

Book of Genesis – Part X - Genesis 23-24

“Divine Promises in Ordinary Life”

In these chapters, God’s promises continue to unfold. We are now no longer looking only at Abraham, but at his descendants who continue the journey which Abraham began (12:1-4). This journey includes life, death, love and marriage.

- I. The Death of Sarah – 23:1-20
 - a. The important point of this narrative is that Abraham is living in the promised land, “the land of Canaan,” but he has no actual claim or status in that land.
 - b. Sarah dies at the age of one hundred and twenty seven (23:1). Abraham mourns and weeps for her (23:2). However, he has no place to bury her since he owns nothing in this foreign land (which nonetheless God had promised to him – Gen. 17).
 - c. Abraham goes to the Hittites, “the people of the land” (23:7) and asks if he can buy “the cave of Machpelah” so he can bury his wife. Abraham points out that he is “a stranger and an alien” (23:4).
 - d. Abraham obviously has a favorable standing among the Hittites. Rather than sell it, they are willing to give him the land for a burial place (23:11).
 - e. Abraham however insists on buying the land (23:12-16). Ephron, the leader of the Hittites, is prepared to simply give it to Abraham. However, by paying for the land, it becomes Abraham’s possession (23:18). This means then that Abraham had a legal claim to it.
 - f. The importance of this story is that for the first time, Abraham actually has possession of a piece of the promised land. He has a legal and public claim to it beyond the spiritual promise of God. The land - the cave where Abraham buries Sarah and the field surrounding it - is a gift, but Abraham still pays for it. Abraham is no longer an alien and a stranger. He is a land owner. He now has a legitimate, earthly claim to what God had promised him.

- II. The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah – 24:1-67
 - a. This is one of the longest as well as one of the most appealing stories in Genesis. Following the death of Sarah, Abraham has to prepare for Isaac’s marriage according to the customs of the time in which parents arranged marriages for their children (a custom of course that still exists in parts of the world).
 - b. This account opens with the statement that “the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things” (24:1). We already saw in the previous chapter that Abraham was wealthy in a monetary sense. This goes further in affirming that God had blessed him “in all things.”
 - c. Abraham now speaks to his servant and makes him swear that he will get a wife for Isaac, not from among “the daughters of the Canaanites,” but that he will go to Abraham’s original country and kindred. This suggests

that Abraham wanted a wife for his son from among his extended family or tribe (or clan).

- d. In a detailed account, the servant sets out “taking all kinds of choice gifts” (24:10). He comes to the city. He speaks to no one. Instead, he comes to a well (which would have been a center of activity in an ancient city) and prays.
- e. There is some humor here. He begins by telling God where he is (God wouldn’t know?). The young women of the town are coming to draw water. He asks for a sign that doesn’t really seem to be all that unusual or significant. Nothing miraculous is involved here. He simply asks God to point out a young woman who would give him a drink and offer to water his camels (24:14). His request is “let her be the one.”
- f. What is notable is how ordinary this is. Wouldn’t any young woman trained in the ancient custom of hospitality be willing to offer drink to a stranger in the town square? What the servant seems to be asking is that the first woman he meets be “the one.”
- g. Before he finishes praying, Rebekah appears. The author tells us that she “was very fair to look upon” (24:16). She readily gives the servant a drink at his request and then proceeds to draw water for his camels. We then read that the servant gazes at her in silence, wondering whether or not this was the one. He may be wondering, “this is too easy,” or “how can I be sure?” The woman fulfills all the things he had asked for in his prayer. Yet, like all of us, he’s not quite sure if God has really answered his prayer, so he goes a step further. He gives the woman gifts of a gold nose-ring and two bracelets (Does she try on the nose-ring?). He asks if there is room in her father’s house for him and his caravan to spend the night (we don’t know how many other servants had come along on this trip).
- h. Rebekah assures him that this is the case. There’s plenty of room. The servant immediately praises God for his steadfast love and faithfulness. This is confirming God’s answer to his prayer. The spiritual example that is so important in this story is that the servant prays for a very specific request. Before his prayer is ended, God answers it. The servant, however, is not sure. He asks for more confirmation before he realizes that God really has answered his prayer. We do the same thing. We pray for things and even when God answers our prayer directly, we’re still not sure that he has. We somehow need additional confirmation.
- i. The fact that the servant thanks God for leading him “to the house of my master’s kin” underscores the idea that Rebekah and her family were distant relatives of Abraham.
- j. The girl runs to her mother’s household. Apparently her father is dead, so her brother is responsible for her. Her brother, Laban, runs out to see the servant. He sees the gifts his sister has received (the nose ring is mentioned first). Laban urges the servant to come into their home. He calls him, “O blessed of the Lord” (24:31). Again we wonder how he knows that. Nothing miraculous has occurred. His sister has met a

stranger who has given her some gifts. Laban's actions all connote urgency. Was Laban perhaps also praying that his sister would find a suitable husband?

