

Life of Faith, Pt 18: Finding a Covenant Partner to Marry (Genesis 24)

Please turn in your Bibles to Genesis 24 and this morning we come to the story of Isaac and Rebekah, the story of God guiding and providing a bride in the covenant of marriage for Abraham's covenant seed. If God's guidance for future decisions or His provision for present and uncertain needs is what you need assurance of, or if His direction for marriage is what you seek, or if you are hurting from loss of a past relationship but trying to keep trusting God's hand that is hard to see at times, if you need comfort or hope in pain, or if you just want to be a faithful servant of your Master, Gen 24 is for you.

Let's start in the end of chapter 24 which circles back to the start of chapter 23, where Sarah, beloved mother of Isaac, sadly died in God's providence. But as Cowper's hymn about God's sovereign hand of providence says it:

God's purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour
The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower ...
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace
Behind a frowning providence, God hides a smiling face¹

In Genesis 24 we'll see God's servant trusting God for His grace, and we'll see that behind the cloud of providence of grief and loss, God had a smiling face upon Isaac, unfolding a new flowering relationship with a sweet bride. Genesis 24:67 says of this young woman Rebekah: *Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.*

One relationship ended but the Lord had a new relationship for Isaac, who evidently deeply loved Sarah, and came to deeply love Rebekah. But it's not just a love story on a human level, it's about God's covenant lovingkindness and God's comforting guidance and providence and God's promise keeping. This story is not really mainly about Isaac, or even his father Abraham, it's about a heavenly Father over this marriage that's literally made in heaven. It has principles to apply, but it's not about us, it's about God and *agape* love, and He needs to be the foundation and focus in all our human relationships.

Genesis 24 starts with a man putting God first unlike his Canaanite culture. The chapter starts with Abraham's concern for a godly wife for Isaac. He's been living in Canaan for decades and knows the Canaanite women aren't believers in the true God (they worship idols and other gods). But Abraham has family back in Haran that God appeared to before they moved there and as we'll see in this chapter they also speak of and know the Lord as Yahweh

If you compare the end of chapter 11 and start of chapter 12 with Acts 7:2, the chronology is that God first appeared to and spoke to Abraham and his clan in Ur (modern Iraq) and called them to move to Harran, where the rest of Abraham's family continued to live after his dad died [2 SLIDES]. In Gen 12 God calls Abraham to move to Canaan, the promised land . Gen 12:5 mentions souls who joined Abraham's house while in Haran and Jewish rabbis interpreted that as souls *joining Abraham's family of faith*. If a godly wife is to be found, that's the place, but Isaac must stay in this land.

¹ *Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way.* ² *Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your hand under my thigh, ³ and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, ⁴ but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac."*

⁵ *The servant said to him, "Suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?"*

⁶ *Then Abraham said to him, "Beware that you do not take my son back there!" ⁷ "The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. ⁸ "But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there." ⁹ So the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter.*

¹⁰ *Then the servant took ten camels from the camels of his master, and set out with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. ¹¹ He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water.*

¹² *He said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham. ¹³ "Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; ¹⁴ now may it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'—may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master." ¹⁵ Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.*

¹⁶ *The girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up.*

¹⁷ *Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your jar." ¹⁸ She said, "Drink, my lord"; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink.*

¹⁹ *Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking."*

This is no small feat for 10 camels who could drink over 20 gallons each!

- Imagine pulling up 200 milk-gallons from a deep pit by rope
- Each gallon was taken back and forth from the well to the trough
- Genesis 24:20 says she ran back to the well to draw for the camels

²⁰ *So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹ Meanwhile, the man was gazing at her in silence, to know whether the LORD had made his journey successful or not. ²² When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half-shekel and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels in gold, ²³ and said, "Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room for us to lodge in your father's house?" ²⁴ She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." ²⁵ Again she said to him, "We have plenty of both straw and feed, and room to lodge in." ²⁶ Then the man bowed low and worshiped the LORD. ²⁷ He said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His lovingkindness and His truth toward my master; as for me, the LORD has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers." ²⁸ Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things.*

This is a narrative not an imperative. It's describing, not prescribing details:

- like putting your hand under some guy's thigh (he may do another type of swearing and punch you in the face, swearing to kill you if you do it again).
- giving a girl a nose ring to run home with (not all dads will be excited).

