

Chapter 18: The Commissioning of Abraham

Genesis 24:1–67

In Genesis 23, Abraham buried his wife, Sarah. Now, in Genesis 24, Abraham prepares for his own death by seeking a wife for his son Isaac. If Isaac does not find a wife, then God's promises to multiply Abraham through Isaac and Isaac's offspring will come to nothing. Nevertheless, Abraham does not want Isaac to take a wife among the pagan Canaanites in the land (Gen. 24:3), and he does not want Isaac to leave the land of promise to go back to the land of Abraham's kindred (Gen. 24:6, 8). In order to find a wife for Isaac, then, Abraham makes plans to send his servant to Abraham's kindred, who will then bring Isaac's wife back to Canaan. Should Abraham actually make these plans, though? If God has promised that Isaac will multiply, doesn't that mean that God already has a plan for bringing Isaac a wife? Is this another story like we saw in Genesis 16, where Abraham unbelievably took God's promises for offspring into his own hands by taking his wife's maidservant Hagar as a second wife? Not at all, for Genesis 24 provides a model for how to believers should seek God's will in our lives by teaching us that *God provides what he promises through plans and prayers*.

Planning for God's Future (Gen. 24:1–9)

Genesis 24 narrates the transition from Abraham to Isaac as the recipient of the promises of God's blessing.¹ All along in Abraham's story, God has directed his promises not primarily to Abraham, but to Abraham's offspring, and now it becomes time for Abraham to decrease as Isaac increases. While the focus of Genesis 23 had more to do with the end of the era of Sarah and Abraham, the focus of Genesis 24 takes a particular focus on the beginning of the era of Isaac.² Before Abraham dies, therefore, the aged patriarch sends his servant to find a wife for his son:

[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, [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." (Gen. 24:1–4)

This passage begins with an overview of Yahweh's faithfulness toward Abraham. The phrase "old, well advanced in years" describes a long life lived before the face of the Lord, as this same phrase occurs to describe the long lives of Joshua (Josh. 13:1; 23:1) and David (1 Kgs. 1:1).³ Furthermore, Yahweh has blessed Abraham "in all things." This includes more than only granting Abraham a long life, but also "his material prosperity, his victory over the eastern kings, the restoration of fertility to Sarah's womb, the birth and survival of Isaac, Abraham's own survival through uncertain times, and

the reception of divine promises.”⁴ After this long life of blessing, Abraham now looks forward to the “next stage of promise” where Isaac will succeed him in everything that the Lord has promised to him.⁵

The Oath of Abraham

We do not know the name of Abraham’s chief servant “who had charge of all that [Abraham] had” (Gen. 24:2).⁶ Some speculate that this is the Eliezer of Damascus, who stood to inherit all that Abraham had before the birth of Isaac (Gen. 15:2–3).⁷ This is a plausible suggestion, but the text does not confirm it. Moreover, the narrative seems to withhold the name of this servant purposefully in order to direct our full attention toward the fulfillment of God’s promises toward Isaac through Rebekah. By instructing the servant to put his hand under Abraham’s thigh, the servant makes his oath while touching Abraham’s genitals:

In the ancient Orient, solemn oaths could be taken holding some sacred object in one’s hand, as it is still customary to take an oath on the Bible before giving evidence in court. Since the OT particularly associates God with life...and Abraham had been circumcised as a mark of the covenant, placing his hand under Abraham’s thigh made an intimate association with some fundamental religious ideas. An oath by the seat of procreation is particularly apt in this instance, when it concerns the finding of a wife for Isaac.⁸

The oath contains both a prohibition and a promise. First, Abraham prohibits his servant from taking a wife for Isaac from the “daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell” (Gen. 24:3). This prohibition against intermarrying with foreign pagans carries through the Old Testament (c.f., Deut. 7:3; 1 Kgs. 11:4; Ezra 9), and even into the New Testament as Paul commands his multiethnic people to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39).⁹

