### 3rd July 2011

### Genesis 24

Over the next month or so we will be looking at the book of Genesis and the story of Jacob. It will provide stories that will enable us to look at god’s providential provision for our lives, our relationship to God, the struggle of prayer and human relationships. This is the wedding season and our first episode from Genesis 24 is about how Abraham found a wife for his son Isaac who would then become the parents of Jacob and Esau.

An Agony Aunt received this letter from a reader that went like this:

*Dear Agony Aunts:*

*Why would any husband adore a lazy, messy, addlebrained wife? Her house looks as if they’d moved in yesterday. She never cooks a meal. Everything is in cans or frozen. Yet this slob’s husband treats her like a Princess. He covers the telephone with a blanket when he goes to work so she can get her rest. On weekends he does the laundry.*

*I get up at 6 a.m. and fix my husband’s breakfast. If my husband ever emptied a waste bin, I’d faint. Once when I phoned him at work and asked him to pick up a loaf of bread on his way home, he swore at me for five minutes. The more you do for a man, the less he appreciates you. I feel like an unpaid housekeeper, not a wife. What is going on?*

The Agony Aunt’s response is classic. She said:

*A marriage license is not a guarantee that the marriage is going to work, any more than a fishing license assures that you’ll catch fish. It merely gives you the legal right to try.*

This chapter, the longest in the book of Genesis, is devoted to a description of the process of finding a wife for Isaac. Finding the right partner is absolutely essential. But as important as this is, finding the right person does not insure a godly marriage. “It only gives us the right to try.”

Excessive emphasis on finding ***the*** right wife or husband can have some disastrous effects for those already married. It is possible for someone to conclude that they have married the wrong person.

So far as our own partners are concerned, we need to place far more emphasis upon the matter of being the right partner rather than upon finding the right partner.

The thrust of our study, then, will be to study the search for Isaac’s wife within its cultural and historical setting and then to look into the implications of this passage for servant hood, guidance and seeking God’s will, and relationships. I hope there will be something in it for everyone.

I received an email the other day

I was very interested to discover your website as we have also started a Christian online project: a free and non-commercial dating agency for Christians.
Our project aims to bring Christians together and promote Christian relationships thereby supporting the Christian community. Over the last 3 days over 200 people have registered on Date-Christians.

People are using the internet today to find their partner. It is easy and straight to the point. Abraham, in this story from Genesis, decided to take action and find his son a wife in a straight forward negotiation, sending his servant off to his home country laden down with gold and jewellery to buy the right woman. His greatest concern was the marriage of Isaac to a woman who would help him raise a godly family, even as God had previously made clear:

(Genesis 18:19) the Lord says For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him). Abraham will be the father of a great nation and all the world will be blessed through him.

Abraham entrusted the responsibility of finding a wife for Isaac to no one less than his oldest and most trusted servant. It is possible, though not stated, that this servant was Eliezer of Damascus. If this is true, the greatness of this servant is the more striking, for his task was for the benefit of the son of Abraham, who would inherit all that might have been his:

(Genesis 15:2) And Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what can you give me, since I am childless. The heir of my household is Eliezer of Damascus?’.

God reassures Abraham that he will have a natural heir. But Abraham doesn’t sit back and wait for God to deliver on a plate.

Prayer is usually always a partnership. We do our bit and God does his bit. Abraham’s actions were based on revelation. In prayer he listened for the will of God and acted within it. Listening prayer is arguably more important that the prayer of request, the petition to God. Instead of ‘Lord give me this...’ the listening prayer asks ‘Lord what do you want? Give me guidance? What is your will? What does your word say about this issue in my life?

The devotion of this servant to his master and to his master’s God is one of the highlights of the chapter. His piety, prayer life, and practical wisdom set a high standard for the believer in any age. He was a man of great integrity, who followed instructions, was diligent dependable. Prayer and worship marked this man out as being head and shoulders above his peers. He was a man with a personal trust in God and who gave God the glory. What a model of servant hood.

The servant, whatever his name, was commissioned to secure a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac. Only two stipulations were stated by Abraham: the wife must not be a Canaanite (24:3), and Isaac must not, under any circumstances, be taken back to Mesopotamia, from whence God had called him (24:6).

