

“Father Knows Best”

Genesis 24

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Many years ago there was a popular television program entitled “Father knows best”.

I believe it was Robert Young and June Lockhart who starred in it.

I have borrowed that title (“Father knows best”) to use as the title for this message today.

And the “father” I have in mind is God.

The story Moses, the author of Genesis, will next tell us, is a story about dating, engagement and marriage.

More precisely it is a story about finding the right person to marry.

And most precisely, it is the story of God the Father faithfully guiding at every turn.

Truly “Father knows best”.

The story is not only or ultimately about dating and marriage, but about a Father-God who is at work in all the details of our lives as well.

How about it, is God at work in your life today?

Are you the victim of blind fate or is Father-God personally involved in shaping the events of your life?

I’m convinced that what Moses wanted his readers to believe and stake their lives on was that **the God who had faithfully worked in this situation in the life of Abraham, would work equally faithfully in their lives.**

Now we turn to the story.

Three years after the death of his wife, Sarah, Abraham was 140 years old.

But the real issue was not how old Abraham was but how old his son Isaac was.

Isaac was 40 and most importantly he was unmarried.

65 years earlier God had told Abraham to leave his father's family and country and go to a land that God would show him – a land that would one day belong to Abraham's descendants.

God also promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore.

65 years later with only one unmarried son, Abraham certainly could have wondered how this promise would be fulfilled.

But Abraham had seen God act so faithfully in the past, that this time Abraham doesn't wonder, he acts.

And he acts not in disbelief as he had done in the past, but he acts in faith.

And when I say, "he acts in faith" I mean just that.

Not that he sits idly by and waits – calling it "faith" but that he acts, - he does something and in the doing, he trusts God to act.

The future of Abraham's family and the promises of God hang on this 40 year-old bachelor becoming a husband and father.

Isaac needs a wife.

Kevin Lehman in The Birth Order Book (1985) included this ad from a newspaper's personal column:

"Christian, blond, blue eyes, 5'2", 100 pounds, professional female, no dependents, wishes to meet Protestant Christian, professional man in 30's with a college degree who has compassion for animals and people, loves nature, exercise and physical fitness (no team sports), music, church and home life. Desires non-smoker, non-drinker, slender 5'7" to 6', lots of head hair, intelligent, honest trustworthy, sense of humor, excellent communicator of feelings, very sensitive, gentle, affectionate, giving, encouraging and helpful to others, no temper or ego problems, extremely considerate and dependable. I believe in old-fashioned morals and values. If you do and are interested in a possible Christian commitment, write to the following box. Please include recent color photo and address." (In Ed Dobson 165)

What are the chances anyone responded to that ad?

I wonder if she ever considered raising her standards a little before trying again!

I wonder if Isaac tried the personals' column in the Beer Sheba Gazette.

Probably not!

Probably because it was customary in his day, Abraham took it on himself to find a wife for his son.

And thus we come to the opening scene of the story.

We find the old man, Abraham, talking to his most trusted servant.

He asks this servant to do a most important task.

In fact, he asks his servant to take an oath that he will do it.

Find the right girl for my son to marry.

Abraham said there are two criteria.

One, she must not be from around here – she cannot be a Canaanite woman.

Two, she needs to be from my family back where I came from 65 years ago.

Now the servant is loyal but he's not stupid.

He asks a very astute question, "What if I find a girl but she won't come back with me?"

Then he adds an idea, "Shall I take your son back the country you came from?"

Now that's reasonable.

He can't take an oath that he will definitely do something he isn't certain he can accomplish.

How about the seemingly better idea of taking your son back to your home country?

Wouldn't he have a far better chance of finding the right girl if he is among all of them?

That idea causes Abraham to come right up off his rug.

With voice raised he says if there is anything you must do it is that!

Under no circumstances are you to take my son back there.

God himself took an oath promising me that this land would belong to my descendants.

Abraham will not compromise the will of God in order to accomplish the plan of God.

The end does not justify the means.

Abraham had once before messed everything up by trying to accomplish God's plan with Abraham's methods.

He had learned his lesson.

He must trust God not only with the outcome but he must also trust God with how it comes to pass.

This is how he expressed his faith in God's involvement:

Genesis 24:7 "The Lord, the God of heaven...will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there."