Second, Abraham makes his servant promise that he will take a wife only from “my country and my kindred” (Gen. 24:4). This phrase echoes the original commission that God gave to Abraham: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred...’” (Gen. 12:1).¹⁰ Furthermore, the two verbs used in Abraham’s opening speech (“go” and “take”) will be important later in the narrative, as Laban and Bethuel will eventually release Rebekah by saying, “Behold, Rebekah is before you; *take* her and *go*...” (Gen. 24:51), so that the servant *takes* Rebekah and *goes* his way (Gen. 24:61) in order that Isaac may *take* Rebekah as his wife (Gen. 24:67; ESV: “became”).¹¹ Importantly, these are the two verbs from Abraham’s test in the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:2: “*Take* your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and *go* to the land of Moriah....”¹² In this case, the servant will not take Isaac; rather, he will go to Abraham’s country and kindred to take back from there a wife for “my son.” Critically, we must recognize that Abraham echoes God’s first and last words to Abraham—Abraham’s initial call, and Abraham’s call to sacrifice. Once more, we will see a *call to go* and a *call to sacrifice* extended with the promise of blessing. This time, however, these calls are not for Abraham or even Isaac, but for Rebekah.

Isaac in the Land

The servant asks a clarifying question, which leads Abraham to issue another prohibition so important that Abraham pronounces it twice:

[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?” [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. (Gen. 24:5–9)

If the woman is not willing to come, the servant asks whether he should take Isaac back to Abraham’s country and his kindred (Gen. 24:5). Abraham responds strongly, insisting that the servant never take Isaac back to that land. The reason is simple: God promised Abraham that “To your offspring I will give this land” (Gen. 24:7). Therefore, if Isaac leaves, then he will deprive “himself of the promised inheritance.”¹³ To leave the Promised Land would signify a “reversal of Abraham’s original act of faith and trust in God in leaving the land of his fathers.”¹⁴

Promises, Plans, and Providence

As when he sacrificed his son, Abraham walks the fine line of faith in God’s promises, avoiding the twin errors of faithless hedging as well as over-confident presumption. In Genesis 22, Abraham confidently believed that even if he sacrificed his son, God would restore Isaac back to life (cf. Heb. 11:19). Therefore, he neither tried to avoid sacrificing his son, nor did he begin to work through backup plans for how God could fulfill the promises after Isaac’s death. Instead, he obeyed the word of the Lord right up to the point when the Lord spoke again to stop him from sacrificing his beloved son. In the same way here in Genesis 24, Abraham confidently believes that God “will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there” (Gen. 24:7); however, he does not specify how he thinks that this will take place, and he does not contemplate other alternatives for finding a bride for Isaac. The whole success of the matter will rest in God’s providential intervention by his angel.¹⁵ If the woman is not willing to come back, then Abraham releases the servant from his oath, but Abraham does not lay out Plan B for such an occasion. The only thing Abraham insists (again) is that under no circumstances should the servant take Isaac back to Mesopotamia (Gen. 24:8). John Calvin rightly observes that Abraham “therefore chooses rather to live by hope, as a stranger, in the land of Canaan, than to rest among his relatives in his native soil: and thus we see that, in perplexed and confused affairs, the mind of the holy man was not drawn aside from the command of God by any agitating cares.”¹⁶ Abraham lives by faith in God’s promises, not by confidence in his own plans for how he will lay hold of those promises.

Additionally, we can see a very important distinction between this story and the story of Genesis 16, where Abraham took another wife for himself to seek out the promised offspring. Abraham was not wrong to seek out the promised offspring; rather, he was wrong in how he sought out the promised offspring. There, Abraham disobeyed God’s commandments by taking a second wife because he doubted God’s ability to fulfill his promises. Here, Abraham makes these plans not from doubting, but from faith. We see Abraham’s confidence in God’s ability to fulfill his own promises in

two ways. First, rather than taking the first available wife for Isaac, Abraham regulates himself and his servant within the parameters of God’s revelation. This means that Isaac must not marry a pagan Canaanite, for God has told Abraham that the Canaanites will not inherit the land because of their iniquity. If Isaac will inherit the land, but the Canaanites will be driven out, then God has made it clear that Isaac must not intermarry with the Canaanites, even though that would be the most convenient way to find a wife for Isaac. Additionally, this means that Isaac must not leave the land of promise, for God has commanded that Abraham and his offspring must remain in the land. Second, Abraham entrusts the entire mission to the providence of God, so that if this plan does not find a wife for Isaac, the servant should simply continue obeying God’s commands. Abraham is acting on the basis of faith: God’s promises prompt him toward action, but God’s revelation regulates the plan he makes, and Abraham rests in God’s providence alone for the success of his mission.