This is not a courtship manual. There's no commands or camels needed to discern God's will for marriage, but there are concepts in Genesis 24 that do relate to other biblical commands. 2 single people in a relationship are to be

1. pre-eminently in love with God
2. parentally involved among God's people
3. purposefully considering marriage for God's glory
4. principally driven by God's Word
5. purity guarding for God's best

Each of those I unpacked more in a 4-part courtship or dating series I taught on the book of Ruth that you can listen to online. There's a lot of interest in that subject based on downloads. Most of our sermons are listened to online 50-60x, but those 4 relationships messages have over 2000 total downloads. What's encouraging to me is the same outline from Ruth works for Gen 24, and if principles are consistent throughout God's Word, they apply to us, too

One pastor said his young people ask most about relationships and guidance and Genesis 24 really highlights both in the story of Isaac and Rebekah. For husbands and wives, this outline is a reminder of what God calls us to and patterns we should model for the next generation. For parents, these realities must be passed on to our children, as the world is teaching them otherwise. For older believers, we need your help reinforcing these truths to younger people, as you've seen the consequences for decades when God's principles aren't followed. For children and young people, this is what God's Word has to say about what you should be becoming now and who you should marry.

#1 Element: 2 people pre-eminently in love with God

Abraham is greatly concerned in v. 1-10 to find a godly wife for his godly son, making sure if he dies that the servant will ensure Isaac doesn't marry a pagan or leave the promised land (thigh=loins=life=solemn vow). This has nothing to do with concern for interracial marriage as some have suggested, it has everything to do with *interfaith* marriage, which the Bible *is* against, marrying someone who doesn't share the same faith and love for the Lord.

Does the Bible want you to marry within your race? Yes, and there's only one race in the Bible, everybody descended from Adam and Eve, the human race. Biblically and biologically there's no such thing as races (plural), that's a theory from evolutionary thinking (White race from chimpanzees, African race from gorillas, Oriental from orangutans). It's not Scriptural or scientific and even many who reject Scripture reject 'race theory' we grew up with. In biblical and biological truth we're all 1 race.² A human family's diversity of appearance when they have unity in the family of faith glorifies the gospel.

Acts 17:26 says we are all of one blood or one man. The human race has a fundamental unity in Adam, and believers have a deeper unity in Christ. We may have different skin colors or hair types or eye shapes but we are one as children of the same parents (Adam and Eve) and even more so as children of God by adoption when we put our faith in Christ. That deepest union we have in the Lord is most important for any we consider marital union with.

1 Corinthians 7:39 says an eligible woman or widow “*is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.*” It says the same for men in chapter 9 “*we have a right to take a believing wife...*” (9:5 NIV), but it's not right to be bound to an unbeliever, or unequally yoked (2 Cor 6:14). The #1 criteria is marry a fellow believer in the Lord, a covenant partner who loves the Lord. Not "does he/she go to church" but "does he/she love Christ more than me?"

This first element is also the first and greatest commandment: *love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind or might, and the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.* It starts with a pre-eminent love (in other words above all else) for God then your spouse. Loving each other isn't the key, each of you loving God above all else is. Our world says similar interests are critical for a relationship, but Scripture says the same faith is. Run hard to Jesus, find someone running with you.

Jesus said if we don't love Him above family relationships we're not worthy of Him (Matt. 10:37), which is another way to say love Him pre-eminently.

1. This must be your pre-eminent and consuming passion, not any other relationship affections/desires/cravings that consume your life (Col. 3:5 “*inordinate affection...covetousness is idolatry*” KJV)
2. Seek a mate who loves the Lord and helps you to (Heb. 10:24-25)
3. Invest single years serving the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32-35), content in Him (Phil 4:11-13), delighting in Him above your heart's desire (Ps 37:4)

This great servant of Abraham in v. 19-20 recognizes a great servant when he sees one. He recognizes a servant's heart that stands out from the rest of the girls (others coming to the well may have had good looks outwardly). It becomes clear later that she has a faith much like Abraham in verse 58 when her family asks: '*Will you go with this man?*' And she said, '*I will go.*'

That's an echo of what God asked Abraham to do in chapter 12 and his faith ¹ *Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you...* So Abraham goes from his family and relatives and father's house and all he knows in Harran to a land called Canaan he doesn't know. He goes by faith, not by sight. Rebekah follows the same path of faith like a female Abraham, and takes Sarah's place in v. 67 in his family as a woman of faith and love.

