

## **A wife for Isaac**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Genesis 24:34-67 (full text\*)

\*RCL omits vv 39-41, 50-57

### **Introduction: the story so far**

Last week in our continuing series on Abraham we thought about the biggest challenge that Abraham had to face – the ultimate test of his *love* for God, his *faith* in God and his *obedience* to God. God had promised Abraham that he would have many descendants, as many as the stars of the sky, and that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. And then he was asked to sacrifice the very child through whom these promises would be fulfilled.

God had no intention that Isaac would be sacrificed, and the story about Abraham being tested invited us to consider our own love for God, our faith in God and our obedience to God, not just when times are good but when life is uncertain or incomprehensible. Will we trust God to bring about his good purposes, even if we can't see how he could possibly do it? Do we love God enough to sacrifice something dear to us, to make his kingdom and his righteousness our top priority?

### **A huge responsibility**

Today we've skipped on many years from that episode. Abraham's wife, Sarah, has died and Abraham realises that

his time will soon come too. But Isaac still has no wife. How will God's promise to Abraham that he will have many descendants come true unless Isaac finds a wife?

As you will realise, in that culture marriages were arranged between families, as is still the case in many cultures today. Representatives of each family would consider whether the son or daughter of the other family was a suitable match, and maybe also how the marriage would cement the relationship between the two families.

But how is Abraham going to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac, who, if we do our calculations, is at least 37 by this point? He is very keen that Isaac marries a member of his own family, but they are all back in Mesopotamia. Also, God has called Abraham to live in the land of Canaan, so he doesn't want Isaac going back to Mesopotamia, in case he is persuaded by his bride's family to stay there.

And so Abraham entrusts his senior manager, the oldest and most experienced member of his team, with the huge responsibility of going back to Mesopotamia, locating Abraham's family and choosing a bride for his master's son Isaac.

The bible reading we are about to hear starts at the point Abraham's servant has been invited to stay the night by Abraham's relatives, and before they eat he tells the story.

***Reading: Genesis 24:34-67***

What a responsibility Abraham's servant has been given! This is not just a family matter: the fulfilment of God's plan

and the vocation of Abraham's family depends on the servant's success.

Have you ever considered how the way you fulfil your obligations to others, and to God, could have important repercussions not only for *their* lives, but also for the lives of many other people who will be impacted? Some guidance or encouragement given to a young person could give them the confidence to try a new subject at school, or discover a hidden talent that eventually leads to a career. The advice you give to a friend about their relationship or their work situation could lead to a marriage being saved or a conflict being resolved. The way we fulfil our responsibilities as a manager, a union rep or a family member, or the example we set to others in ethical matters, could have an effect far beyond the immediate situation.

I'm going to look at each of the characters in this story to see what we can learn from their examples.

## **Abraham**

We'll start with Abraham. The main thing we see here is his commitment to the fulfilment of God's purposes. Isaac must not marry a Canaanite or go back to Mesopotamia.

Abraham is willing to delegate the task of finding a bride for Isaac to his trusted servant. He also has faith that God will help him to achieve success in his mission:

"The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and make your way successful."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 24:40 NRSV

Abraham has experienced God’s faithfulness in all the ups and downs of his own life, and he can use this experience to instill confidence in God in others. We too, can look back on God’s faithfulness to us in the past when facing a new challenge.

## **The Servant**

The servant is the main character in this episode. Taking his cue from Abraham, he turns to God to help him and guide him. It seems unlikely that he’s ever visited the town where Nahor, Abraham’s brother, lives. There will be many unmarried young women living there – how will he know whom to choose?

We know that the girl must be a relative of Abraham’s. But the servant also wants a woman of good character. So he makes a specific request to the Lord:

“Let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, ‘Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,’ 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.”<sup>2</sup>

He is looking for someone who is helpful and considerate of the needs of others, including the needs of their animals. Isaac has many animals – cattle, sheep, camels. He needs a wife who will understand the needs of humans and animals. I wonder whether there is enough emphasis in our society on the importance of character when people are looking for

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 24:43-44 NRSV

a mate. There's a lot of emphasis on looks, sexual compatibility, shared interests, "chemistry". But what about good character? It's interesting that Abraham's servant doesn't ask God to find Isaac a good-looking wife – although the narrator does comment earlier in the chapter that Rebekah is very attractive. When I was a young man looking for a wife, I was guided by this verse in Proverbs:

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.<sup>3</sup>

Abraham's servant turns to God in prayer, and is not afraid to make a specific request. I think it takes more faith to do this, but it's well worth doing. If your request is reasonable, and made with God's glory and the well-being of others in mind, God will honour it.

The other thing I noticed about the servant is that when God answers his prayer, he immediately thanks and praises God:

"Then I bowed my head and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son."<sup>4</sup>

He does the same when Rebekah's father and brother agree to let her go with him.<sup>5</sup> How good are we at thanking God when he answers our prayers?

When I was working at Namirembe Cathedral in Uganda, it was very common for people to come up to the altar rail at

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<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 31:30 NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 24:48 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Verse 52

the end of communion to give thanks for an answer to prayer, a wedding anniversary, the birth of a child or grandchild or a successful job interview. They would usually bring a gift of money with them. There's nothing like showing gratitude, whether to other people or God. I'm sure that if we developed such a culture of gratitude in our church, we would see more blessings from God.

## **Bethuel and Laban**

How do Bethuel and Laban, Rebekah's father and brother respond to Abraham's servant? They immediately show hospitality to him and the men with him, and listen carefully to his story. It must have been a bit of a shock for them when the servant of a long-lost relative turns up and asks them to allow Rebekah to leave almost immediately to be a bride. But they are open to seeing the hand of God at work:

Then Laban and Bethuel answered, 'The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. Look, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken.'<sup>6</sup>

How open are we to seeing God at work and allowing his purposes to be fulfilled?

## **Rebekah**

And so to Rebekah. The future of God's plans for Abraham's family will depend on her. And she shows herself immediately to be proactive, open-hearted and hospitable. Giving a drink of water to Abraham's servant is one thing –

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 24:50-51 NRSV

drawing water for 10 thirsty camels after a long journey through the desert is another!

She's also ready to respond to God's calling. Just as Abraham exercised faith way back in chapter 12 when he obeyed God's call to move to Canaan, so Rebekah shows her faith in being ready to leave what is familiar and go with a stranger to be married to a man she has never met.

## **Isaac**

There's not much about Isaac in this episode. But what we do read about him is very important:

He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; *and he loved her.*<sup>7</sup>

## **God**

And this brings us to the final character in our story, which is ... God. Unlike some of the other episodes in the story of Abraham, where God speaks to Abraham, or an angel intervenes, God is silent. But he is nonetheless very present. Abraham and his servant both trust God to provide a wife for Isaac. The servant prays about the girl who will come out to draw water, and immediately, before he has finished his prayer, Rebekah appears and does exactly what he has prayed for. God's answer to his prayers is confirmed when he discovers that she is a relative of Abraham, when her family show him hospitality and when they acknowledge God's hand in all this and agree to her leaving. And Rebekah's agreement is the last link in the chain.

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 24:57 NRSV

God's answers to our prayers are not always as instantaneous as in this story. But if we involve him in our lives, seek his will and trust his promises, we will see him working in our lives.

Let's follow the advice Paul gives to the church in Philippi:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV