

Genesis 24
Psalm 45
John 3:22-36

“A Bride for the Son”

August 23, 2009

Abraham’s servant is rightly said to be one of the most attractive characters in all of scripture.

He is faithful to his master.

He is devout and pious in his attitude toward God.

He is humble and resolute.

And especially if he is the Eliezer of Genesis 15,

then he is all the more admirable

in his service to Isaac, the one who has displaced him

(because if there were no son, Eliezer would have been Abram’s heir).

But there is something else about this that we need to keep in view:

namely, the wisdom of Abraham!

After all, Abraham is wise enough to entrust all that he has

to a man who is worthy of that trust!

But the question of Genesis 24 is whether Isaac will find a bride.

The Canaanites are doomed to be dispossessed,

and so Abraham does not want to yoke his son to the cursed Canaanites.

But unless Abraham can find a wife for Isaac,

the Promises will fail,

there will be no future for the seed of the woman.

This is also the theme of Psalm 45.

Psalm 45 speaks of the wedding of the Son of God.

The Psalm begins with the glory of the King,

and then moves to the beauty of the bride,

before concluding with the promise of sons.

So let us sing Psalm 45.

[read John 3:22-36]

In a very real way, the servant in our passage in Genesis 24

is like John the Baptist –

the friend (or in this case, the servant) of the bridegroom.

The glory of the servant is to be faithful to his calling and then to fade away.

Gregory the Great, in his “Book of Pastoral Rule”

comments that “a servant is guilty of adulterous thoughts

if he desires to please the eyes of the bride

when he is sent off by the groom to offer gifts.” (74)

If Abraham's servant had sought to woo Rebekah for himself,
he would have been an abomination to his master.
If John the Baptist jealously guards his own status and disciples,
he would have detracted from the glory of the one who came after.

The point should be clear:

the servant prepares a bride for his master –
not for himself!

My purpose, as a servant of Christ, is not to make you like me,
but to draw your eyes to Christ – that you might behold his glory!

Therefore we should not spend too much time focusing on Abraham's servant,
lest we praise him overmuch for being simply a good and faithful servant.
Rather, we should give heed to what the servant himself says:
that it was the LORD who made his journey successful (v21, 40, 42, 56).

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain!

1. Dialogue 1: Abraham and the Servant's Oath (24:1-9)

24:1 Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years.

And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.

*2 And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household,
who had charge of all that he had,*

“Put your hand under my thigh,

What is under a man's thigh?

The imagery is very clear.

Put your hand on the organ of reproduction and swear by the seed-producer.

3 that I may make you swear by the LORD,

the God of heaven and God of the earth,

*that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites,
among whom I dwell,*

4 but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.”

5 The servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land.

Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?”

After all, if the prospective groom doesn't come,

she or her family may wonder “what's wrong with him?”

Why would they let their daughter go out to the wilds of Canaan

when they have never met the man?

6 Abraham said to him, “See to it 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 kindred,

*and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,'
he will send his angel before you,
and you shall 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 oath of mine;
only you must not take my son back there."*

*9 So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master
and swore to him concerning this matter.*

Abraham is insistent that Isaac must not marry a Canaanite.

The Canaanites are doomed –
under God's wrath and curse.

And even as Abraham would not join Sarah's bones to their bones in a Hittite grave,
so also Abraham will not join the promised Seed to the cursed seed of the serpent.

Isaac must stay in the land,
but he must not intermarry with the people of the land.

Isaac will never leave the land.

Abraham left the land to go to Egypt during a famine.
Jacob will leave the land to go to Egypt during a famine.

For that matter, Isaac himself will send Jacob to Laban to find a wife –
the very trip that Isaac was forbidden to make.

But Isaac will never leave the land.

Isaac will go to Gerar (but Gerar is technically still within the land).
Isaac will be a model of stability
as he waits patiently for the fulfillment of the promise.
His presence in the land will be a constant reminder of the promise.

Isaac is a reminder to us that God will do what he has promised.

We cannot force God's hand.
We cannot make God move faster.
But we can be faithful in the place where he has called us.