The End of Abraham

Gordon Wenham makes an important observation about this passage: “This first scene contains the last recorded words of Abraham....Abraham enters history through the divine promises (12:1–3, 7); he passes out of history with this promise on his lips.”¹⁷ With that, Abraham completes his last important work in this world by sending his servant to find a wife for Isaac. Abraham sacrificed much for the sake of obtaining God’s promises. It is not surprising, then, that Abraham’s final concerns before going to his grave have to do with ensuring that the promises toward his offspring will be carried forward. Even today, God calls us to sacrifice much for the sake of the promises of the inheritance that we have in Christ. Do we order our lives—and our preparations for death—in the hopes of seeing those promises come to fruition in the coming generations? Abraham’s hope for the future sets an example of how believers ought to look forward to God’s work in the next generation. God graciously raises us up for use according to his purposes, but God has a much bigger plan for the kingdom of Jesus Christ that spans beyond any of us individually. We must never confuse the importance of God’s work with the importance of us, his workers. As Charles Wesley reminds us, “God buries his workmen, but carries on his work.”

Praying for God’s Direction (Gen. 24:10–49)

Faithfully, the servant packs for a journey to Mesopotamia to find the wife that God has selected for Isaac:

[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 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.” (Gen. 24:10–14)

The most likely reason the servant takes ten camels and “all sorts of choice gifts” is to pay the bride price (cf. Gen. 34:12): “Abraham’s ten camels as a gift may be compared with Jacob’s ten bulls (32:15), Joseph’s ten donkeys (45:23), Jesse’s ten loaves (1 Sam. 17:17), Jeroboam’s ten loaves (1 K. 14:3), Naaman’s ten talents of silver (2 K. 5:5), all of which are gifts from one person to another.”¹⁸ It is also possible that the camels are only for transportation, since an unnumbered group of animals return with the servant and Rebekah on their way back to Isaac (Gen. 24:63–64). Notice that the key verbs *take* and *go* (cf. Gen. 24:3–4) occur in this description: “Then the servant *took*...and *went*...and *went*” (Gen. 24:10; ESV: “took...departed...went”).¹⁹

The narrative passes over the journey itself, bringing us directly to the arrival of the servant and his camels at the city of Nahor (Gen. 24:10–11). Specifically, the man comes to “a well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water” (Gen. 24:11). Three important marriages in the Old Testament arise out of encounters between men and women at wells: here, Abraham’s servant meets Rebekah on Isaac’s behalf; in Genesis 29:1–14, Jacob meets Rachel; and in Exodus 2:15–21, Moses meets Zipporah.²⁰ Previously, we have also observed the way that God met Hagar at a well to preserve her marriage with Abraham (Gen. 16:7–14). All of these events foreshadow Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, since Jesus both asks about the woman’s husband (John 4:16–18) and causes the woman to become a part of his own bride (the Church) through faith (John 4:39–42).

A Confident Prayer

When the servant arrives, he prays for God to give success to his errand by showing him the bride that God has chosen for Isaac. The verb that the ESV translates as “grant me success” (Gen. 24:12) is a word that, in another form, simply means “happen” (cf. Gen. 42:29; 44:29); however, here the form of the verb is causative: “please *make it happen* before my eyes,” which “expresses God’s providential overruling of all events.”²¹ The servant recognizes that nothing will happen unless Yahweh brings it to pass. Therefore, the servant asks that God will confirm the chosen bride through a remarkable sign: not only will the right woman offer to give him a drink, but she will also offer to water the servant’s camels. This would be no small task for the woman, as John Walton points out:

A camel that has gone a few days without water can drink as much as twenty-five gallons. Ancient jars used for drawing water usually held no more than three gallons. In other words, this offer involves perhaps from eighty to a hundred drawings from the well. Such an unbelievable proposal would indicate that God is working to override human nature in specified ways.²²

God alone could bring about such an extraordinary sign by causing a woman to go so far out of her way to help a stranger. Additionally, her actions would also “indicate a kind and industrious nature in the woman.”²³ By this, the servant is seeking to ensure that Isaac’s wife is a woman of high character and faith.