 Abraham and his offspring were missionaries in this sense. While they lived among the Canaanites, they were not to become one with them by marriage. To move back to Mesopotamia would be isolation. To live among them but to marry a God-fearer would serve to insulate Isaac from too close a relation with these pagans. Thus, a wife must be secured from among the relatives of Abraham while, at the same time, Isaac was not allowed to return there himself.

Of course some mixed marriages do work. Some Christian marriages fail. There are no guarantees – back to the marriage licence reply again. When I was in my twenties I remember people advising me in line with the advice from Paul’s Second letter to the Corinthians (chapter 6) ‘do not be yoked with unbelievers’ Paul was writing on marriage and the problems of the early church where one partner came to faith and how this caused tension and split loyalties in the relationship and his advice was don’t risk it – if your faith is important to you find someone who is at least sympathetic or else you’re heading for conflict.

Our culture idolises romantic love – love is feeling – to get swept away on. It is the stuff of the media and advertising world. In the ancient world that approach was like putting the cart before the horse. Arranged marriages were the order of the day – families working out level headedly who would be an appropriate match – similar background, values, outlook, faith, ability. Then the love came second. Look at the end of this chapter – verse 67. Rebecca became Isaac’s wife and he loved her.

Now I am not for one moment suggesting we go back to the tradition of arranged marriages. But this story is a challenge to our culture. Love needs to be more than a feeling – it needs to be thought through. Arguably our culture has become too feelings dominated and we have lost a measure of restraint, discipline, self control, thoughtfulness and thought through ness.

Parents advising children? – using your years of wisdom and practical experience? – These are some of the arguments that for example Asian communities put forward to defend the practice of arranged marriages. There are ways and means. Sadly our culture has put so much emphasis on personal freedom that we grow up feisty and independent and not wanting other people to interfere in our choices. Again, I think we need balance. If your son or daughter was about to buy a dodgy second hand car I’m sure they would be asking your advice and i’m sure you’d be wanting to give it. Yet is there no honest conversation about such a life changing decision such as who will be my partner?

There is a lot in this story about guidance.

First and foremost, Abraham’s actions were based upon revelation. God had promised to make Abraham a great nation and to bless all nations through him. Abraham instructed his servant to seek out a wife for his son with the assurance that God would give divine guidance. “His angel” would be sent on ahead to prepare the way for the servant. Abraham thus acted upon revelation he had previously received, assured that additional guidance would be granted when needed. His faith was not presumption, however, for he allowed for the possibility that this mission might not be God’s means of securing a godly wife for Isaac: “… 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” (Genesis 24:8).

What a wonderful example of faith in God as One who guides His people. Abraham sent his servant, assured that God had led by His Word. Abraham sought a wife for his son, assured that God had prepared the way and would make that way clear. Abraham also allowed for the fact that God might not provide a wife in the way he had planned to procure her and thus made allowance for divine intervention in some other way.

Eliezar the servant asks God for a sign to confirm which girl he should propose too**.** A younger servant would probably have gone about this task in a very different manner. You can imagine him coming into town, advertising the fact that he worked for a very wealthy foreigner with a handsome, eligible son who was to be his only heir. His intention to find a bride would have been publicized, and only one lucky girl was to be chosen. To select such a bride the servant might have held a “Miss Mesopotamia” contest. Only those who were the most beautiful and talented would be allowed to enter, and the winner would become the wife of Isaac.

Eliezar shows his wisdom. He says he will take his camels to the well and if a girl offers him drink and drink for his camels then that will be a sign for him. In the end Rebecca not only does all this but does much more. He obviously sees in her a kind generous nature – a woman with a good heart.Any woman who was willing to “go the extra mile” in this matter was one of unusual character.

Humbly he prayed for guidance, but wisely he proposed a plan which would test the character of the women he would encounter. The servant sought to test the woman rather than God .There was no spectacular revelation, nor did there need to be. Wisdom could discern a woman of great worth.

