

The Patriarchs |The Gospel According to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

The Bride

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Genesis 24.1-15

Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way. ² Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your hand under my thigh, ³ and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, ⁴ but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac." ⁵ The servant said to him, "Suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?" ⁶ Then Abraham said to him, "Beware 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 birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will 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 my oath; only do not take my son back there."

⁹ So the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter. ¹⁰ Then the servant took ten camels from the camels of his master, and set out with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. ¹¹ He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water. ¹² He said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham. ¹³ "Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; ¹⁴ now may it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also' -- may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master." ¹⁵ Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.

We're looking at *The First Book of Moses, Genesis*...and specifically at the lives of the patriarchs ...Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And at this point...in the saga...the first generation is passing the baton to next generation. "*Abraham was old, advanced in age*", about to pass off the scene with no fanfare. The *Matriarch, Sarah*, has already died (she's buried in that cave, by the field, the down-payment of the promised land...last week).

Sarah's tent is now empty – there IS no mother in Israel and *that's a problem*...because, the Cure for evil, for the fallen world, will come from a mother, "the Seed of the woman...will bruise the

serpent's head". But there IS no woman in God's chosen people ...Sarah's tent is empty. And Abraham has to find a wife for the promised son, Isaac...if there's going to BE a next generation.

But where will Abraham find a bride for Isaac? And not *any* old bride ...but THE Bride. Verse 14 calls her "the *appointed*" bride. That's the conflict that gets raised and then settled in this long chapter.

Something important is happening here...longest single narrative in ALL the Patriarch chapters...and it has to do with a word that Christians have always used...sometimes *almost as a synonym for God*, the word is "providence", *God governing circumstances*.

In a 2011 movie *The Adjustment Bureau*, the filmmakers posit a situation in which a young politician and a ballerina fall in love...but there seems to be something keeping them apart...like... thwarting their efforts to be together. And the trailer says, "If you believe in freewill...If you believe in chance...If you believe in choice...fight for it!" It's kind of Romance meets existential philosophy (maybe the film aims a little too high).

Interesting dilemma though: DO we choose a path or is it chosen for us? Is there fate? And can it be resisted...or adjusted by our decisions or our prayers or successes or failures? Is there destiny? Are things pre-determined...does God have an unalterable plan for your life OR are we free to choose?

Well, we can't answer all these questions *but we do get a little glimpse here into the workings of God*. So what does this teaching of providence say and *how does it play out* in this long chapter, which we're only going to summarize? Let's consider: 1) The Servant's Quest 2) Providence, Prayer and Promise.

Abraham is painfully aware of the *absence* of his beloved wife...her tent is empty. HE is very old (thinking legacy) and he *wants* a wife for his son Isaac ...who is a fitting matriarch for a new generation.

But Sarah was a sojourner...and a woman of faith who *went* by faith to a strange land... So...Isaac's bride can't come from this land...not a Canaanite woman who is at home here... "Let her come *the way we came*, the pilgrim way...and... by faith!"

So Abraham calls his chief-of-staff to a sacred oath...and says, "go to our old home in Haran ...Mesopotamia... a month-long journey...God has promised and He will give you success...If she won't sojourn, by faith...you're released from the oath"

So, off he goes with a huge caravan of ten camels...a month's journey and he arrives at evening when women come out to get water at the village well... He parks the camels and he prays...FOR...*what's already destined to happen*...he prays, "O LORD, the God of my master

Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham.” (“success” 4x).

And then, a big...stipulation...a very specific prayer: “Lord, reveal the appointed woman by her willingness to not only offer me a drink but also that she offer to water our camels ...that’s how I’ll know she is (*here’s the word*) the appointed bride, the chosen, the pre-determined bride”

Then...immediately...there she is, Rebekah. And she does exactly as the servant prayed.

She does the impossible. Camels coming in from the desert can drink a lot of water. She volunteers for a huge task (up to 80 trips to the well)...basically no one would ever volunteer for this...so the servant was asking for the impossible.

Was this a character thing? Was he looking for someone with crazy hospitality and mercy? I think so. He didn’t ask that she levitate ...it’s something would almost never happen but also something practical and beneficial for a matriarch. Big hospitality.

And he watches her and sort of marvels, “Could this be the one?” and she finishes the whole task. Then he honors her with jewelry – not payment but honor, as if to say, “You are really exceptional.”

And it turns out she’s a distant relative of Abraham. And she invites the whole bunch into her family’s home. And the servant bows down and worships God – “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His lovingkindness and His truth toward my master; as for me, the LORD has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers.” (27) This ambassador is getting the confirmation he needs from every angle.

Then Rebekah’s brother enters the scene. It’s a guy named Laban... a real character. Later we learn that he’s a rascal and a greedy man. And Laban sees the jewels and all the camels and is really impressed and he runs to bring these rich guys into his home.