Importantly, the servant is not offering his prayer in desperation or skeptical cynicism. Rather, the servant confidently grounds his prayer in the covenant loyalty of God toward Abraham. Both at the beginning of his prayer and at the end (Gen. 24:12, 14), he appeals to the “steadfast love” (*hesed*)

of God. This is an important theological word that describes God’s commitment to demonstrate faithful, loving, kindness toward his people, according to his promises. Therefore, the servant is asking God to answer his prayers on the basis of the promises that God himself has made: that is, the servant “interprets his task as an extension of the promises, making his prayer a corollary to Abraham’s faith in the Lord’s adequacy.”²⁴ Allen Ross points out that *hesed* is a critical word throughout this entire passage:

Central to the development of the story is the idea of covenantal loyalty (*hesed*), both from the divine perspective and the human. Abraham acted with *hesed* in preparing for the future of the covenant through the marriage, Eliezer acted with *hesed* in faithfully carrying out his responsibilities, and God demonstrated his sovereign *hesed* by guiding the servant to the proper place and ensuring that the mission did not fail.²⁵

God’s covenant loyalty not only stands behind God’s actions, but faith in God’s covenant loyalty also prompts covenant loyalty from people at every critical juncture of this mission.

Importantly, this helps us to recognize that the servant is not praying presumptuously, but in faith. The servant does not pray out of any name-it-and-claim-it prosperity gospel; rather, he is praying according to God’s revealed will. Although the servant never read these words, his prayer reflects what the Apostle John writes in the New Testament: “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 John 5:14). God has promised to multiply and to make Isaac fruitful; therefore, the servant prays that God will provide the wife through whom those promises will be fulfilled. The servant does not presume that Abraham’s strategic planning alone will bring the mission to fruition. Rather, just as Abraham said that God would send ahead his angel (Gen. 24:7), so the servant prays for God’s angel to accomplish the work.

An Answered Prayer

Immediately—before the servant has even finished praying—the Lord provides an answer to the prayer:

[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. [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. (Gen. 24:15–21)

Although the text eventually informs us about Rebekah’s beauty and virginity (Gen. 24:16), the first

information that the narrative stresses is her lineage: “born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother” (Gen. 24:15).²⁶ Only after we learn her identity do we see that she acts precisely according to what the servant asked God to show him by offering water not only to him (Gen. 24:18), but to his “camels also, until they have finished drinking” (Gen. 24:19). Gordon Wenham notes that the same verbs for “quickly” and “ran” (Gen. 24:20) were also used to describe Abraham’s own “enthusiastic hospitality” when the three visitors came to him by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:2–7).²⁷ Like Abraham, Rebekah will be asked sacrificially to leave her country and her kindred, so it is fitting that her hospitality matches that of her future father-in-law. As Rebekah works, the servant only watches silently to see whether the Lord has indeed answered his prayers (Gen. 24:21).

Revelation and Worship

Once Rebekah finishes, the servant begins revealing to her the purpose for his journey, although he stops short of telling her the entire story:

[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?” [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.” [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.” [28] Then the young woman ran and told her mother’s household about these things. (Gen. 24:22–28)

First, the servant gives some of Abraham’s “choice gifts” (Gen. 24:10) to Sarah: a gold ring and two arm bracelets (Gen. 24:22). Then, the servant asks Rebekah whose daughter she is, and whether there is room at her father’s house to spend the night (Gen. 24:23). When Rebekah reveals the identity of her family and extends hospitality to the servant (Gen. 24:24–25), the servant bows his head and worships Yahweh for his steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness toward Abraham, for Yahweh has indeed brought him to the house of Abraham’s kinsmen (Gen. 24:26–27). Just as the servant began with prayer, he now closes with prayer.²⁸ Although the narrator revealed Rebekah’s identity to us immediately, the servant remains in suspense until this moment. When he discovers her identity, he is overwhelmed with gratitude and responds in worship. John Sailhamer helpfully explains what the narrative is trying to teach us:

What is unusual about this particular narrative, and also what makes it unusually long, is that even though we, the readers, by now already know the young girl, who she is, and what family she was from, we must still wait for the servant to inquire of the girl and to find out for himself. Rather than finding out such information at the same time as the character in the narrative, the reader’s part in the story is to look on as the servant himself learns about the girl and how the Lord had prepared his way. Thus the point of the narrative is not the reader’s

discovery of what God has done but the servant's response to it. The narrative purpose behind this point, apparently, is to give due attention to the Lord's role in the events. The writer is not content to leave the reader alone with such an amazing picture of God's work. Rather, in the character of the servant and in his response, the reader is shown the proper response to such events. Such divine preparation for the seed of Abraham and the line of blessing must be accompanied by the kind of appreciation seen in the servant: "Then the man bowed down and worshiped the LORD, saying, 'Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master'" (vv. 26–27). The servant is a model for all godly readers and their proper response to the work of God.²⁹

Indeed, when the Lord shows us his work, our response should always be to worship him for what he has done.

