

“A WIFE FOR ISAAC”

There are three distinct scenes in this passage, and each of these scenes has a different main character. Abraham is prominent in the opening scene, Abraham’s servant is the key figure in the middle scene, and Isaac is the focus in the concluding scene. There is, however, one other main character in this passage, a character who is far more important than any of the others. That character is the Lord. Moses, the author of Genesis, makes it very clear that the Lord is the one who provides a wife for Isaac. We see this by the strong emphasis upon God’s providential control over the events that take place in this chapter. God’s works of providence are defined by our Shorter Catechism as “his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.” [Q. 11] This is precisely what we see in Genesis 24. The Lord preserves the line of promise by governing the actions of the characters in this story. What would have happened if Rebekah had not been willing to draw water for the servant’s camels? What if her family had refused to let her go with the servant? What if she had been unwilling to go? So many things could have gone wrong, but it all worked out in the end, because there was an invisible hand guiding the entire course of events. Those of you who have read J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* may recall how this idea frequently comes up in that story - the idea that there is some unseen, ultimate purpose that is directing the course of events. In Genesis 24, it is very clear that God is the principle actor in this story, just as he is the principle actor in all of history. God is in control of all the events of life, and he calls his people to live with an active awareness of his

providential control. Now, I want to say up front that providence is certainly not the only theme that is present in this passage. There are a number of things that we can learn from this chapter, and we will touch on several of these things in this sermon. But as far as our overall focus tonight, I want to call our attention to the various ways in which the actions of the characters in this story were shaped by their belief in divine providence.

The death of Sarah, which was the topic of the previous chapter, would have made Abraham even more aware of the fact that the day of his own death was approaching. And this caused him to think about the importance of finding a wife for Isaac. He wanted to ensure that Isaac could produce offspring so that the covenant might continue into future generations. But he did not want his son to intermarry with the Canaanites. He knew that the Canaanites were under God's judgment, and that their wickedness would lead his descendants away from the Lord. Abraham's offspring must not become entangled with the Canaanites. For this reason, he made his servant swear, by a solemn oath, that he would not permit Isaac to marry a Canaanite wife. Incidentally, Jesus' teaching on the matter of oaths is sometimes misunderstood to mean that it is wrong for God's people to engage in oath-taking of any kind. But that is not what Jesus meant when he addressed the matter of oath-taking. There are a number of places in the Bible where oath-taking is portrayed in a positive light, and Jesus did not intend to contradict those passages when he said "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.'" Instead, he was confronting the practices of the Pharisees, who were guilty of using oaths in false and manipulative ways, teaching that there were some kinds of vows that you might not have

to be as serious about keeping. But Jesus would have none of that. If you say you will do something, then you are bound by your word. This is the point behind the vow that Abraham made his servant take. He wanted his servant's word that he would do what he said.

Instead of finding Isaac a wife from among the Canaanites, the servant was commanded to go back to the family that Abraham left behind in Mesopotamia, the household of his brother Nahor, and to look for a wife for Isaac there. This was a journey of about 500 miles, a journey that would have taken about three weeks. And when the servant asked if he should take Isaac back to that land if the prospective bride was unwilling to come to Canaan, Abraham was adamant that this not be allowed to happen. That too would be a rejection of the covenant, because the Lord had called Abraham out from that land and promised to give his descendants the land of Canaan. Isaac must remain in the land of promise.

Abraham's actions here give an indication of how he had grown in his faith. Unlike those times earlier in his life when he was willing to adopt pragmatic solutions to the challenges that confronted him, here we see a man who is unwilling to compromise. What happened to the man who was willing to take Sarah's servant Hagar and have a child through her? Where is the man who lied about Sarah being his wife in order to save his own skin? Abraham has matured in his faith. He knows that Isaac needs to marry a non-Canaanite wife, but he is not willing to permit him to leave Canaan in order to find one. He does what is within his power to find a wife for Isaac, and then he entrusts the

situation into the hands of the Lord. This is a good example of how our belief in divine providence should affect our actions. We need to be faithful; we need to do what God would have us do, but then we need to trust God to accomplish his will. As Samuel Rutherford puts it, “Duties are ours, events are the Lord’s.” [*Letters*, 238]

The idea that the Lord restricts the pool of potential mates for his people is a principle that is repeated throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. God’s people are only to marry “in the Lord.” And it is noteworthy that in this passage it is Abraham, not Isaac, who assumes the responsibility for making sure that this happens. Now it is true that the marital customs of Abraham’s world were quite different than those in our society. In the ancient world, parents played a far more important role in the selection of a mate than they do in our culture. But regardless of the culture in which we live, Christian parents should strive to be a significant influence when it comes to the person that their son or daughter will marry. In a sense, this is the last task of a Christian father and mother in the parenting of their children: to see to it that they marry godly spouses. We may not live in a day of arranged marriages, but this does not mean that parents cannot guide their children in this all-important matter. From the very beginning, we should be teaching our children that the only spouse for them will be a man or a woman who truly loves Jesus Christ; a man or a woman who is earnest in his or her commitment to live as a follower of Christ. If we fail to do this, then we will fail in our duty to ensure that the covenant is transmitted to succeeding generations. And to you children, I want to say this: you must listen to God’s Word in this matter. There may come a time when you

are tempted to think that it would be okay for you to pursue a relationship with someone who is not a committed Christian. But this is something that you simply must not do.

