

## A BRIDE FOR ISAAC

*Genesis 24:1-67*

Well, we are continuing our series in the book of Genesis, called *Seeing and Savoring the Gospel in the Old Testament*, looking at how even though his name is mentioned, all of Genesis points us to Jesus. And we arrive today at the longest single story in the entire book. The love story of Isaac and Rebekah.

Well in two months from now Eli and I celebrate our tenth anniversary. And we've had two major weddings in our family over the past month that have caused me to reflect on the last ten years and the ways I've learned and grown. And personally, I think one of the biggest evidences of growth in my life over these years, is my ability to now watch a romantic comedies with my wife.

You see, I don't know any guy who naturally enjoys romantic movies. It doesn't matter whether it is the latest pairing of Hugh Grant or Matthew McConnaghey with whatever actress is popular, or whether it's those "sophisticated" romantic comedies where characters wear flowing gowns, talk with British accents and live in castles. In general romantic movies are just too predictable for the average guy.

I can pretty much tell you the plot line of any romantic movie without even watching it. The movie usually begins with the guy and girl either single or in a bad relationship with the wrong person, they serendipitously stumble upon one another (substitute whatever locale makes the story most interesting - the grocery store, the gym, or randomly sitting beside one another on a park bench), and the rest of the movie follows their quest for true love with each other, usually overcoming as many obstacles as possible, including at least one moment where the two appear to hate each other and end up kissing. In the end, true love wins the day and these fated lovers find themselves together at last.

Compare that with our story today. Something tells me Genesis 24 isn't going to make the screenplay for the next movie that opens on Valentine's Day. An aging father makes a pact with his servant, a promise involving hands placed awkwardly close to private areas, and the deal is that the servant to go to a far off land and choose a bride for the father's son. The catch here though is that the Bride will need to be a cousin of the groom, a distant cousin granted, but a cousin nonetheless. The servant goes to the land and chooses the girl based on her camel watering skills, brings her back to the happy groom whom she has never met before and they make a happy home together in their tent. Oscar nomination right?

Well, it's obvious there is a huge difference between the stories of hollywood and what we find on the pages of Scripture, and its not just a difference of strange lands and customs. What is is that drives the romance stories of hollywood? It's the ideas of fate, and chance, and destiny. But there is something much greater and far more beautiful going on here in Genesis 24.

This story is moved forward not by blind hope in the impersonal powers of chance, but by a simple reliance on the providence of a faithful and loving God.

God's providence is the reality that God provides for and controls everything in history, and in nature, and in people. God's providential control is illustrated by every narrative in the Bible. You can't read the Bible without reading of God's providence.

But what's amazing in this story is that God's intervention isn't shown in ways we can't always relate to. There are no miraculous signs, no altering of nature's laws, no sun standing still or waters parting but simply the same thing we experience regularly: the ordinary, everyday providence of God's hand.

And this providence isn't just the hand of a distant God, a deity out there that remains aloof from his creation, neither is this providence just some cold theological abstraction, something for dusty textbooks in back corners of old libraries.

Instead God's providence here is incredibly personal. It is the outworking of the divine romance, the overflow of the greatest love story ever told. God's providence is the tool of his loyal, steadfast love by which he cares for his chosen covenant people.

While God never steps into the spotlight on the stage of this play, and never utters an audible word, his fingerprints are everywhere, and in the end we are going to see that God is the hero of this story.

So let's dive in and we're going to follow this story today through four acts, four scenes, and we're going to see a hopeful vow, a humble prayer, a trusting pledge, and a joyous union.

Our story begins with heartache. Sarah, the woman through whose offspring God has promised to bless the world, has died. and with the pain and grief of her passing still lingering, Abraham buries his wife in Hebron in Canaan, and suddenly what has seemed like the blessing of Yahweh on this family is strikingly absent. Sarah is dead. Abraham is old. And Isaac himself is no longer a young man at 40 years old. And the gravity of this situation re-awakens Abraham to the promises God has made.