2. Dialogue 2: Rebekah and the Servant's Prayer (24:10-27)

*10 Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed,
taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master;
and he arose and went to Mesopotamia [Hebrew Aram-naharaim] to the city of Nahor.*

*11 And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water
at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water.*

*12 And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham,
please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham.*

13 Behold, I am standing by the spring of water,

*and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water.
14 Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,'
and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—
let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac.
By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master."*

Please let me warn you that this method of 'seeking a sign'
is not a guaranteed method.
I knew a woman who took this approach,
asking that God would send a man according to a certain specific sign.
God obliged her.
But the man who approached her in that manner was a con artist.
She discovered that before she married him,
but went ahead with the marriage because of the sign.
God's word is clear: Christians should not marry unbelievers.
She had two options: obey God's word or follow the sign.
She followed the sign,
and paid dearly for that mistake.

She learned that sometimes God will give you the "sign"
as a way of testing you:
will you obey the plain teaching of God's word?
or are you just trying to manipulate God by asking for signs?

As you watch the servant, the sign is only part of his quest.
Even after the sign is fulfilled, he continues to watch to see if she is "right" for Isaac.

*15 Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah,
who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother,
came out with her water jar on her shoulder.
16 The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known.
She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up.*

No doubt there were other women around the well –
old servant women, married women with small children,
but there was one that by her attire proclaimed that she was eligible.

*17 Then the servant ran to meet her and said,
"Please give me a little water to drink from your jar."
18 She said, "Drink, my lord."
And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink.
19 When she had finished giving him a drink, she said,
"I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking."
20 So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water,
and she drew for all his camels.*

21 The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the Lord had prospered his journey or not.

Notice how she reacts.

She “quickly” let down her jar.
She “quickly” emptied her jar into the trough.
She “ran” again to the well.

There is nothing reluctant or indecisive about Rebekah.

Thirsty camels can drink up to 25 gallons –
and most jars would only hold about 3 gallons or so.
So she is running up and down the steps to the well probably 50 times.

Obviously Rebekah is a very capable woman – and also a very generous woman.

While this is not the main point of the text,
the maidens of Israel are certainly being given an example of hospitality.
Rebekah does this out of kindness for a stranger,
with no expectation of reward.

Do you run to help strangers in need?

(I would add that the well would be a public place –
there would have been many friends and neighbors around –
so she is in no danger here)

*22 When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half shekel,
and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, 23 and said,
“Please tell me whose daughter you are.
Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?”*

His meaning is plain.

He is proposing marriage,
and his gifts demonstrate that he is proposing marriage
on behalf of a wealthy man.

24 She said to him, “I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.”

25 She added, “We have plenty of both straw and fodder, and room to spend the night.”

Once again, she offers more than he has requested.

He asks for a room, and she offers to feed his camels as well as him.

26 The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD 27 and said,

*“Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham,
who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master.
As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen.”*

3. Dialogue 3: Laban and the Servant’s Mission (24:28-61)

28 *Then the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things.*
29 *Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out toward the man, to the spring.*
30 *As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms,*
and heard the words of Rebekah his sister, "Thus the man spoke to me,"
he went to the man.

Notice that Laban only acts after he sees the gold.
Both here and in his dealings with Jacob,
Laban is motivated by greed.

And behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring.
31 *He said, "Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside?*
For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels."
32 *So the man came to the house and unharnessed the camels,*
and gave straw and fodder to the camels,
and there was water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him.
33 *Then food was set before him to eat.*
But he said, "I will not eat until I have said what I have to say."
He said, "Speak on."

Hospitality creates obligation in the ancient world.
By refusing to eat, the servant remains in control of the situation.
If things go poorly, he may walk away and look for someone else.
If he eats first, then he is bound to this household.

You may have noticed when we read the passage
that the narrative essentially tells the same story twice.
The servant simply repeats what we already know.

Or does he?!

Notice the creative retelling of the story that the servant uses in talking with Rebekah's family.
He emphasizes Abraham's wealth,
Isaac's youth (Sarah bore him when she was old),
That Isaac is the sole heir,
Abraham's oath, emphasizing the family relation.

Note that while Abraham had said "go to my country and my kindred"
the servant adds, "my father's house"
a free translation which is intended to increase the sense of obligation
on the part of Bethuel and Laban.