Then the servant gets right down to business: I’m here on a mission to find a bride for Isaac. I represent Abraham, your relative, and want you to know that, “The LORD has greatly blessed my master, so that he has become rich; and He has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and servants and maids, and camels and donkeys.” And he tells the whole Abraham and Sarah story (Isaac etc.)...*like a testimony of God’s faithfulness to this relative of theirs* who may have told them that he was being called by the God named YHWH and now they know that Abraham’s God really did keep His promises.

So how bout it?... I think this woman is the one. Have I come to the right place?

Laban says, “Heck yeah! Cha-ching!!...Rich relatives!! Wooo! Hooo!!...I uh...I mean ...uh yes, this is from the Lord!”

And then, this really excellent servant bows again and worships God.

Then they give the bride and the family big gifts (the bridal price of gold and silver) and they celebrate. ...the family wants Rebekah to stay a while but she says, "I'm ready to go right now!" (See, she's got the pilgrim-spirit!) And they leave...the next day.

When they get back to Isaac's house, a month later...will Isaac receive her? It's like a final moment of tension...and yes he does! No questions asked, sight unseen. "The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her". It's like a Romance ...and a philosophical dilemma. (Like that movie).

And here's the dilemma...why did this old servant *pray at all* ? Abraham had guaranteed success. God had promised success. God has repeatedly sworn, through the whole Abraham/Sarah story, sworn by His own existence that this family...would flourish WILDLY and become a great nation and a blessing to all nations. So why the big prayers, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham."

If there's a God who appointed this woman, if it was destined to happen...if an almighty God had planned it...and if His will can not be resisted ...it WILL COME TO PASS...then why pray? Why swear oaths and go on missions...and why come up with ways to make decisions and why...do anything?

Well, Abraham and his chief-of-staff (the servant) definitely believed in a God who governs the whole universe and leaves nothing to chance. They believed in the God of the Bible...but that didn't make them either passive or prayerless...just the opposite.

They saw themselves as pilgrims on a quest to cooperate with providence and to celebrate it.

When they see themselves under God's governance and under His sway and dominion they're able to say with Job, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away – blessed be the name of the Lord" (1.21). And later, as it will be said by the Apostle Paul, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose." (Romans 8.28)

The tough stuff, like the Sarah dying and the very pleasant stuff like the arrival of the Bride he came to love...even the greed of Laban and human sin are all raw materials for providence...And they receive all these things from the Unseen Hand of providence with the assurance that God is weaving together all the threads of a tapestry, the dark threads and the gold ones...into a picture that will only be fully appreciated in the future. We look up at it the seemingly tangled underside now...but some day we'll see it from above and we'll marvel at it forever.

And even now, when we see flashes of the big picture it makes us want to bow low before God.

Four times in this story the most important word for understanding the whole OT is used. It's often translated, as it is here, "*lovingkindness*". It's the Hebrew word, "*hesed*" and it refers to God's loyalty to His covenant or promise. It makes its way into the NT as the Greek word "*charis*", translated "grace".

And the point is, if we see that God, at His own expense, will keep His promise...His oath...His grace...*THEN, WE WILL NOT BE PARALYZED BY THE IDEA OF PROVIDENCE – WE'LL ACTUALLY BE INVIGORATED BY IT.*

When I see that God was working all things together for Isaac and for the continuation of His people – that God was going to bring a Savior from the seed of the woman – HE PROMISED! And "*hesed*", God's loyalty to His oath, God's grace would see to it that the promise was kept – there would be a bride for Isaac, a mother in Israel. With that in SIGHT, the servant was on an adventure. He was confident that His efforts and prayers would not be wasted.

And when we see that out of Abraham's line would come one to bless all nations (Gen 12) and that Jesus Christ is that promised seed – when we see Him, born of a woman in the fullness of time – when we see Him living and dying in the place of all who trust in the grace and hesed of God – that stirs us to pray and to live with a sense of mission.

You have to see the God who destines and governs, **the God of providence** as mysterious but also as good and that His whole story is about a mission to get a Bride for His Son.

In the Book of Isaiah (700BC), Messiah is predicted again and again under the moniker, "the Servant of the Lord". And Jesus Christ came into the world, in time, to fetch us. The Church is called the Bride of Christ. He came from afar to get a Bride.

Unlike Rebekah, though, Jesus Christ finds His Bride, us, the Church, not qualified...but unfaithful. And His task is ...not simply to give a bridal price of gold or silver...but to ransom us *and to give His own obedience and blood...to suffer hell on the Cross for the life of His Bride.*

And when I see that...and when I see that the great culmination of history is a wedding reception that will never end...that makes me want to be engaged with what God is doing in the world. It makes me want to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done".

I'm not trying to change a "bad fate" into a good one (as in the movies). Hesed, grace, the Cross and Resurrection convince me that even out of the bad stuff, even out of the worst stuff that God WILL care for His people...and the world will be healed.