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God at Work Genesis 24:1-67

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This morning I want to quickly dive into Genesis 24. This is the story of Abraham's sending his servant back to his old homeland and family to find a wife for Isaac. It's one of Abraham's last acts and because of that the story serves as a transition to the life of Isaac. It's a powerful story of faith as it shows us the faith of Abraham, the faith of his servant, and the faith of Rebekah, but more importantly, the story is about the providence of God. It gives us a profound view of God at work to bring about his promises. Look at verses 1 to 9:

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. 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, 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, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." 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?" 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,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. 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." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Isaac is forty years old at this point. The fulfilment of God's promises rest on him, but so far he isn't even married. Presumably that's because Abraham doesn't want him intermarrying with the Canaanites. God would later forbid his people to take wives from amongst the pagan Canaanites. At that later point in time, the prohibition was for religious reasons. God did not want his people assimilating pagan worship and pagan gods. His people were called to be a holy people wholly committed to him. Abraham's thinking simply has to do with a desire for his son not to be assimilated into the Canaanite population. God had promised to make Abraham into a great nation through his offspring and so Abraham doesn't want to see Isaac marry a Canaanite girl and end up becoming a Canaanite and losing his identity. And so he gives his servant—probably Eliezer of Damascus—specific instructions to find a wife for Isaac. He was to go back to Padan-Aram, to Abraham's family, and to find a bride there. She was to be someone from Abraham's own people, not because his people were less pagan, but because they weren't Canaanites. And his servant was to bring the girl back with him. Under no circumstances was Isaac to be taken back to Padan-Aram. Abraham didn't want Isaac becoming a Canaanite, but neither did he want Isaac giving up the Promised Land

and returning to their old pagan family and its pagan ways.

And so Abraham's servant sets off with ten camels and expensive gifts for the bride-to-be. At the end of what would have been a three or four week journey, he arrives at the city where Abraham's relatives lived. He stops at the well outside the town, just at the time of day that all the girls are coming out to draw water. He trusts that God is at work and prays, asking God to give him a sign: "God, I'm going to ask one of these girls for a drink from her jar. If she's the one for Isaac, she'll not only offer me a drink, but she'll offer to water my camels too."

We might not grasp just how crazy a sign this would be. A camel could drink almost 100 litres and he had ten of them. These girls would have been coming with small jars that held ten or fifteen litres. No one would expect any of these girls to offer to water his camels, especially not without being asked. But lo and behold:

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. 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. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not. (Genesis 24:15-21)

So far so good! We'll come back to this idea of asking God for a sign later, but it seems to have worked for Abraham's servant. And yet even though the nearly impossible happens, he's still looking for more confirmation. And so he gets out the gifts he brought for the bride-to-be and starts asking her about herself.

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, and said, "Please tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." She added, "We have plenty of both straw and fodder, and room to spend the night." The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD 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." Then the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things. (Genesis 24:22-28)

The nose ring and the bracelets were expensive gifts that showed Abraham's good will and his seriousness in seeking a bride for Isaac. A worker in that time and place might expect to earn ten *silver* shekels in a year. These bracelets weighed that much in *gold*. The girl would have known right away what these gifts meant and she was understandably excited. Abraham's servant looks for further

confirmation that this is the woman God has in mind and gets it when she explains that she's the granddaughter of Abraham's brother. And so as Rebekah excitedly runs home to tell her family, he gives thanks to God.

Rebekah's brother, Laban, hears her story and goes out to the well to find the servant. He offers him his best hospitality, but Abraham's servant wants to deal with the business at hand first, and so he tells Rebekah's family about his master, his mission, and he especially stresses the providence of God as he tells them how everything has unfolded. Even though it's not his intent, he's so enthusiastic about what God has done over all these years for Abraham and especially how God has led him straight to the bride he was sent to find, that he's unwittingly taking on the role of an evangelist for the Lord.

So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. 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. 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. (Genesis 24:34-36)

He goes on to tell how Abraham sent him to find a bride for Isaac and how he had asked God to confirm the girl was the right one by her offering to water his camels.

"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.' 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. 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. 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. 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." (Genesis 24:45-49)

This was enough, even for pagan Laban and Bethuel, who say to him:

"The thing has come from the LORD; 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."

Again, Abraham's servant bows in worship before the Lord, then he distributes the gifts that Abraham sent to the family of the bride. In the morning, the servant asks to leave right away with Rebekah. Her family hesitates. It was important for a girl's family to know that she was going to a place of security where she would be treated well. Normally, when a girl married, her father and her family weren't very far away. They could make sure that her new husband was treating her right. In this case, as much as Abraham has demonstrated his good will and his wealth, leaving with the servant for Canaan means that they will have no way to make sure Rebekah's new husband treats her well. Laban asks for ten days: time for him to make sure everything was

as the servant made it out to be. In the end, they leave the choice to Rebekah. After all, she was the one taking the risk by going off to a strange land, with a man she'd only just met, to marry a complete stranger. Rebekah, however, demonstrates her faith. She's heard the servant's report of God's blessings to Abraham, she's seen the first-hand evidence of his wealth in the gifts he sent, and she's heard the servant's story of how God has been with him the whole way, preparing the way before him. And so just as Abraham's leaving his homeland to follow God to Canaan demonstrated his faith in God, Rebekah now steps out in faith, leaves her family and homeland, and puts her faith in the God of Abraham.