But what is Abraham's servant doing?
There is really only one way of saying it:
he is preaching the gospel.
Abraham's servant comes to Bethuel and Laban

and he proclaims the gospel of the Kingdom.
To summarize it in the words of Mark's gospel that we've been hearing Sunday evenings:
"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand,
repent and believe the gospel!" (Mark 1:15)

When Abraham was called to leave his father's house,
only one of his relatives – his nephew, Lot – came with him.
Now Abraham's servant returns preaching the kingdom of God.

*34 So he said, "I am Abraham's servant.
35 The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great.
He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants,
camels and donkeys.*

If you would see the coming of the kingdom,
look at the firstfruits of the kingdom that God has given to Abraham.

*36 And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old,
and to him he has given all that he has.*

The Son has now received the inheritance from his Father.
And all that belongs to the Son will be yours, if you will believe my message.

*37 My master made me swear, saying,
'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites,
in whose land I dwell,
38 but you shall go to my father's house and to my clan and take a wife for my son.'
39 I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.'
40 But he said to me, 'The Lord, before whom I have walked,
will send his angel with you and prosper your way.
You shall take a wife for my son from my clan and from my father's house.
41 Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my clan.
And if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'*

(In verse 41, remember that in v8 Abraham had said if *she* would not come –
but the servant recognizes that his first challenge is to convince *them* to let her go!)

They will not get to see Isaac.
They must believe the message *about* Isaac.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.
It is the preaching of the message that must turn the hearts of Laban and Bethuel.

*42 "I came today to the spring and said, 'O LORD, the God of my master Abraham,
if now you are prospering the way that I go,*

43 *behold, I am standing by the spring of water.
 Let the virgin who comes out to draw water, to whom I shall say,
 "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,"*
 44 *and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also,"
 let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son.'*
 45 *"Before I had finished speaking in my heart,
 behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder,
 and she went down to the spring and drew water.
 I said to her, 'Please let me drink.'*
 46 *She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said,
 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also.'*
So I drank, and she gave the camels drink also.
 47 *Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?'*
She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.'
So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms.
 48 *Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD and blessed the LORD,
 the God of my master Abraham,
 who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son.*
 49 *Now then, if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me;
 and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."*

The preaching of the gospel demands a response!
 Will you believe the message?
 The kingdom of God has come to you.
 What will you do?

In other words, if you will not show hesed (steadfast love – covenant loyalty)
 and faithfulness to your own kin, tell me now!
 God has shown hesed – will you?

The sermon emphasizes that this is God's will – will you stand against it?

It is truly a fine sermon,
 and it has the desired effect:

50 *Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said,
 "The thing has come from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good.
 51 Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go,
 and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken."*

Notice that Laban takes the first place.
 It is likely that Bethuel is old and perhaps an invalid.
 Laban speaks on his behalf.

52 *When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the LORD.*

53 *And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments,
and gave them to Rebekah.*

He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments.

54 *And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there.*

When they arose in the morning, he said, "Send me away to my master."

55 *Her brother and her mother said,*

"Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go."

In one sense this sounds like an innocent request.

They just agreed to the marriage yesterday – give them a few days to say goodbye!

But the point here is that they wish to delay (perhaps indefinitely).

And the servant understands that this could wind up preventing the marriage altogether.

Now that the dowry has been given,
they are in no hurry.

They wish for a long engagement – and if they delay,
perhaps they can stall and even insist that Isaac come and take her.

What sounded at first like the response of faith
turns out to be mere opportunism.

Like Simon Magus in the New Testament, Laban is just looking for an angle –
how can he make a profit from the gospel.

56 *But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way.*

Send me away that I may go to my master."

57 *They said, "Let us call the young woman and ask her."*

Laban is an opportunist.

What is his sister?

When God called Abram, he went.

Will Rebekah be a fitting bride for Isaac?

Will she go when God calls her?

Will she leave her father and mother and home and all that she has
in order to follow the call of the gospel?

She has on the one hand everything that has ever made sense to her –

She has on the other hand only the call to repent and believe the gospel.

Will she seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness?