Hospitality and a Proposal

Rebekah runs ahead of the servant, arriving at her house first to tell her household what has happened (Gen. 24:28). When she arrives her brother Laban immediately sees the great wealth that his sister is wearing upon her arrival:

[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. 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."

[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. [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. [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.'

[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.” (Gen. 24:29–49)

As soon as the narrative introduces Laban, we learn something about his greed. He both sees the jewelry that Rebekah is wearing (Gen. 24:30) and notices that the servant is “standing by the camels” (Gen. 24:30), which “were in this period a rare and luxurious type of transport.”³⁰ Laban is calculating the wealth of this visitor! Of course, if we know anything of Jacob’s story with Laban in Genesis 28–31, Laban’s greed will not surprise us here.³¹ Laban greets Abraham’s servant with pious-sounding language (“Come in, O blessed of the LORD”; Gen. 24:31) without really knowing anything about him, other than his obvious wealth.

Abraham’s servant refuses to eat until he can state his business for coming (Gen. 24:33). The next section, Genesis 24:34–49, is a lengthy repetition of what we have already read in this passage. Still, what the servant says is not an exact restatement of what we have read; rather, the servant crafts his story in the most winsome way possible as he seeks Rebekah as a bride for Isaac. Gordon Wenham writes this:

The servant’s long speech goes over the events already related in vv 1–27. But this is not mere repetition for the sake of repetition; Hebrew storytellers are usually very sparing with their words, so the fullness of the servant’s recapitulation of events shows it has a most important function. The first account shows how the servant discovered Rebekah and became convinced that she was Isaac’s chosen bride. But now he has to persuade her family that it is right for her to marry Isaac. His whole approach is pitched with this end in view, and it is important to read the second account in the light of the first to see how the servant appeals to the interests of Laban, in particularly to convince him that Isaac is a worthy match for Rebekah. The whole account builds toward his final appeal, “Now then if you are going to treat my master with kindness and loyalty, tell me” (v 49). And in convincing Laban of the rightness of the marriage, the narrator at the same time confirms in our minds that God is indeed in control, answers prayer, and fulfills his promises.³²

First, the servant identifies himself as Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24:34) and gives a brief overview of the way that Yahweh has “greatly blessed” (Gen. 24:35) his master by giving himself wealth (Gen. 24:35) and a son in Sarah’s old age, to whom Abraham has given all that he has (Gen. 24:36). Then,

the servant repeats his conversation with Abraham almost verbatim (Gen. 24:37–41), with only a few minor variations. To start, the servant omits Abraham’s prohibition against bringing Isaac to Aram-Naharim (Gen. 24:6, 8): “Diplomacy dictated this deletion. It would not have been the kind of remark that would give the servant rapport with Laban and entry into his house. In fact, it could have severed the conversation there and then” if Laban believed that Abraham looked upon Laban’s home contemptuously.³³