Over the past few weeks we've seen how God made a covenant with Abraham. God promised that Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky, and that the nations would be blessed through them. And God promised that he would do everything necessary to fulfill this covenant.

Yet in the despair of this moment, where the sum total of Abraham's covenant offspring is one, we can't help but ask the question - have God's promises failed? We're seeing an old man and his grieving son, how can God possibly work through this situation and these people?

Watch, we're about to see God working through a hopeful vow.

Abraham calls his servant, the oldest of his household, the one in charge of all that he has, and he says to him:

v. 2 - '*Put your hand under my thigh, that I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of earth...*'

What is going on here? This whole act, is pretty foreign to our modern sensibilities, our modern way of doing things. But there is a vow, a promise about to be enacted, and nowhere else in Genesis do we see a vow like this.

Literally Abraham says to his servant, put your hand on my loins - the Bible is quite blunt sometimes folks. But Abraham is reminding his servant of God's promises, of God's covenant. You see God had promised Abraham offspring, a seed, and God had sealed that promise to Abraham through the covenant of circumcision. And so when Abraham asks his servant to put his hand under his thigh, he's saying, as you make this vow, as you commit to this promise I am asking you, remember the promises of God. Remember what God has said and what God has done. And then Abraham makes this request of his servant...

v. 3 again, swear "*that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.*"

If God's promise is to be fulfilled, Isaac needs a wife. And that wife, above all else, must not come from among the people of Canaan. Now this isn't some type of ancient near-eastern racism at work here. Instead, God has promised that it is Abraham's family who will possess the Promised Land. That family then, must be set apart from the people of the land. They need to remain distinct, and that won't happen if they begin to intermarry with the Canaanites.

This request from Abraham isn't unlike Paul's New Testament command that there is freedom in who we marry, granted they are "in the Lord". When singles get married it is

intended by God to happen within his covenant people. And so to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant must return to his homeland.

But there is an obvious "what if" question...

v. 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?'*"

The obvious question is: What if this woman doesn't want to move? What if she likes life in Mesopotamia, likes the food and the climate and the culture, and has no interest in moving here.

But there is a question underneath that question. What the servant is really asking is this: "Can you really trust yourself to God's providential hand? Can you actually trust God for his loving and gracious provision for his promises, or do you need to think about which part of his promise you are going to be obedient to? Is it going to be the land or the legacy Abraham?"

v.6 - "*Abraham said to him, 'See to it that you do not take my son back there. 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,'*

Abraham is recalling the character and promises of this God,  
*he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But*

(and you can hear Abraham's reticence to even speak this possibility.)

*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."*

Do you see this expression of Abraham's faith? This is a changed man. This isn't the man who took matters into his own hands with the promise of a son and fathered Ishmael. This is a man who has learned that God's providence is to be trusted. That God will lovingly and graciously fulfill his promises as his people walk in faithfulness to him.

Well, what happens next...

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

*"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 to the city of Nahor.*

*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."*

I love how this goes. It's so typical of the Bible to summarize a 400 mile journey, that would have taken more than two weeks, in one sentence.

Finally, after all the preparations, and all the days and nights traveling across the endless desert with his caravan, the servant arrives in Nahor - and there by the village well, as the last rays of sun are slanting over the horizon the curtain closes on scene one and opens on scene two and the stage is set for God to act. But the servant does something unexpected. Instead of holding a beauty contest, or going door to door surveying the selection of women, he offers a humble prayer:

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

This word "steadfast love" here is the Hebrew word *hesed* and it's going to come up three more times in this chapter. If there is one Hebrew word you need to know as we study the Old Testament together it is this. *Hesed* is God's loyal love, his faithful love, it's his love that fulfills all his promises, his love that remains eternally committed to the covenant that he has made with his people.

