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# CHAPTER 2:

## SIGNIFICANCE OF BURIAL IN THE BIBLE

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In the Bible, we find many examples of how the bodies of the dead are treated. While there may not be any direct instruction on burial, there are plenty of examples in Scripture whereby we may reasonably infer that burial is the biblical teaching.<sup>10</sup> We shall first investigate some examples of burial in the Old Testament to have an idea of how the Old Testament saints treated the bodies of their dead. After which, we shall look at New Testament examples, especially that of Christ. Finally, we shall see what the Bible explicitly states concerning the burial of believers.

### SIGNIFICANCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The Old Testament has many mentions of death and burial. The first explicit instance of burial is what we find in Abraham's life.

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#### EXAMPLES OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

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Genesis 23 describes the death and burial of Sarah. Abraham was called out of the Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land that God had promised him. Abraham was not permitted to live in the cities but was to be a sojourner. However, in Genesis 23, we find the first and only instance of Abraham purchasing a piece of land for the express purpose of burial. Genesis 23:3-4, 17-20 states,

*“And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight... And the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders round about, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city. And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan. And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the sons of Heth.”*

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<sup>10</sup> WCF 1.6 “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men...”

It was a deliberate act on Abraham's part to purchase a piece of land for burial. He made sure that he did not receive it as a gift but paid in full the price for that piece of land. In fact, this would be the place that Abraham himself would be buried in (Genesis 25:8-10).<sup>11</sup>

Abraham did this in faith, trusting in the promise that God had given to him concerning the land. Hebrews 11:10, 13-16 states,

*“For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God... These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”*

Abraham knew that God had promised him the land of Canaan. Yet, he also knew that the land pointed to the greater land of Canaan, the heavenly Jerusalem. While he sojourned on this earth, waiting for the possession of the Promised Land, he knew that the ultimate Promised Land was heaven itself.

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#### EXAMPLES OF ISAAC AND REBEKAH

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Burial was also the way for Isaac and Rebekah. When Isaac and Rebekah died, they were both buried in the same place where Abraham and Sarah were buried. Genesis 35:28-29; 49:30-31a,

*“And the days of Isaac were an hundred and fourscore years. And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.”*

*“In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a buryingplace. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife;”*

There was a purpose and significance of why the families were buried together. They were buried in light of the promise that the Lord had given them concerning the Promised Land, just as Abraham did.

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#### EXAMPLES OF JACOB, LEAH, AND RACHEL

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Rachel died first after the birth of Benjamin. Genesis 35:16-20 records,

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 25:8-10 “Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre; The field which Abraham purchased of the sons of Heth: there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife.”

*“And they journeyed from Bethel; and there was but a little way to come to Ephrath: and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labour. And it came to pass, when she was in hard labour, that the midwife said unto her, Fear not; thou shalt have this son also. And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin. And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.”*

Both Jacob and Leah were buried in the same place where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah were buried. Jacob made it clear to his children when he was about to die that he must be buried in the same place where Abraham and Isaac were buried. Genesis 49:28-33 records,

*“All these are the twelve tribes of Israel: and this is it that their father spake unto them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them. And he charged them, and said unto them, I am to be gathered unto my people: bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a buryingplace. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife; and there I buried Leah. The purchase of the field and of the cave that is therein was from the children of Heth. And when Jacob had made an end of commanding his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the ghost, and was gathered unto his people.”*

Joseph made sure that this happened by bringing Jacob out of Egypt after he died to be buried at Machpelah (Genesis 50:1-13).

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#### EXAMPLE OF JOSEPH

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While Joseph died and was buried in Egypt, during the Exodus, Moses and the children of Israel brought out his bones and eventually buried them in the Promised Land. Joshua 24:32 records,

*“And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph.”*

This was an act of faith on Joseph's part. He remembered the promise of God concerning the Nation of Israel and the land, and he commanded to be buried there by faith. Hebrews 11:22 tells us,

*“By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.”*

Joseph, like the other Patriarchs, requested burial in the Promised Land because of their faith in the promise of God.

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## EXAMPLES OF AARON, MIRIAM, MOSES, AND JOSHUA

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Following the Patriarchs, we also see that the practice of burial continued in the time of the Exodus. The Bible tells us that Miriam was buried when she died. Numbers 20:1 states,

*“Then came the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, into the desert of Zin in the first month: and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there.”*

The Bible tells us that Aaron was also buried when he died. Deuteronomy 10:6 states,

*“And the children of Israel took their journey from Beeroth of the children of Jaakan to Mosera: there Aaron died, and there he was buried; and Eleazar his son ministered in the priest's office in his stead.”*

In fact, the Bible tells us that when Moses died, it was God who buried him. Deuteronomy 34:5-6 states,

*“So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.”*

Furthermore, Joshua, Moses’ successor, was also buried when he died. Joshua 24:29-30 tells us,

*“And it came to pass after these things, that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being an hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnathserah, which is in mount Ephraim, on the north side of the hill of Gaash.”*

We see therefore that the practice of burial continued, the Lord Himself choosing to bury the body of Moses.

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## EXAMPLE OF THE KINGS

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The practice of burial continued to the period of the kings and beyond. The Bible tells us that King David was buried. 1 Kings 2:10 states,

*“So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David.”*

The Bible also tells us that King Solomon was buried in 1 Kings 11:43.

*“And Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David his father: and Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead.”*

There are many other examples of the rest of the kings being buried, but suffice to say, burial was the common practice for the kings.

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## REASONS FOR BURIAL

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Why did the Old Testament saints choose burial? For one, they chose burial because of faith in the promises of God concerning the Promised Land. They did not only choose burial, but they chose to be buried in the land because they knew that that was the land that the Lord had given them.

Furthermore, the burial place of the Old Testament saints was a place of remembrance. We know this because when Rachel was buried, “*Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.*” (Genesis 35:20). A burying place was to be a place of remembrance of the dead. In fact, what we shall see in the coming chapter is that those who were not buried were not buried as a judgment from God that their wicked lives would not be remembered.