Additionally, the servant speaks as though Isaac has already received his inheritance from Abraham (“and to him he has given all that he has”; Gen. 24:36), although we do not read about Isaac’s receiving the inheritance until the next chapter: “Here the servant anticipates Abraham’s intention actualized in 25:5.”³⁴ By describing Isaac’s inheritance this way, the servant removes any doubts of the financial stability of Isaac. Furthermore, the servant substitutes Abraham’s restatement of God’s promise (“To your offspring I will give this land”; Gen. 24:7) with a statement of Abraham’s faithfulness: “The LORD, before whom I have walked” (Gen. 24:40): “Thus the servant has shifted his emphasis from Abraham’s blessings (vv. 30–36) to Abraham’s behavior. His commendable features are not only his abundant possessions but also his obedience to Yahweh.”³⁵ The servant’s phrase, “before whom I have walked” (Gen. 24:40) matches the language of Genesis 17:1: “I am God Almighty; *walk before me*, and be blameless....” In this paraphrase, the servant is making a strong statement about Abraham’s covenantal obedience before God. Then, the servant expands Abraham’s kinship language (“go to my country and my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac”; Gen. 24:4) into a stronger, more intimate statement: “You shall take a wife for my son from my clan and from my father’s house” (Gen. 24:40): “By playing up the kinship aspect between Isaac and Rebekah, the servant minimizes the pain of her separation from her family. He also plays down the possible resistance that the bride might feel about leaving home.”³⁶ In retelling his encounter with Rebekah at the well, the servant omits asking for provisions (Gen. 24:23), perhaps to avoid drawing attention to any imposition he may be causing.³⁷ Then, the servant reports asking Rebekah’s identity *before* putting the jewelry on her (Gen. 24:47; cf. Gen. 24:22–23), perhaps to indicate his thoroughness in committing to Rebekah.³⁸

Once the servant has finished his story, he closes with his question: “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” (Gen. 24:49). Earlier, the servant praised God for showing steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness to his master (Gen. 24:27), and now he asks whether they will show steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness to his master as well (Gen. 24:49).³⁹ To accept his proposal represented great financial gain for their family, but it also represented an opportunity to submit themselves to God’s will toward Abraham and his offspring, Isaac. Therefore, the servant is not content merely to rejoice in what God has done, but he presses this family to follow God’s own example by sending Rebekah to become the wife of Isaac.

Pursuing after God’s Call (Gen. 24:50–67)

With the proposal on the table, Laban and Bethuel give their response:

[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.”

[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.” [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.” [58] And they called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will go.” [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!” (Gen. 24:50–60)

First, Laban and Bethuel acknowledge that the “thing has come from the LORD” (Gen. 24:50). Abraham expressed confidence that the Lord would send his “angel” (Gen. 24:7) ahead so that the servant could bring home a wife for Isaac, and now even Rebekah's family acknowledge that this has happened. Even so, we should recognize that the text does not record a word that God has spoken, nor does the text narrate any action that God directly takes. Instead, we are meant to see God's providential work in what he has done to arrange these details behind the scenes. Allen Ross writes this:

[This passage] is about the providence of God in the lives of faithful people, ensuring the perpetuity of the covenant. Two considerations are important here. First, God is declared to be the sole cause of the events in the narrative. The characters in the story voice the narrator's convictions on this point. Verse 27 records the theme clearly: “He has led me.” Even Laban recognized this guidance and would not dare contest providence. Second, God is deliberately behind the scenes, yet directing the acts. In this respect the account is very similar to the Book of Ruth. The story records no word from God, no miracle, no cultic contact, and not prophetic oracle; it does not even restate the Abrahamic covenant. It reports the hidden causality of God, sovereignly working through the circumstances of those who are acting in faith. The role of faith, expressed in personal prayer, trusting for divine guidance through the circumstances, an acting responsibly in anticipation of God's faithfulness, is predominant because God is not visibly active.⁴⁰

In response, the servant prays for the third time (cf. Gen. 24:13–14; 24:26–27), bowing himself down to the earth before Yahweh (Gen. 24:52).⁴¹ He has asked the Lord to give him success, so he worships the Lord when he sees the Lord answering his prayer.

We see the other side of God's “hidden causality” in the responses of Laban, Bethuel, and

Rebekah. Laban and Bethuel instruct the servant to “take” Rebekah and “go.” As we noted earlier, these are important verbs, not only in this passage, but also in the wider story of Abraham. Kenneth Mathews writes this:

Central to their affirmation is the tandem of key terms repeated in this chapter, “take” (*lāqah*) and go [*hālak*]” (v. 51), echoing both the call and test of Abraham (12:1,4; 22:2,3) and the servant’s commission (24:4,7,10). The one possible “hitch” to the man’s plans, however, still awaits him. The family announces that after ten days they will permit her to “go” (*hālak*; v. 55), but the servant begs leave to “go” (*hālak*) to his master immediately (v. 56). When the question is put to the woman, Will you “go?” (*hālak*), she ends the debate by speaking one word in the Hebrew, “I will go” (*hālak*; v. 58).⁴²