Your God commands you to marry “in the Lord.”

As Abraham’s servant made his way to the city of Nahor, his consciousness of divine providence caused him to look to the Lord in prayer. He asked God to give him success in the task to which he had been assigned. And more specifically, he asked God to give him a sign so that he could be certain that he had found the right woman for Isaac. Now this is something that we see on a few occasions in the Bible. You may be familiar with the similar story in the book of Judges, involving Gideon and the fleece. In both of these instances, the Lord granted the sign that was requested. But this does not mean that we should treat these as examples to follow. It may be that this was simply an instance of the Lord graciously accommodating himself to the weakness of Abraham’s servant. Or it may be that the servant had received some instruction that we do not know about that caused him to do this. Regardless, there is nothing in the Bible to lead us to think that we should expect God to lead us in this way.

The important thing about the servant’s prayer is what it tells us about his faith. He clearly believed that God was in control. He wanted God to cause things to happen in a certain way. That is what he prayed, and that is exactly what God did. Before the servant had even finished his prayer, Rebekah showed up and acted as if on cue. She did exactly what the servant had asked of the Lord. And in doing so, she showed that she was a woman with a generous and caring disposition. Drawing enough water for ten camels to

drink is a lot of work. Rebekah's willingness to do this greatly exceeded the bounds of common courtesy. Here was a young woman who was well-suited to take Sarah's place as the new matriarch of the covenant people.

The actions of Abraham's servant show us that there is a direct correlation between our confidence in divine providence and our prayer life. Some people try to argue that the idea that God is in control of everything causes people to be less diligent in prayer, but this is not what we see in the Bible. To be sure, there is mysterious connection between providence and prayer. God does not tell us how he ensures that all things take place according to his will while also using our prayers to actually change things. But the Bible clearly tells us that both of these things are true. Belief in providence leads to a fervent prayer life.

The servant's trust in God's providential care also causes him to be a careful observer of the things taking place around him. Look at verse 21: "The man gazed at [Rebekah] in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not." He is watching intently, trying to understand what God is doing. He believes that God is governing these events, and this belief causes him to be watchful. The same should be true of us. We need to be continually reminding ourselves of the fact that the Lord's hand is behind everything that takes place in our lives. And this should make us very watchful. We too should wonder what God is doing, even though we will not always be able to understand what he is doing. Again, here is Samuel Rutherford, "we cannot win to the bottom of His wise providence, who ruleth all; yet it is certain this is not only good what the Almighty

hath done, but it is best.” [*Letters*, 103-4] Most of the time, we will not know God’s exact purposes in the circumstances and events that he ordains for our lives. But we must never forget that God is in perfect control, that he has a purpose in everything, and that his purposes are always what is best.

When we believe this, we will be better prepared to respond to the things that God providentially ordains for our lives with the appropriate gratitude. This is what we see Abraham’s servant doing. He prays, he watches, and then he gives thanks. Yes, it is true that his request was immediately granted, and in exact conformity with what he had asked. Admittedly, this is not always the case. But if we truly believe that God has perfect power over everything, and if we believe that his purposes for his people are always good, then it is foolish for us to grumble over the things that the Lord ordains for our lives.

This brings us to the conclusion that God ordained for this story: Isaac and Rebekah meet, they marry, and they fall in love. And it is worth pointing out the order in which the text relates this. It does say that Isaac loved Rebekah, but notice that it says so after he took her to be his wife. This provides a healthy corrective to something that is out of balance in our culture. In our society, romance is the factor that receives the greatest emphasis when people are considering whom they should marry, and this is not entirely good. This is not to say that romantic love is unimportant. It is a component of marital love, but it is certainly not everything. A marriage built on romance alone will almost certainly fail. This explains why almost all of the people who work in Hollywood, the

industry that does the most to perpetuate the supremacy of romance, move so quickly from one marriage to the next, or at least from one relationship to the next. I have no doubt that Isaac and Rebekah found romantic fulfillment in their marriage. The text gives us every indication that they did. But it is significant that the romance is not mentioned until after they were married.

One final point about this account of the Lord's providential provision of a wife for Isaac: the Lord's purpose in bringing Isaac and Rebekah together went beyond their own happiness and fulfillment. It certainly brought that, but their union was also essential to the furthering of God's kingdom-program. This marriage was about something that was far bigger than Isaac and Rebekah. And the same is true of every Christian marriage, and every Christian life. You can be sure that the Lord is providentially guiding all of the events of your life. You can be sure that, if you belong to Christ, God is working everything together for your ultimate good. But you must also remember that you are a part of something that is far bigger than yourself. You are a member of the kingdom of God, and the Lord is using you, and every part of your life, as one of the living stones out of which he is building his great spiritual house.