



Paying to Belong

Genesis 23:1-20

At times we place too much importance on things that have no real significance of their own. At times they are important things, but which from a long view lose their worth. Faith demands that we look further ahead than we normally do. When we seek belonging, we need to define what we seek to belong to. Do we limit ourselves to belonging to things that have no importance to God's plans?

Abraham faced a dilemma when his wife, Sarah, died. He had followed God's instructions on leaving the lands of his ancestors toward a land God promised to give to his descendants. He had arrived, but he had been unable to declare any portion of land as his own. His status was that of a nomad. He was a rich man, but he did not belong to any land. He had followed God's promise with the recognition that at some point God would give all the land around him to his descendants, but at a very advanced age he had not yet received the first small piece of the Promised Land.

With Sarah's death, he sought a portion of the land to bury his wife. He had, however, a difficulty. He had no right to the opportunity to buy land, as he was a foreigner among the inhabitants of the region. Even though he was wealthy, the right to buy land depended on the judgment of the elders of each city. He would have to seek permission to purchase a tract of land, but there was little hope that they would allow for it. With the right of land purchase came the privilege and responsibility of sitting in the elders' council, conducting the town's economic and political business.

It was not to be expected that such important rights would be freely granted. Abraham was a foreigner, even if wealthy and powerful, which could give him great influence in the business of the city. Conferring on him the right to purchase property would essentially grant him the rights of citizenship. This was a big step to take. At the same time, it was complicated for the city elders, for Abraham had fought against a alliance of five kings on rescuing Lot, overcoming them with no outside help beyond the his own 318 fighting men. There was some risk to the city of offending such a man of importance and influence. For such issues there were arrangements among various cities to protect themselves against external attacks, but the situation was sure to seem rather critical from the elders' perspective.

Abraham went to speak with the Hittites of the region. He knew of a property he liked near the city, one with a cave appropriate for burial. He arrived to request the right to purchase property in which to bury his wife, Sarah's body. He recognized his lack of legal standing for the purchase, but he came in humility to fulfill the formalities in petitioning for the right they could confer. In his words, he recognized his foreign standing, but he asked anyway for the right to purchase land.

The Hittite elders did not answer his request directly. They protected their responsibilities, needs, and priorities on answering the request. It was not an outright refusal, but they passed over the petition itself. They offered to allow Abraham to make use of any of their own tombs, but without granting him opening to effect a purchase. It was a very respectful way to deny his request, but it was a denial, all the same. They granted Abraham the opportunity to bury his wife, but not to own the tomb.

At this point, Abraham stood. Up to that point, he had been sitting among the men of the city as an equal. Now, however, he placed himself as an outsider. He then made another request. Now he asked that they convince Ephron to sell him the cave of Macpelah. That way he would have a place to

bury Sarah, as well as being owner of the land. This was still insisting, but as he demonstrated by the physical act of standing, the insistence came without the threat of force.

We do not know much about land prices in that day. We also know little of the size of the tract of land in question. It was a cave prepared for burial, as well as an agricultural field and a stand of trees. The elders said nothing at this point, but Ephron himself answered. He offered Abraham the land, but not in terms of sale. He offered it for his use. He accepted the context of the elders' presence as witnesses and offered it, cave and field at no cost, yet also without a title of ownership. Abraham might bury his wife, but the land would belong neither to him nor his descendants.

Abraham did not accept the offer, but insisted further. He asked Ephron to sell him the property, accepting his money and his right to ownership. Ephron answered according to the common formulas of negotiation. Apparently he accepted the option of a sale and none of the elders intervened. He gave Abraham a price according to the normal procedures of negotiating. It was likely a very high price, expecting them to dialogue further to negotiate the price that would be appropriate for the land and the cave in question. This, however, never happened. Without worrying over normal negotiation norms, Abraham accepted the offered price at face value.

It was a simple purchase of a piece of land with a cave. At the same time it was a declaration that now Abraham belonged to the land. It was the down payment or first installment of fulfillment of God's promise that the land in which he lived belong to his heirs. He went on then to bury his wife's body, no longer as a nomad, but as one who had settled and belonged to the land. He placed his wife's remains in a place from which he would never need to remove them.

This was a simple commercial negotiation process, but for Abraham and his descendants it had great significance. Far beyond the transference of land titles, settling, and rights of negotiation, it spoke of God's promise in all his faithfulness. God had never promised Abraham that he would receive any of the land during his life. He had promised to give it to his descendants. Even so, in the latter years of his life, God opened the way for Abraham to see the first step of the promise being fulfilled, the promise that had given him purpose in following God into unknown lands.

When he purchased the land, Abraham made an economic pact of belonging to the land with its definition of ownership. He was not an inhabitant of the land with the rights of citizenship. He had voice and vote in the council of elders. He had the right to seek justice and expect fair treatment according to the laws of the Hittites. More than that, however, he accepted the worth of all God had promised to grant him.

The field and the cave were not so important in light of God's promise and provision. Abraham had not sought to advance the fulfillment of God's promise. What is a cave and field worth in contrast to a whole country? God had promised so much more than the parcel of land Abraham was buying. It only had real significance as a symbol of the rest of what God was giving Abraham with the promise. Not that Abraham would see the rest in his earthly life, but through faith he could see in this purchase God's faithfulness with all the rest. He had never lived as a landowner. It was not necessary, for he had no wish to belong to the Hittites, but to God's faithfulness. Are we ready to trust in the abundance of God's provision, even without seeing what lies ahead?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*