#1: 2 people pre-eminently in love with God

#2: 2 people parentally involved among God's people

Father Abraham is very involved in the start of this chapter in helping his child find a wife, in contrast to Lot in the end of chapter 19 with his girls where we see the disaster of a father whose daughters end up pregnant and he's responsible (in more ways than one). Verse 16 mentions Rebekah is a virgin, and in case you don't know what that means it adds "*she had never lain with a man*" in the NIV (others say "had relations with" or "known"). That not only speaks to her faith, it also speaks to her father/family values.

- In OT times and in God's Law, the father was held responsible for the purity of a daughter living in his house (Deut. 22:20-21)
- Fathers were to teach their children: guard your heart (Prov. 4:20-23) and eyes (4:25-27) and ears (5:1-4) and steps (5:5-14)
- both father and mother's teaching is to protect from impurity and its consequences (6:20-33), and give wisdom on who to marry (Pr 31)

Notice in v. 28 that Rebekah runs home to tell her mother's household about this man and this conversation and the gifts he gave. In the book of Ruth we see her similarly go straight to Naomi (her only parent figure she had) after the threshing floor conversation with Boaz. It says "*she told her everything Boaz had done ...*" (Ruth 3:16 NIV). Alistair Begg says on this point in Gen 24:28 that if you're not running home to share with your parents everything, when a potential relationship is developing, that's unhealthy and dangerous.

[run to parents first, not peers, or posting on Facebook]

If you can't tell parents what's going on, you need spiritual accountability. Nothing is more normal in the biblical narratives than for young people to share with their family and family of faith, seeking their counsel and input, and nothing is more abnormal or unhealthy than a family being uninvolved. Young people shouldn't be off alone, not wanting other people around, just wrapped up in themselves and former relationships get left behind. Alistair Begg says you need family and friends to help you from getting imbalanced and even to say things to a guy like "dude, you're controlling or consumed."

Not everyone has a godly father like Abraham but brothers can step up, too, like we see in v. 29: *Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran outside to the man at the spring.³⁰ When he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's wrists, and when he heard the words of Rebekah his sister, saying, "This is what the man said to me," he went to the man; and behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring.*

If you compare v. 31-32 with father Abraham in chapter 18, Rebekah's dad Bethuel is apparently old and incapacitated (v. 50) so Laban steps up and in.

Alistair Begg also comments on how the brother wants to meet a guy giving gifts to his sister, and how there were times with his sisters when he would meet a guy at the door and take their flowers and after the guy left he would throw them in the trash. They would cry, "Alistair, why'd you throw them in the trash, he's a good guy." He'd say "I know him from the rugby club and how he talks and he's not a nice guy." They'd protest "but you don't know everything." His reply: "but I do know this." His sisters later thanked him.³

I can think of when I had to protect my older sister from Tom, a controlling guy who was manipulative and everyone who knows her is glad she didn't marry him. My dad was out of the country at the time but other times I saw him shut down other relationships my sisters had which they weren't super excited for at the time but are super thankful for now. I also got to meet my now brother-in-law Ethan before my family, somewhat like Laban, and to make sure he was a good guy (I disciplined him before he met or even knew of Lisa). I remember him asking counsel before courting Lisa and he said "I'm thinking Lisa and I won't kiss till our wedding, what do you think?" I said "I don't have a Biblical command, but I think that's great idea, brother!"

