of Zohar (Gen. 23:8-9, ESV).
- And he’s even willing to pay “the full price” for the cave so he can bury his wife properly (Gen. 23:9, ESV).
- Ephron initially offers to give the cave and the field the cave is in to Abraham for free (Gen. 23:11).
- But Abraham insists on paying for the field.

⁶ Wilson, “Hebron.”

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1994), 126.

⁸ Kelm George L., “Hittites,” ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 769, Logos Bible Software.

- And finally, the deal is made.
- For four hundred shekels of silver, Abraham purchases this field from Ephron the Hittite, and is able to bury his wife in the cave that he was hoping for.
- Look down at verse 19 with me: “After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites” (Gen. 23:19-20, ESV).
- What I want you to see is that when Abraham makes this purchase, this is actually the first time Abraham officially owns land in Canaan.
- This is a big deal.
- One commentator points out that “in a sense the purchase of the plot of land at Macpelah was a first step toward Abraham and his descendants’ acquisition of the whole land of Canaan.”⁹
- One other commentator brings out the fact that this is really “the beginning fulfillment of the land promise” that God made to Abraham over and over again.¹⁰
- In other words, the death of Sarah becomes the very backdrop in which God continues to accomplish his purposes and to keep his promise of giving over the land of Canaan to Abraham.
- Why is this important? What’s the point of making such a big deal out of all this?
- What I want you to see, is that even though death was never a part of God’s original plan for creation—no, it came into our reality as a tragic consequence of sin entering this world—God can use even *death* to accomplish his purposes and to fulfill his promises.
- Death doesn’t have the final word.
- Think about this with me.
- Like Sarah, whose death became the catalyst for Abraham purchasing land from the Hittites and the initial fulfillment of God’s land promise to Abraham, there would one day come a descendant of Sarah whose death would lead to the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3, ESV).

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 130.

¹⁰ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, vol. 1B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 321.

- Like Sarah, whose death happened only after she gave birth to a child of promise—a child who in turn would lead to “descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore,” *the* child of promise, in his death on a blood-stained cross, fulfilled God’s promises from long ago through prophecies of a man who would one day be “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities,” who “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” would “[pour] out his soul to death” in order to “[bear] the sin of many” (Heb. 11:12; Isa. 53:5, 7, 12; ESV).
- But unlike Sarah, who was buried in a cave and whose body remained lifeless, her long-awaited descendant, whose body too was placed in a “tomb that had been cut out of the rock,” didn’t stay dead for long, but defeated death and now lives to offer the promise of eternal life to the world (Mark 15:46, ESV).
- So now, knowing all this, how should we face the reality of death?
- Simply put, we should see death as just another milestone in our journey of faith.
- Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, *even though he dies*; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26, NIV 1984; emphasis mine).
- In other words, we Christians have been promised by Jesus himself that faith in him means for us that death will not have the final word for us. No, like with the apostle Paul, to die and to leave the body is to be immediately ushered into the presence of Jesus.
- Listen to his words in Philippians chapter 1, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:21-23, ESV).
- We Christians have a hope that no one else on earth can have. Because when facing death, even in our final moments, we have hope that God will fulfill his promise to us: “He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25, NIV 1984).
- Many of you might be aware of this already, but the well-known author and pastor Tim Keller passed away just a couple months ago. He planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1989.¹¹
- And God used him powerfully, especially in preaching the gospel and explaining the Christian faith to secular intellectuals.

¹¹ Sam Roberts, “The Rev. Timothy Keller, Pioneering Manhattan Evangelist, Dies at 72,” *The New York Times*, last modified May 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/19/nyregion/the-rev-tim-keller-dead.html>.

- Back in May of 2020, Keller was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer. He went through two whole years of chemotherapy and as of January of this year was still undergoing an immunotherapy drug trial.¹²
- Before getting diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, Keller actually had thyroid cancer. But because thyroid cancer was treatable, it really wasn't until he was diagnosed with an incurable cancer, like pancreatic cancer, that it finally hit him...he was really going to die.¹³
- Listen to what he says about death and dying: "Everything just changes when you actually realize time is limited and I'm mortal...there is some kind of denial that's there that just will not go away until you actually have a doctor saying, 'You're going to die of this and you could die of this within weeks. It all depends.'"¹⁴
- In the hours just before his passing, Keller's son shared that his father prayed these words, "I'm thankful for all the people who've prayed for me over the years. I'm thankful for my family, that loves me. I'm thankful for the time God has given me, but I'm ready to see Jesus. I can't wait to see Jesus. Send me home."¹⁵
- These are the words of a man who saw death as just another milestone in his journey of faith.
- "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25, NIV 1984).
- Christian, and I ask this to myself as well, can you really say with the apostle Paul that "to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21, ESV)?
- If you were to face death tonight, do you think you'd have it in you to honestly say, "I'm ready to see Jesus...Send me home"?
- Tim Keller, in an interview he did earlier this year, said that he and his wife "would never want to go back to the kind of prayer life and spiritual life [they] had before the cancer."¹⁶
- The kind of intimacy and closeness that Keller experienced with God as he approached his final days are probably what allowed him to feel the way he did about going home to be with Jesus.
- I think if we're to learn anything from this, it's that we need to seek all the more to cultivate our relationship and our intimacy with God right now.

¹² Brierley and Jackson, "Tim Keller Q&A on Cancer, Prayer & Forgiveness."

¹³ Brierley and Jackson, "Tim Keller Q&A on Cancer, Prayer & Forgiveness."

¹⁴ Brierley and Jackson, "Tim Keller Q&A on Cancer, Prayer & Forgiveness."

¹⁵ Michael Foust, "Tim Keller Dies at Age 72: 'I'm Ready to See Jesus,' He Said in Final Hours," Christian Headlines, published May 19, 2023, <https://www.christianheadlines.com/contributors/michael-foust/tim-keller-dies-at-age-72-im-ready-to-see-jesus-he-said-in-final-hours.html>.

¹⁶ Brierley and Jackson, "Tim Keller Q&A on Cancer, Prayer & Forgiveness."

- So that one day, we could truly say “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” and mean it with all our hearts (Phil. 1:21, ESV).
- Here’s my call to action for you. Every day this week, pray the words of Psalm 90:14 as you start your day or begin your devotions.
- “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” And ask the Lord to give you deeper levels of closeness with him and joy and a sense of his presence in your life.
- I’m going to do this too. Let’s do this together.
- Because growing in our enjoyment of Christ now, will only pave the way to letting death simply be the entryway to more enjoyment of Christ later.
- Let me close by talking to those of you here with us today who haven’t crossed the line of faith just yet.
- You’ve been hearing me talk about the realities of death and dying and I hope you’re better able to understand how Christians think about these things.
- But what I hope most for you is to realize that you can’t presume you’ve got years to live and think that you can put off figuring things out with God until later.
- Your life could be taken from you in a freak accident—tonight.
- And if you die apart from a relationship with Jesus, there won’t be a second chance to get right with God after death.
- If you want to know how to become a Christian or you just have questions about faith, come find me after service. I’ll be in the back. Or schedule a time later this week with a Christian friend just to talk things over.
- But don’t put it off. Jesus died, so that you could live in eternity with him.
- That’s his promise to you.

❖ Conclusion

- So, how are you going to face the reality of death?
- Entrust yourself to a God who knows the number of your days.
- And entrust yourself to a God who can use even death to fulfill his promises.