### But God does deal in circumstantial signs. Debbie and I had just met before I went out to Africa for three months. When I returned we met up and I hoped it would be the start of something serious. I was training form ministry in Manchester at the time, she was living in Nottingham. She was passing through and met up to see my photos of Africa! I thought the meeting didn’t go well and thought that was the last I’ll see of her. But a few days later I received a postcard from her. It said how much she enjoyed meeting up and could we do it again. It was a sign – a green light for Go! The postcard had a copy of a Cezanne painting and a large print of that painting hangs up in our front living room to remind us of God’s sign.

Having found the woman who should be Isaac’s wife, the servant now had to convince the family that Abraham’s son Isaac was the right man for Rebecca. The fact that Rebecca would need to move far away was an obstacle which must be overcome by strong arguments. This delicate task was skilfully handled by the servant. The urgency of his mission was indicated by his refusal to eat until the purpose of his journey was explained.

First, the servant identified himself as a representative of Abraham, Bethuel’s uncle (verse 34). This would have set aside many objections of these relatives, who were concerned to protect the purity of Rebecca’s descendants. Then the success of Abraham was reported. Abraham had not been foolish to leave Haran, for God had prospered him greatly. By inference, this testified to Isaac’s ability to provide abundantly for the needs of Rebecca, who was not living on a poverty level herself (cf. verses 59, 61). Isaac was said to be the sole heir of Abraham’s wealth (verse 36).

Rebecca had come in wearing gold jewellery – money was talking! In the old saying – ‘did he have prospects – can he keep my daughter – yes he can! In today’s world of equal opportunities and lack of job security it is more pertinent to ask can you keep each other, can you support each other?

 The most compelling argument he could possibly provide was evidence that it was the will of God for Rebecca to become the wife of Isaac. He accomplished this by recounting all that took place from his commissioning by Abraham to the conclusion of his search at the spring.

The forcefulness of the servant’s presentation was not missed. Laban and his father responded:

“… The matter comes from the LORD; so we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebecca is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has spoken” (Genesis 24:50-51).

The mission had been accomplished, and now Rebecca walks in the steps of her great uncle Abraham. She, like he, was led by God to leave her homeland and relatives to go to the land of Canaan.

Isaac had been in the field hoping to meet them verse 63. As he lifted up his eyes he beheld the caravan approaching. Was Isaac, like the servant earlier, praying about this task of finding a wife? Rebecca looked with interest upon the man who was approaching them. She asked the servant about him and learned that this man was her future husband. Appropriately, she covered herself with her veil.

Isaac, too, needed to be assured that Rebecca was the woman God had provided for him. We know from verse 67 that Isaac was assured that Rebecca was God’s good and perfect gift for him.

Summing up:

Genesis 24 is a chapter that is rich in lessons for our lives: servant hood, guidance, and finding a partner.

We see Eliezar as the model servant.

We see how God’s hand guides in this story.

We learn valuable advice about the dating game;

First of all : **be aware of God’s purposes for your life** – for example the Bible informs us that it is sometimes God’s purpose to keep some of His servants single I Corinthians 7:8-24.

Secondly: **wait for God’s time.**  Isaac was 40 years old when he married. By some standards that was about 10 years late (cf. Genesis 11:14,18,22). It is well worth waiting for God’s choice.

Thirdly, if **we would have a godly partner we must look in the right place.** Abraham instructed his servant not to look for a wife among the Canaanites.

Fourthly: **if you would have a godly partner you must seek godly qualities.** I notice that Abraham’s servant did not evaluate Rebecca on the basis of her physical appearance. This servant knew from experience and wisdom the qualities which are most important to a successful marriage. Just being a woman who believed in the God of Abraham was not sufficient. Jjust being a Christian does not make them a good candidate for a relationship.

Fifthly: **heed the counsel of older and wiser Christians.** Not only were Abraham and his servant a part of the process, but Rebecca’s family also had to be convinced of God’s leading.

Finally: **romantic love is not enough to sustain a marriage so don’t make it the only criterion for a relationship.**

Next week we’ll see how sibling rivalry tore this family apart. More lessons to be learnt no doubt.