Or will she allow her concerns for "all these things" to overwhelm her?

Will she follow this ancient servant into the wilderness to a man she has never met?

Will she walk by faith? Or by sight?

*58 And they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?"
She said, "I will go."*

This is the same word used in Genesis 12 –
Go from your father's house.
The same word used in Genesis 22 –
Take your son and go...

Will you go with this man?

To paraphrase Hebrews:

By faith, Rebekah obeyed when she was called to go out
to a man whom she was to receive as her husband.
And she went out, not knowing where she was going.

By faith she went to live with the son of promise,
living in tents with Isaac and Jacob.

If she had been thinking of that land from which she had come, she could have stayed.
But as it is, she desired a better husband, that is, a heavenly one.
Therefore God is not ashamed to be called her God,
for he has prepared for her a bridegroom.

*59 So they sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men.
60 And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,
"Our sister, may you become
thousands of ten thousands,
and may your offspring possess
the gate of those who hate him!"*

In this blessing we hear echoes of the blessing of Abraham that we saw in 22:17.
It may have been a common ancient near eastern blessing,
but in the context of God's promises to Abraham
it takes on new light.

Not only is Abraham blessed.
Not only is Isaac blessed.
Rebekah is blessed as well!

Blessed is she who hears the Word of God and keeps it! (Luke 11:28)

*61 Then Rebekah and her young women arose and rode on the camels and followed the man.
Thus the servant took Rebekah and went his way.*

Rebekah goes forth with her servants.
Like Abraham before her, she walks by faith,

and she goes forth to the Promised Land with only the blessing upon her.

Truly she is a fitting bride for the Seed of Abraham.

4. Dialogue 4: Isaac and the Servant's Faithfulness (24:62-67)

62 Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb.

It literally means "the well of the Living One who sees me."

We meet Rebekah at a well.

We now meet Isaac coming back from a well.

This is the place where Hagar had met the LORD (16:14).

63 And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening.

This is a rare word which may mean to "meditate" or to "roam"

And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming.

64 And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel

65 and said to the servant, "Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?"

The servant said, "It is my master."

At the beginning of the narrative we are told that Abraham sent the servant.

Abraham was the master.

But now the servant says that Isaac is his master.

So she took her veil and covered herself.

This identifies her as the bride.

66 And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.

Where is Abraham?

Abraham has disappeared from the narrative.

Isaac is the master now.

*67 Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah,
and she became his wife, and he loved her.*

So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Rebekah replaces Sarah as the matriarch of the clan.

And while this marriage starts off well,

we will see that Isaac and Rebekah have a rather turbulent relationship.

Rebekah will experience the barrenness of Sarah.

In child-rearing Isaac and Rebekah will be at odds.

So if you are looking for a pattern for betrothal, marriage, or parenting,
you will not find it here.

Rather, we need to see what God is doing in history.

As Caesarius of Arles put it,
“Abraham sent his servant into a distant land to take a wife for his son,
because God the Father intended to send his prophetic word throughout the world
to search for the Catholic church as a spouse for his only-begotten Son.”

Rebekah goes with the servant to the Isaac, her bridegroom.
It is no stretch at all to see this connects to how the church goes with Christ’s servants
to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.
In John 3 we heard about how the friend of the groom
rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice.

My task as your pastor is to be the servant of the bridegroom.

If I try to win your affection for myself,
I would be an adulterer,
because I would be trying to steal the heart of the bride from the bridegroom.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:2
“For I feel a divine jealousy for you,
since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.”
Paul says that his task was to be like Abraham’s servant.

The pastor is to be a perennial best man.
The pastor is to lead the bride to Christ –
not himself.

When the pastor seeks the love of the church, there is trouble ahead!
Because when the bride thinks more of the best man than she thinks of her bridegroom,
no good can come from that!

My task is to bring you to Jesus.

As Gregory the Great puts it so well:
“good spiritual directors desire to please others,
but this is to lead their neighbors by the sweetness of their own character
to an affection for the Truth (himself).
It is not because they desire to be loved,
but instead because they use affection for themselves as a sort of road
to introduce the hearts of their audience to the love of the Creator.” (p76)