The sermon

Intro

Benjamin Franklin remarked, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." Death is sure and certain. Ten out of ten people die.

If death is something all of us are going to face, one would think we'd want to understand what death is all about. Surely an intelligible people would be more concerned to understand death than to catch the latest TicToc or Instagram post, right?

What is death? Why is death? What happens after death? Is death the end of the road for humanity?

We'll explore these sort of questions as we encounter Abraham's response to death.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

We'll walk through the passage. We'll explore the nature of death. We'll consider questions about burial versus cremation. We'll end with Jesus' defeat of death.

Point 1: Abraham lays down roots

Sarah's death

Sarah died at 127 (23:1). Ages were still decreasing after the flood. Abraham lived to 175 (25:7).

A good number of years have passed since God tested Abraham by commanding the sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac was now about 37 years old (see 17:17).

Abraham's response is described as mourning and weeping (23:2). Sarah and Abraham became one flesh in marriage. They'd been together for 62 years in Canaan (12:4; 17:17). They experienced the miraculous conception of Isaac together. Losing her left Abraham in tears.

Grief is the response of great love, great loss.

Abraham's request of the Hittites

"Abraham rose up from before his dead" = Abraham was on his knees weeping in the presence of Sarah's dead body. Then he leaves the body to talk to the Hittites (23:3).

Abraham is ***"a sojourner and foreigner"*** = a foreigner, an outsider, living among a people not his own, outside his homeland, without possession of land. He wants to bury Sarah, but he doesn't possess any property.

Abraham wants to ***"bury my dead out of my sight"*** (23:4). The ancient practice wasn't to keep the decaying body of the deceased around.

Abraham is called ***"a prince of God among us"*** (23:6) = an official of high rank in God's eyes. By this time, Abraham has plenty of servants, animals, and soldiers. Abraham's unique relationship with God, his blessing, distinguishes him from others.

The Hittites are totally compliant: ***"Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs"*** (23:6). But that isn't what Abraham's looking for. Abraham doesn't want to use someone else's property. He wants to purchase his own property. And he's

willing to pray ***"full price"*** (23:9). He wants the cave of Machpelah, which is owned by Ephron (23:8-9). The property will serve as a ***"burying place"*** for future generations. Abraham says, ask Ephron for me (23:8).

Ephron's response

Either the scene shifts to Ephron's presence after they asked Ephron, or Ephron was present all along (23:10). What we have here is an official transaction in the presence of witnesses: the Hittites.

Ephron calls Abraham ***"my Lord"*** (master, owner; someone of importance; sign of respect) and says the field and the cave are yours at no price (23:11). Abraham requested a cave. Ephron says I'll give you a field and a cave. Abraham doesn't want the property for free (23:13). We're not told why, but Abraham wants to pay for it. The property's valued at 400 shekels, which is nothing between two men of stature like Abraham and Ephron (23:15).

Ephron concedes to take the money and they weigh it out according to the standards of their day (23:16).

Sarah's burial

Machpelah was ***"east of Mamre"*** (or near Mamre), a base of Abraham's operations (14:13; 18:1).

After securing the property, ***"Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre"*** (23:19). Sarah's body was out of sight because her body was enclosed in a cave. Not because she was in the ground.

This property would be the only land Abraham owned within Canaan. Abraham was acting by faith. God promised Abraham countless offspring and God promised that those offspring would dwell in the land. By acquiring property in the promised land, Abraham provided a burial place for future generations because he trusted they would dwell in the land God promised.

This isn't the last we'll hear about this property in Genesis.

Point 2: Death brings tears

What is death?

Here I'm talking about physical death, the death Sarah experienced, not spiritual death, our sinful nature that alienates us from God, not the 2nd death, the final fate of the wicked in hell.

What happens when a person dies?

1) Death is cessation of breath.

The physical body is no longer alive. Organs cease to function. Temperature lowers. Rigor mortis sets in. Skin color changes.

Abraham wants Sarah out of his sight before her body decays (23:8). Death is ugly.

2) Death is separation/division of the soul and body which was previously unified.

The unity of soul and body is broken by death. While we live here on earth, our soul and body work in tandem according to God's design. The mind wants the hand to move and it does. Why does my hand move? Because I want it to. The hand doesn't move apart from the operation of the soul. At death, soul and body cease to work together as a unified package.