And as the servant stands by this village well, in the fresh coolness of an Arabian evening, he petitions God to providentially act in accord with that loyal and steadfast love.

v. 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. 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."*

In a story so saturated with the providential action of God it's interesting to find someone praying. Sometimes people will ask, why pray if God is sovereign. If God is in control of everything and working out everything according to his purposes, why pray? But the real question is *Why pray if God is not sovereign*. If God isn't sovereign there is no hope or confidence that he even has the ability to answer prayer. And so for the servant this confidence in God's sovereign appointment of a wife for Isaac doesn't make him say, "well, what will be will be," instead God's sovereignty over all of this drives him to his knees.

And then, with the final words of this urgent prayer still on his lips, he slowly lifts his head, opens his eyes, and there is Rebekah...

v. 15 - *"Before he had even 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."*

Do you see what the storyteller is doing here? \*whisper\* He is letting us in on a little secret. This woman here, pay attention, this is the one God has appointed. And what is she like?

v. 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. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, 'Please give me a little water to drink from your jar.' She said, 'Drink, my lord.' And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, 'I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.' 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."*

Do you see the *hesed* of Yahweh. A girl young and beautiful arrives, an earthen jar on her shoulder. And the servant's heart would have been pounding out of his chest! Is this the one, might this be the girl God has appointed for Isaac?

Now, in a culture that no longer travels with camels, I'm pretty sure we don't understand how difficult a task this would have been for Rebekah to offer to water the servant's camels. After a long journey like this camels can each drink about 25 gallons of water. That's like the fuel tank on your average pickup truck. And the ceramic jar that Rebekah would have brought down to draw water was about 3 gallons. So, if my math is right, to draw water for each of these 10 camels, Rebekah would have had to take the several steps down into that well 80-100x. And if it takes about 10 minutes for a camel to drink, this whole process may have been 1.5-2 hours of sweaty labor. Meanwhile, she must have thought this servant was the rudest man alive, because the entire time he just watched her in silence.

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

Now I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure he would have known after about the 10th trip down into the well that this was the Lord's will!

But as his camels finish drinking, this old servant, so loyal to his master Abraham whom he had served for so many years, realizes that this really and truly is the one whom God has appointed. And his hand shaking, he reaches deep into his bags, and draws out the costly treasures that he's born these 400 miles from Canaan, a gold nose ring and gold bracelets, and he presents them to this woman and asks her the question he's been waiting for.

v. 23 - *"Please tell me whose daughter you are."*

Her answer is perfect. She is Nahor's granddaughter, Abraham's grandniece. And so with his soul absolutely pouring over with immeasurable joy at the steadfast loyal love of God to

orchestrate everything, to graciously arrange all of these acts of kindness, he bows his head and worships.

v. 27 - *"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."*

Who has led him in the way? The LORD. Yahweh. The God who is faithful to his covenant. The God whose steadfast love reaches to a thousand generations. Here it is again - The God of *hesed* has acted and his providential action is beyond doubt!

And for Rebekah, the excitement of this servant and the mention of the name of Abraham, a name long part of the stories told around the family fire, causes her to run as quickly as she can to tell her family of these things.

Now Rebekah has a brother named Laban. And we're going to meet Laban again in a couple weeks from now - his story continues. But Laban, is a man who loves money and power and control, and he sees the ring on Rebekah's nose and the jewelry on her arms and right away he sees dollar signs.

v. 29 and following - *"Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out toward the man, to the spring. 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. And behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring. 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.' 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. Then food was set before him to eat. But he said, 'I will not eat until I have said what I have to say.' Then Laban said, 'Speak on.'"*

Then over the next 15 verses, the servant recounts his story and tells of the providence of God. And he concludes his story with this:

v. 49 - *"Now then, if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master tell me; if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."*

He's saying, I've told you how God has shown his steadfast love and faithfulness, you've seen it! Now are you on board or not.

And their answer is this:

v. 50 - *"Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, 'The thing has come from the LORD, this is from Yahweh; we cannot speak to you bad or good. 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.'"*

*"When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the LORD (for the third time). 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. And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there."*

God's providence can't be denied! And for at least the time being, Laban has been dealt with.