Laban and Bethuel begrudgingly permit Rebekah to leave, but then they drag their feet before allowing her to go. Finally, they put the ultimate question to Rebekah herself, and Rebekah responds with faith and obedience, saying, “I will go” (Gen. 24:58). In the same way that Abraham obeyed the call of Yahweh to leave these kindred to go to the Promised Land (Gen. 12:4), Rebekah follows in Abraham’s footsteps by *going* to marry Isaac by faith. Gordon Wenham comments aptly on the significance of her actions: “Rebekah’s willingness to leave her land and kindred shows that she is, as it were, a female Abraham, who like him will be blessed.”⁴³ Rebekah recognizes the providence of God in this situation not as something that dooms her, but that an opportunity offering her great blessing. Before leaving, her family pronounces a greater blessing than they could have realized: “Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and may your offspring possess the gate of those who hate him!” (Gen. 24:60): “The family of Rebekah little knew that their conventional blessing echoed God’s pregnant words to Abraham (22:17).”⁴⁴ Once again, we see the providence of God at work to establish his promises to Abraham with Isaac and Rebekah.

Taking Rebekah as a Wife

The narrative concludes with the return of the servant with Rebekah in order that she may marry Isaac:

[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.

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

[63] 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. [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.” So she took her veil and covered herself. [66] And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. [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. (Gen. 24:61–67)

Yet, we find the all-important verbs of this passage: “Thus the servant *took* Rebekah and *went* his way” (Gen. 24:61). These same verbs described the servant’s hopeful departure (Gen. 24:10), and

now they describe his successful return. Furthermore, just as Rebekah's willingness to "go" means that she functions as a "female Abraham," so her being "taken" sacrificially makes her a new kind of Isaac (cf. Gen. 22:2). When they arrive at Beer-lahai-roi, they find Isaac out in the field toward evening. When Rebekah learns that she is about to meet Isaac, she dismounts from her camel (Gen. 24:64) and veils herself (Gen. 24:65). After the servant has a chance to tell Isaac everything that has happened (Gen. 24:66), Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife, bringing him comfort after his mother's death (Gen. 24:67).

The Next Generation

Before we close our study of this passage, we should note a few puzzling elements of the final paragraph. First, while we would expect Abraham to be the first to greet his successful servant, we read nothing of Abraham whatsoever. Second, the servant describes *Isaac* as his master (Gen. 24:65), even though he has only previously referred to *Abraham* as his master (Gen. 24:9, 10, 12, 14, 27, 35, 36, 37, 39, 42, 44, 48, 49, 51, 54, 56).⁴⁵ This has led some to speculate that Abraham has already died.⁴⁶ While this is possible, we may also read this as demonstrating that Isaac has stepped forward to take his father's place as the heir of the promises, even if his father will still live a bit longer.⁴⁷ Indeed, when Isaac takes Rebekah into his mother's tent, we are also seeing that Rebekah replaces Sarah as the matriarch through whom God's promises will be fulfilled.⁴⁸ The point of this story is not that Abraham has died, although that will happen soon. Rather, the point of this story is about passing the covenantal baton from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebekah. God is burying his workers, but carrying forward his work by raising up new workers. Not only does Rebekah function as a new Abraham and a new Isaac, but she becomes a new Sarah.

In this story, then, Rebekah functions as a type of the church, in that her offspring are the people of God. The Bible frequently speaks of the members of the church as the offspring of a woman, from the first promise of the gospel in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15) all the way into the New Testament (Rom. 9:6–13; Gal. 4:31; 2 John 1:1, 13; Rev. 12:17). These passages reflect the fact that God uses his church as his instrument for bringing about the new birth of his people. That is, the church proclaims God's word, administers the sacraments according to God's word, and prays for God's word to bear fruit as we fulfill our commission of making disciples of Jesus. The early church father Cyprian of Carthage (200–258) expresses this idea with rhetorical flourish: "You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the church for your Mother."⁴⁹ This does not put the church on the same level as God, but it simply recognizes the unique mission and role that God has assigned to his church. In this light, Rebekah's story is not merely something for the church to admire, but something to imitate. Just as Rebekah *goes* sacrificially to become the mother of God's people by faith, so the church is called to *go* sacrificially to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

Discussion Questions

1. How do God's promises prompt Abraham's plans? How does God's revelation regulate Abraham's plans? How does Abraham weave into his plan a thorough dependence on God's provision? What promises has God given to prompt and regulate your plans? How are you depending on God in prayer as you make plans for the future he has promised in his word?