3) Death is altered existence, not the end of existence.

Death involves separation of soul and body. Death also involves relocation of the soul. The soul lives on in a new location.

For the believer, the soul enters God's presence in heaven. Christian, presently, *"while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord"* (2 Cor 5:6). But when we die, we will *"be away from the body and at home with the Lord"* (2 Cor 5:8). For Paul, death is gain (Phil 1:21) because to experience death is *"to depart and be with Christ,"* which *"is far better"* (Phil 1:23) than remaining alive here on earth. While our body remains somewhere on earth, our soul leaves this earth to be in Christ's presence. For the believer, death is relocation of the soul to heaven.

For the non-Christian, the soul goes to a place called Hades (Luke 16:22-23). There, the unbeliever experiences conscious existence of the soul described as torment. For the non-Christian, death is relocation of the soul to a distressing place called Hades.

What's the experience of death for those of us who are left behind?

1. Loss

When you lose something as simple as a toy, you don't have it anymore. You can't go into your bedroom and grab it. You can't play with it. If you didn't care about the toy, no big deal. If you enjoyed the toy, if you had fond memories, there's a sense of loss. I wish I still had that toy.

When someone dies, they're no longer here. If you did things with that person, you can't do them anymore. Someone you talked with. Someone who cooked you dinner. Someone you played card games with. Someone you traveled the country with. When that person died, you lost a bunch of things.

2. Alteration of life

Someone who played a significant part of your life is no longer around. Things you used to do together don't happen anymore. Life isn't the same.

3. Sadness/grief

Because we cared about that person, we shared life with that person, we've lost a lot. And we're sad. We wish we could visit their home or wake up with them. We long for a conversation. We long to do that thing we always did with them, whether eating a meal or going shopping. We think things like they used to sit on that couch at this time. When we think of that person, we get sad. We grieve because we've lost someone who mattered to us. Tears are the appropriate response to death.

4. Anger

Loss can lead to anger. Particularly if their death was unexpected and "unfair." We should have had them for longer.

5. Memories/nostalgia

Death often gives way to memories, nostalgia. We remember the past. We remember life with that person. We remember particular days, the things we did together. A mix of joy and gratitude and sadness.

6. Christian hope

For those who died in Christ, there's hope. We will reunite one day in the new heavens and new earth. Separation is temporary. Reunion will be forever and ever.

For those who died in unbelief, if we believe what Jesus said about weeping and gnashing of teeth, there's great grief. There might be regret. We think things like maybe if I would have done this better, they would have believed? The best

we can do is say they rejected God and God is right to punish sin. God will deal with them justly. We can still thank God for the time with them. God chose for that non-Christian to be in my life.

7. There's still life to be lived

If we're sad about the death of an unbeliever, there's unbelievers in our lives today we can evangelize. If we enjoyed a person's company, we can be that sort of company for others. If someone's death is crushing us, we're probably not alone. We can talk with others who miss them too.

Why death?

God made Adam the federal head of mankind. As Adam went, so went the human race. God gave Adam one command. Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you'll experience death. Implied, if you don't you won't experience death. Adam broke God's command and death came into our world.

Point 3: Burial or cremation?

A question that's come up on more than one occasion is the issue of cremation. Is God okay if I cremate my loved one? Is it okay if I get cremated? This is a good question. Because it means you're concerned about pleasing God.

I think one of the reasons you have questions is because the Bible doesn't provide a direct answer. In the Bible we have commands about sexual morality, drunkenness, honesty, theft, work, the tongue, forgiveness, etc. But we have zero commands about manner of burial.

No one I read said cremation is sin. Pastors are varied.

John MacArthur said, "Scripture says nothing about a required mode of burial for either believers or non-believers…Obviously any buried body will eventually decompose…So cremation isn't a strange or wrong practice-it merely accelerates the natural process of oxidation. The believer will one day receive a new body…thus the state of what remains of the old body is unimportant…What we need to focus on as Christians is not how to dispose of our earthly bodies, but that one day new bodies will be fashioned for us like our Lord's glorious resurrection body." – https://www.gtycanada.org/library/questions/QA177/does-the-bible-prohibit-cremation

On the other hand, John Piper wants to create a culture of burying rather than burning in Christian churches. Piper argues "burial is preferable to cremation…preferable, not commanded." – https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-cremate-their-loved-ones

Why do some argue for burial rather than burning?