Laban in v. 31 calls this man blessed of the LORD and invites him into the household so they can talk with him as a family, offering a meal in v. 33. I don't have time to read v. 34-47 where he retells the story of v. 1-26 to the family and how the Lord's providence led him on his search for Isaac's wife:
⁴⁸ *"And I bowed low and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had guided me in the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son."*
⁴⁹ *"So now if you are going to deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, let me know, that I may turn to the right hand or the left."*
⁵⁰ *Then Laban and Bethuel replied, "The matter comes from the LORD; so we cannot speak to you bad or good."*

The father Bethuel in counsel with his family gives his consent, recognizing the Lord's blessing, and in v. 51 he gives his blessing. Usually it takes more time to discern the Lord's hand before you would give your daughter's hand. But what does Rebekah think of all this? They decide in v. 57 "let's ask her"
⁵⁷ *And they said, "We will call the girl and consult her wishes."*
⁵⁸ *Then they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will go."*
⁵⁹ *Thus they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse with Abraham's servant and his men.*
⁶⁰ *They blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, Become thousands of ten thousands, And may your descendants possess The gate of those who hate them."* [like 22:17b]

God's blessing follows those who honor parents and godly family or friends.
*3rd principle of courtship/relationship: **Purposefully considering marriage***

The Bible knows nothing of "recreational dating" - the 20th century Western cultural, casual relationships that typically start with young teenage school-children nowhere near marriage and with no intent of marriage, often 10-14 years or so before the average marrying age (currently 24 for women, 28 for men). So if he starts going out before or by age 16 it's 10+ years earlier than many are anywhere near marriage. I talked about this more in the courtship or dating series, but typically the young adult to adulthood journey includes a series of romantic relationships, most of which are with someone else's future spouse (since most daters don't end up married) with mini-divorces. Better to wait until you're realistically purposefully considering marriage as a possibility than burn in passion for a decade or burn so many relationships

I don't need to spend a lot of time here because the Bible doesn't talk about pre-marital relationships that aren't purposefully considering marriage but if you're nowhere near making that commitment don't be driving cars that are someone else's and wrecking them. And as dads, just as you wouldn't let a teeny-bopper boy who hasn't talked to you drive off with your truck without permission or parameters, wondering when you're getting it back or damage he may do it, surely we should do more for our daughters we love far more.

*There's a 4th element: **Principally driven by God's Word***

When it comes to principles, some go overboard (30 rules before we'll ever consider letting our daughter go out, and meanwhile she's now over 30, or I have seen some long lists of traits for a future spouse only Jesus fulfills). In simple terms, some need to lighten up, others tighten up, other brighten up.⁴ There are many principles we could look at from God's Word, here's two:

1. Faithfulness and service are the ways to prepare for marriage

Josh Harris points out 'Rebekah was ... faithfully carrying out her current obligations... though her task was mundane, she had a ... ready willingness to serve others. These qualities put her in the right place at the right time with the right attitude when God intended to match her with Isaac.⁵

2. Godly character is most attractive to a godly servant

- this godly servant noticed her *humility* (v. 19, lowly job watering camels)
 - her *industry* (v. 20, a hard-worker well-suited for shepherd life with Isaac)

- he noticed her *hospitality* and *generosity* (v. 25, inviting them to the home)
- Gen 24 highlights her *purity* and *virginity* in v. 16, and a bonus, her *beauty*
- in v. 65 before meeting Isaac we also see the Rebekah's *modesty*, covering

⁶³ *Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming.* ⁶⁴ *Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel.* ⁶⁵ *She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." Then she took her veil and covered herself.* [unlike Hollywood women uncovering themselves for some guy]

One writer says: 'Rebekah was everything that modern teenage girls are so often encouraged *not* to be. Instead of locking herself in her room, she was out [serving] her family. Instead of being glued to her cellphone, she was on the lookout for strangers who needed a drink. Instead of showing off her [body] ... Rebekah "took her veil and covered herself" as she prepared to meet her fiancé ... Rebekah is a picture-perfect example for young ladies!¹⁶

Which brings us to our final point: Purity Guarding for God's Best

This love story could not be more opposite all love stories in movies. This beautiful woman not only has never lain with a man (v. 16) she wants to save herself completely till her wedding. The world thinks "if you've got it, flaunt it," or "show 'em whatcha got" ...but that's what the honeymoon is for. Our world, even many Christians, leave very little to the imagination or for the wedding night, but Isaac and Rebekah saved it all till marriage in v. 67.