But when morning comes, and the curtain opens on the third scene, there is Laban, this greedy trickster, along with his mother, asking the servant to stay for ten more days.

v. 55 - *"Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go."*

Now knowing Laban, and it's insinuated in the way he says this, this would't have been just 10 days.

What is happening?! What's going on here? It seems like up 'til now God has providentially acted and now suddenly it is all on the verge of falling to pieces. But in fact, this demand brought about by the sin and greed and manipulation of Laban is an opportunity for another demonstration of God's gracious providences. Something happens here that was unheard of in Ancient Near-Eastern culture, the chance for the bride herself to choose her direction. We're about to see a trusting pledge.

The servant is unmoved. v.56

*"Do not delay me, since the Lord has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master."*

Then Laban and Bethuel said, *"Let us call the young woman and ask her. And they called Rebekah and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?'"*

And so here is the crisis point. Will Rebekah say no and frustrate all the servant has traveled here for? Or will she willingly trust herself to the providential hand of Yahweh? Everything hangs on her answer to this question.

*And she said, 'I will go.' So they sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed her saying, "Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and may your offspring possess the gate of those who hate him!" (Possible interjection here)*

*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."*

God has worked. In God's steadfast love he has provided everything in order that his promises might be fulfilled and his covenant maintained. Now it's time for the joyous union.

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

And it just so happened (another of God's providences) that Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening... *And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel and said to the servant, 'Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?' So she took her veil and covered herself.*

This was the sign that she was Isaac's bride, that she was his, that she was the one God had appointed for him.

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

You can imagine the story he had to tell.

*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.*

The marriage is immediate. And Isaac is comforted - that word means so much more even in the Hebrew. It is this sense that all is right with the world, that everything is as it should be. Sarah's empty tent has been filled. The promise of the seed of the woman from Gen. 3 will continue. God has providentially work to fulfill his covenant promises in the life of Abraham and Isaac.

But what about us? Sure, the providences of God look great in Isaac's life, and in Abraham's life, but what about your own life? Can you really trust yourself to God's providential hand? Can you actually trust God for his loving and gracious provision for his promises? How can you know that God is acting for your good? What in the world does an ancient marriage, so distant from our own time and culture, have to say to us?

Well, let me show you church that the marriage displayed here in Gen. 24 between Isaac and Rebekah points to a much greater marriage that has **EVERYTHING** to say about your trust of God's providential hand in your own life.

Turn with me to Ez. 16 - God here in Ezekiel is speaking words to his people Israel, specifically to Jerusalem, and listen to what he says:

*Ez. 16:8-14*

Do you see the parallels to Gen. 24? God says of Israel, I set my affection on you and when the time was right and you were ready I married you and in my steadfast love I did everything in my power to make you beautiful.

Then what do we find when we turn to the New Testament? Ephesians 5 uses this very same language to talk about Jesus Christ and the Church. Jesus doing everything to beautify his bride, covering her with garments of righteousness so she can one day stand side by side with him for all eternity.

Brothers and Sisters, it is one thing to know that God is sovereign over all things, but how do we trust that his providences are good, that in the ordinary, everyday providences of life he is working for us? We must look to the ultimate demonstration of God's hesed, of his loyal steadfast love, that through the cross God has done everything necessary to make us his bride.

Many of us have memorized Rom. 8:28. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* But what is the foundation of this promise? How do we know this is true?

We know because just as Abraham did everything to secure a bride for his son, God the Father has done everything to secure a bride for his Son, planning and sending out his servant the Holy Spirit to find her, clothing her in choice jewels and clothing, and bringing her to present her to Jesus.

v. 29 - 30

And here is the clincher for us in our trust - v. 32

What seals our trust of the gracious everyday providences of God in our lives? The *loyal steadfast* hesed of God shown through the gospel.