- k. Before he is prepared to eat, the servant insists that he state his business. Laban responds with the simple statement, "Speak on." He identifies himself as Abraham's servant without further explanation of who Abraham is, so perhaps they already knew about Abraham. If they are relatives, this would not be surprising. He tells them about Abraham's blessings and gives the reason for his mission. He describes in detail all the events leading up to his encounter with Rebekah at the well.
- l. After telling the whole story, he asks Laban (who probably represents the father Bethuel) if he accepts the commission from Abraham. Laban responds with the affirmation, "The thing comes from the Lord" (24:50). He sees all this as a fulfillment of God's will, "as the Lord has spoken," and gives the servant permission to take his sister back to be Isaac's wife.
- m. Abraham's servant bows before the Lord in gratitude at these words (24:52). The servant gives gifts to Rebekah and her family. They then have a big dinner. In the morning, the servant is ready to return to Abraham. However, Rebekah's brother and mother ask if she can stay for at least ten days before leaving. This is certainly not an unreasonable request given that her family may never see her again (24:54-55).
- n. The servant however does not want to delay. He sees that the Lord's will has been fulfilled so he wants to complete his mission as soon as possible (24:56). They effect a compromise by letting Rebekah make the final decision. In response to the question of whether she will go with the servant, she answers simply, "I will" (24:58). The family does not seek to oppose her. Rather they give her their blessing and she leaves with Abraham's servant (24:60-61).
- o. The scene now shifts to Isaac. He goes out for a walk in the evening. He sees the camels approaching. Rebekah sees him and apparently concludes who he is because she gets off her camel before she asks the servant about his identity. The servant replies that it is his master, in other words, Isaac. Rebekah covers her face with her veil (I must confess I still wonder, is she wearing the nose ring?). The servant tells Isaac all that has happened on his journey (24:62-66).
- p. In a simple but moving passage, we read that Isaac takes Rebekah to his mother's tent. He marries her, loves her and she comforts him after his mother's death (24:67).
- q. There are a number of key themes in these chapters:
 - i. Abraham believes in God and is indeed called "a friend of God" (Isa. 41:8). God's promises to him are unconditional. They include the land and the fact that his descendants will be as the stars in the sky. Yet in both cases, we see Abraham in these chapters as being proactive with regard to the fulfillment of those promises. He buys a piece of the land of Canaan and arranges for a wife for his son which of course is essential to the promise of having great

descendants. This points out that God's promises and human activity go together. We are never told that Abraham's actions are necessary to fulfill God's promises (God guaranteed them by swearing by himself, Heb. 6:13). Yet human action is involved. Faith is not static. It calls for action (James 2:17).

- ii. What is remarkable about these stories is that they describe events which seem very ordinary (planning a funeral, looking for a wife) yet at the same time are very much part of God's chosen plan. It is striking that the servant's prayer is answered immediately, exactly as he requested, but then he is not sure (24:21). This is a very human trait.
- iii. What is refreshing in these stories is that after grim accounts of sin and judgment (Cain and Abel, the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters), we have a series of events where everyone wants to do God's will. As a result everyone receives some kind of blessing.
- iv. It is alien to our way of thinking that we read that Isaac marries Rebekah and then we have the comment that "he loved her" (24:67). Love in Scripture is more than an emotion or a desire. It is an act of the will. God wills to love us even when we are very unlovable.

Questions for Us –

1. What do you think is the significance of Abraham having to pay for the land that has already been promised to him? In what sense does God have to pay to bring us to himself when we already belong to him?
2. Abraham is an alien and a stranger in the land which God has promised to give him. What does that say about our role as aliens in a world which has already been claimed by Jesus Christ (Rev. 11:15)?
3. What can we learn from the examples of Abraham's servant and Laban regarding prayer and following God's will?
4. Why do you think Rebekah is so eager to go with Abraham's servant?