2. What does Abraham’s example teach us about seeking the good of the next generation? Why must we remain aware of our mortality and the brevity of our lives in this world? How can you live now to seek Christ’s glory among the next generation? How might you apply the words of John the Baptist, spoken of Jesus?: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

3. How does Abraham’s servant model praying for God’s direction? How does the servant model praise and thanksgiving when God fulfills his prayers? If God is working, though, why does the servant need to put his proposal to Rebekah’s family so winsomely? Do you both work diligently for the prayers of your heart *and* pray fervently for the success of your work?

4. How does this passage present Rebekah as a new Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah? What does this tell us about God’s purposes for Rebekah? What does this tell us about her faith? What kind of call does God have for his church? Why must God’s call on his church require sacrifice? What blessings does God promise for those who respond to Christ’s call in faith and obedience?

Notes

1. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 180–81.
2. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 152.
3. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 326.
4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 138.
5. Kidner, *Genesis*, 157.
6. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 140.
7. Kidner, *Genesis*, 157.
8. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 140.
9. Kidner, *Genesis*, 157.
10. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 327.
11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 138.
12. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 327.
13. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 2 (Reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 15. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ii.i.html>>
14. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 181.
15. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 419.
16. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 15. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ii.i.html>>
17. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 140.
18. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 144.
19. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 143.
20. “This is the first of three marriages in the Pentateuch where woman meets man at the well, and marriage is eventually consummated. The other two are Gen. 29:1–14 and Exod. 2:15–21. The parallels in all three are that a man visits a land other than the one in which he is living. By a well he meets a girl who comes to draw water. She runs home to tell, and shortly a marriage occurs. A feature that Gen. 24 shares with Gen. 29, but not with Exod. 2, is that the land where the woman lives is the original home of the man; and the woman he marries is a relative. Unique to Gen. 24 is the representation of the husband-to-be by proxy, and the absence of anything heroic by the servant. He does not roll away the stone at the well, as did Jacob (29:10);

nor does he drive away any nasty shepherds, as did Moses (Exod. 2:17). Also, in Gen. 29:10 and Exod. 2:17 it is Jacob and Moses who do the watering of the animals. The absence of Isaac from this event (versus the actual presence of Jacob and Moses in the other incidents) and the drawing of the water by Rebekah (versus the drawing of the water by Jacob and Moses in the related narratives) highlight both the passivity of Isaac and the determination of Rebekah.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 148.)

21. “The servant asks that the LORD will ‘guide’ him, lit. ‘make it happen in front of me.’ The root קרה ‘happen’ occurs several times in the qal in the Joseph story (42:29; 44:29; cf. 42:4, 38) but only here and 27:20 (Jacob’s explanation of how he was able to prepare the meal so quickly) in the hiphil. The hiphil expresses God’s providential overruling of all events.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 143.)

22. Walton, *Genesis*, 530.

23. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 419.

24. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 332.

25. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 415.

26. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 146.

27. “And she fulfills her offer with unexpected alacrity. ‘She quickly emptied her jar...and ran back to the well.’ Her enthusiastic hospitality reminds us of Abraham scurrying hither and thither when preparing food for his visitors: the same verbs (מהר ‘hurry’ ‘quickly’ and רץ ‘run’) are used here and in 18:2–7.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 144.)

28. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 145.

29. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 182.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 146.

31. Kidner, *Genesis*, 158.

32. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 146.

33. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 154.

34. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 147.

35. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 154.

36. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 148.

37. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 327.

38. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 154–55.

39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 148–49.

40. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 415.

41. “For the third time, the servant prays. It is a point of interest that he had stood, watchful for the answer, to make his request (12, 13a, cf. RSV); it was the answers that progressively prostrated him (26, ‘his head’; 52, ‘to the earth’).” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 159.)

42. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 342.

43. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 138.

44. Kidner, *Genesis*, 159.

45. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 162.

46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 152.

47. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 348.

48. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 422.

49. Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church*, trans. Maurice Bévenot, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 25 (New York: Newman Press, 1956), 48–49.