1. Burial, not cremation, is modeled throughout the Bible.

Sarah was placed in a cave, not buried in direct. Jesus was placed in a rock formation, not buried in dirt.

2. Church history. Christians have historically practiced burial not burning.
3. The dignity of the human body. Burial respects the body. Burning does not.
4. Burial preserves the biblical picture of bodily resurrection. Burning does not.

We sing songs about rising from the grave, not rising from urns.

5. Cremation pictures burning in hell, not bodily resurrection.

Piper recommends pastors urge inexpensive funerals and even recommends using church funds to help cover funeral costs to prevent cremation. Piper concedes cost is what drives Christians towards cremation.

As a pastor, I don't want to lay upon you burdens God hasn't given. If I'm going to take a stand, I want it to be backed up with Scripture. I strive to demonstrate from Scripture why I'm saying what I'm saying. I want strong, airtight arguments, not weak arguments based on human logic with flimsy biblical support.

One area where Christians often fail is speaking about things where the Bible has little or no clarity as if the Bible provides great clarity (e.g., Christmas trees are an abomination). Another problem. Christians can be passionate about things the Bible doesn't emphasize (e.g., burial versus cremation) while lacking in passion for things the Bible does emphasize (e.g., grace-giving speech, evangelism, prayer). Sometimes we Christians have convictions that are out of proportion when measured against Scripture.

All this to say I don't have a strong conviction about burial over cremation. Based on biblical data, burial is preferable, but I'm not going to make it a church emphasis. All we have is practice recorded with no biblical comment on that practice. And zero instructions in regard to that practice. The Scriptures give us freedom on how to dispose of the body. If anything, it's a matter of wisdom, not obedience. I don't have biblical warrant to bind your conscience on the matter. My emphasis as a pastor would land elsewhere: those things the Bible clearly demands of us.

Practical question: Are my convictions rooted in Scripture? Is the intensity of my convictions matched by Scripture?

We can make a big deal about things the Bible doesn't. Then we don't make a big deal about the things the Bible says are critical. Our convictions should be proportional to Scripture!

Point 4: Jesus defeated death

Death is loss. Death is sad. Death results in human suffering. Both the decay experienced prior to death. And the pain it brings to those left behind. Jesus came to die. Jesus came to destroy death.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). God is the Creator of all that exists: the stars, the planet, the animals, us. Everything, us included, belongs to him. He can do with us as he chooses. God is Ruler. He directs history according to his plan. God is Judge. He's a moral being who evaluates our behavior.

The pinnacle of God's creation was us: mankind. We were uniquely created in the image of God. To reflect God's glory as we ruled over God's creation. The first man, Adam, was given one command. He broke it. Plunging us and our world into ruin.

With the first sin, sin and death entered God's very good world. As a result, we come into the world with bodies that decay and die. And we come into the world with a sinful nature. So we inevitably sin. Sin meaning doing life our own way, not God's way. Breaking God's commands.

Because God is a good and righteous Judge, he doesn't look on our sinful rebellion approvingly. As a result, there will be a day of judgment. All the dead will be raised. Some to eternal life. The rest to eternal conscious punishment in hell. Hell is called the 2nd death.

Because God is merciful and loving and longed to display his glory in the salvation of sinners, God the Father sent God the Son, Jesus, into the world to die for sinners. Such that whoever believes would experience forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Rescue from the curse of sin and death comes through Christ alone. God furnished proof of Jesus' claims by raising Jesus from the dead. Those who trust in Jesus will likewise be raised to imperishable bodies fit for the new heavens and new earth. The end of God's creation is the redeemed living in God's presence in a world without sin and death and suffering. Death will be no more. Grief will be no more. You'll never be sinned against! Nothing to fear ever

again! Re-unions will take place among believers. And God will be treasured as he ought to be. Too good to be true. But it's true. Jesus rose victorious over death! Those who trust in Jesus will, likewise, experience victory over death!

I'm not a Christian. How do I respond?

Repent and believe. Turn from doing life your own way by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection. Trust in Jesus, not yourself. Understand the cross. Understand God's forgiveness requires a substitute to take the punishment in our place.

Confess your sins to God. Thank God for sending Jesus. Ask God for forgiveness. Ask God for help to follow him. Trust that God forgives all who believe.

Tell us if you believe.