The purity of a wedding veil is a biblical image here and Song of Solomon 4 where on the wedding night there is a proper unveiling and uncovering:

¹ *"How beautiful you are, my darling, How beautiful you are! **Your eyes are like doves behind your veil ...*** ³ *"Your lips are like a scarlet thread, And your mouth is lovely. Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate **Behind your veil ...*** ⁷ *"You are altogether beautiful, my darling, And **there is no blemish in you.*** ⁸ *"Come with me ... **my bride ...*** ⁹ *"You have made my heart beat faster ... **my bride ... How much better is your love than wine ...**"*

I won't read all that chapter, but it celebrates purity guarded for God's best! It speaks of a bride like a garden locked or a spring sealed (4:12), the idea is it's kept guarded till its flowers, fruit, and fullness are enjoyed in marriage. It warns daughters earlier not to arouse or awaken love prematurely (3:5).

Isaac hadn't met Rebekah before v. 67, but it says he took her as his wife, "*and he loved her.*" She put her veil on in v. 65 before they met so we're not even sure if he fully saw her before their wedding. If the veil of v. 65 is her bridal veil, her riding toward Isaac is the "here comes the bride" part of this wedding. It reads like this isn't "love at first sight," it's "*marriage* then first sight," and after the covenant commitment of marriage, then "he loved her." Notice the word order in v. 67 again '*she became his wife and he loved her.*' In v. 58 Rebekah had agreed to marry a man she hadn't met but only knows the Lord is with him and she in faith commits to covenant love sight-unseen

Nothing could be farther from modern love stories or ideas about love, even in Christian circles, much less the world's ideas of the keys of a relationship. The idea of growing to love someone, not based on sight or similar interests or strong feelings or sexual chemistry or psychological compatibility tests, but based on a covenant commitment to love and serve, isn't very American. But it's the Jewish biblical mindset captured in the play *Fiddler on the Roof*:

Tevye asks his wife Golda, 'Golda, do you love me'. She breathes a heavy sigh and looks at him: 'Do I love you? For 25 years I have washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cows. After 25 years, why talk of love right now?'

Tevye replies: 'Golda, the first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared, I was shy, I was nervous.' She responds 'So was I.'

'But my father and my mother said **we'd learn to love each other...**'⁷

That's a NT concept, too. Titus 2:4 says older women are to teach younger women to love their husbands and children. It's learned, not a lovin' feelin'. God's Word says don't be conformed to the pattern of this world, instead be transformed by the renewing of the mind to know God's will (Rom. 12:1-2).
 - *our world sees love as a noun, a feeling you can be falling in and out of, Scripture sees love as a verb, a faithful commitment, a choice with action*
 - *our world says the biggest factor is how much both of you love each other, but Scripture makes the biggest factor how much both of you love the Lord and understand His covenant lovingkindness despite our sinful unloveliness*

This love story of Rebekah, like Ruth's, reminds us of a greater love story of a greater Kinsman-Redeemer and a greater son of Abraham (Jesus) and His covenant love to His bride, His church. In Genesis 22 father Abraham said to Isaac '*the Lord will provide Himself the lamb, my son,*' and in the gospel the Father did provide His son Jesus Himself being the Lamb, dying for the church, His bride and wife-to-be. Both images (bride, lamb) are in Rev. 21.

Rev 21:9 says '*Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.*'

Both the lamb spoken of in Gen 22 and the bride spoken of in Gen 24 are pictures pointing to the Lamb to come and His bride to come, the church. The reason purity and all these principles are so important is that marriage since Genesis 2 (according to Ephesians 5) is to picture Christ's purifying preeminent love for His bride, a theme running from Genesis to Revelation.

We need to look beyond the servant in Gen 24 to a greater Servant named Jesus who came even farther to get a bride. When He was born, men came to this land again with camels from hundreds of miles away, also following the Lord's guidance to get there, also bearing gifts of gold, also to worship. Like Isaac, Jesus was also offered up as a sacrifice by His Father, before the Father sought out the bride He had chosen for Him. This son of Abraham, Jesus, also met a woman at a well He called to be in His bride by faith and He calls all of us to be a part of His bride by believing in Him as our Master

Jesus is Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord who provides.
Guide us Oh Thou great Jehovah. Amen.

¹ William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

² For more on this see www.sermonaudio.com message by Voddie Baucham on Genesis 10

³ Available from www.truthforlife.org

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, New updated ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 157.

⁶ Kurt Strassner, *Opening up Genesis*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2009), 110.

⁷ Simon Vibert, *The Diamond Marriage: Have Ultimate Purpose in Your Marriage* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 161-62.