Rebekah leaves with her family's blessing. As she and the servant approach her new home, we pick up the story at verse 62:

Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. And 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?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. 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. (Genesis 24:62-67)

Through Abraham's servant, God brings Rebekah and Isaac together. She veils her face as he approaches,

indicating that she is his bride, and he takes her into his mother's tent. Sarah had been the mistress of the household. By now taking Rebekah into that same tent, Isaac shows the rest of the household that Rebekah is their mistress now. The storyteller uses this to transition the focus of the larger story from Abraham to Isaac. In faith Abraham sent for a bride that his son might truly be the inheritor of God's promises, and the story ends with Isaac now married and taking his father's place as the covenant head of the family.

Now, what does all this mean for us? First and foremost this is a story that shows us God at work and God's people living by faith and trusting his work. The story was foreshadowed back at the end of Chapter 22. After the story of the sacrifice of Isaac there's a short notice that Abraham received word of Nahor's growing family back in Padan-Aram. That list of Nahor's children and grandchildren included Rebekah. It might not have seemed important at the time, but that notice was recorded there to point to the fact that God was at work. Isaac was the son of promise and if he were to become the nation God had promised to Abraham, he was going to need a bride. God was at work to meet that need.

Abraham didn't know the details, but he had faith that God would provide. He did what made the most sense to him: he sent his servant to find a bride from amongst his own people. But notice that he didn't tell the servant to bring a girl back kicking and screaming. He told his servant that if the girl refused to come back with him, that his duty was done. Even in this, Abraham did what made the most sense, but understood in faith that God might have some better plan, some better way to provide a wife for Isaac.

He'd learned not to presume upon God or to force his hand. Think back to Hagar and Ishmael and the trouble that came about when Abraham and Sarah tried to force God's hand and to bring about his promises in their own way. Abraham's learned that lesson now. We need to do the same. When it comes to God's promises, we need to let God work and then wait on him. In our faith we *should* be proactive, as Abraham was. But we also need to be willing to let God redirect our plans and to let him work in his own way.

And letting God be God also highlights the servant's asking for a sign. I think this is an important part of the story to address, because all of us look for God's guidance and the servant's request for a sign from God can be tempting. How many of us haven't, at some point in time, made a request like this of God? "God, if you want me to do such-and-such, make *this* happen, and if you don't want me to do such-and-such, then don't make *this* happen." When we do that what we're asking for is a mechanistic oracle. It's so common amongst Christians that we even have a term for it, based on the story of Gideon: we talk about "putting out a fleece". But, brothers and sisters, the thinking behind these requests isn't Christian; in fact, it's profoundly pagan.

There are three examples in the Old Testament of God working through these sorts of oracles, but we need to remember that just because the Bible records that someone did something, doesn't mean it condones that action. Consider that all three of these events took place in the early days of Israel's history. And consider the religious knowledge and maturity of the people who asked for these oracles. Abraham's servant was obviously a man of faith, but he

lived at a time when God had revealed almost nothing of himself. Abraham followed God, but he knew little more of God than that he was faithful to his promises. Gideon asked for a sign when he twice put his fleece out, but consider that Gideon came from a home in which Baal was worshipped and where they had an Asherah pole in the back yard. He asked for a sign to confirm what God had spoken. What that request underscores is the fact that, because of his pagan background, Gideon was inexperienced at listening to God and wasn't fully trusting of God because he lacked a full knowledge of God's faithfulness. The third example was requested by the pagan Philistines in 1 Samuel 6. Because of where his people are at, God will sometimes condescend to our immature requests, but that doesn't make our immature requests good things.

As Israel came to know God better, they stopped asking for signs and listened for his voice spoken by the prophets. And by the Christian era, God had revealed the fullness of Scripture. We have the Bible now; we have the fullness of God's revelation of himself. Scripture is all the guidance we need. We just need to steep ourselves in it that we might better know God's will and his precepts. If we feel as though we're in the dark in terms of his will or in terms of direction and guidance, it's not usually because we need a sign; it's usually because we've ignored the Scriptures he's given.

The problem with asking for a sign is that doing so presumes upon God. In asking for a sign what we're really doing is trying to force God's hand by pushing him into a corner and *demanding* he give us an answer on our own terms. That's the heart of the pagan mindset that we saw in the story of the tower of Babel. It's

the opposite of having faith and simply letting God be God. If anything, the story of God's provision of a bride for Isaac shows us that God is always working to bring about his will, his plans, and the good things he has promised us. As he works behind the scenes, his expectation for us is to be preparing by steeping ourselves in his Word. The Scriptures reveal God and his will far better than any sign we could possibly ask for. And, brothers and sisters, as the Scriptures teach us about God, about his character, about his promises, and about his expectations for us, all we need to do is be prudent in our actions and watch him at work around us. Consider how Rebekah and her family knew without question that she should return Canaan to marry Isaac. They had heard the servant's witness about the goodness of the Lord and as the servant told them the circumstances surrounding his being sent and his encounter with Rebekah at the well, God's will became obvious—even to pagans.

So study God's Word that you might know him, that you might know his ways, and that you might know what he expects of his people; trust that as he has always been at work and that he is still at work today; act with prudence and common sense; walk by faith; and see God work.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you tell us through the prophet Jeremiah: "I know the plans I have for you...plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Let us walk in faith as we trust in that promise. Help us to remember that you are always at work to bring about what you have promised. And, Father, remind us that to know your will, we need only immerse ourselves in your Word. We ask these things through Jesus

Christ, our Saviour and Lord.
Amen.