This is a marvelous thing that has happened to Abraham.

God had promised that his son would be the beginning of a great nation of people.

Therefore his son must have a wife and children.

Therefore God will certainly see to it that it happens.

So he said to his servant, go, knowing that God will go before you to accomplish his purpose.

The Apostle Paul wrote, Philippians 1:6 I am confident of this, "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

God's purposes for each one of us are quite clear.

He desires us to be like Jesus in our attitudes and conduct.

And he desires us to be useful in the building of his kingdom.

The promise is that he will do that and as Jesus said, “I will never leave you or abandon you, I am with you always...”

God is present and at work in our lives, in every detail of life.

The servant agreed to Abraham’s terms and took the oath.

So his challenge is to find a wife for Isaac, not from among the local girls, only from Abraham’s family back in Haran and he couldn’t take Isaac back there to live.

So the servant saddled up 10 camels, loaded them with goodies and went the 450 miles to the place from where Abraham had come.

The next scene in the story is a couple of weeks and 450 miles away.

Now if I was that servant, during all those days of traveling, I might have been tempted to wonder how on earth I was going to find the right girl.

What am I supposed to do?

Pull into town with 10 camels, find a place to stay, hang out on the street, girl-watching, for a few days until what?

How am I supposed to know which girl is the right one?

Abraham’s servant is smarter than that.

He is acting on Abraham’s behalf and apparently his faith was of the same kind as Abraham’s.

Apparently instead of whining, the servant, like his master, Abraham, devised a plan of faith in action.

Trusting in God’s faithfulness, the servant makes a plan.

The kind of woman suitable to the task of mothering a nation in the line of Abraham needed to be a certain kind of woman.

He would start by going to the well, where healthy, strong, young women would come.

Secondly he prayerfully devised a test that he would give to the young women he met.

His dependence is on God not on his ingenuity.
 But he is nonetheless thoughtful in his plan.

Genesis 24:12-14 “Then he prayed, ‘O Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’ – let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac.”

The servant’s “test” asked that **not only** common civility and courtesy mark this woman **but that** uncommon servant-hood mark her.

He would ask her for a drink.

He would have to make the first move.

Whether she responded at all would be a good sign.

If she went further and volunteered to do something more (give water to the others traveling with him) that would be even better.

But he would add to the test a further remarkable extra – he would expect that she would volunteer to water his 10 camels as well (no small task).

- What if no unmarried women come to the well that day?
- What if every woman from whom he asks a drink, turns shyly or abruptly away?
- What if no woman offers to do anything beside give him some water?
- What if two hear his request and offer not only him but his camels a drink?
- How is this supposed to determine God’s will for a wife for Isaac

The servant doesn’t believe this alone will determine the issue.

He believes God is actively involved in this detail of life and he is simply trusting God to work in the process.

Even if a young woman offers to water his camels (without being asked), the servant still needs to find out more about her.

But first things first. Will any woman meet the first test?

Genesis 24:14 “Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder...The girl was very beautiful...She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again.”

Isn't that a great phrase, “Before he had finished praying”?

The author wants us to know that God is so immediately involved that he is acting even as we pray, even before we pray.

In our lives we are too often tempted to call it simple coincidence.

But God works in our lives by design.

I know that I told this story three years ago but it bears repeating here.

It was 1948, three years after the end of World War II and Marcel, nearly 50 years of age, took his usual 9:09 morning train from his suburban home and headed into New York City.

On this particular morning however he decided to change trains and visit a friend in Brooklyn.

After the visit he took a Manhattan bound subway to go to his office.

The subway car was crowded but a seat opened up and Marcel sat down next to a man reading a Hungarian language newspaper.

Having come from Hungary, Marcel struck up a conversation with the man only to learn that the man, whose name was Bela, had come from the city of Debrecen, a city Marcel knew well.

During the war, Bela had been sent to a German labor camp in Ukraine, had been captured by the Russians, but after the war escaped and made his way back to Debrecen.

When he found his way to the apartment building in which his parents and brothers and sisters lived he found it inhabited by others who knew nothing of his family.

He went from there to the next street where he had lived with his wife and found likewise, the apartment was occupied by strangers who knew nothing of his wife.

As he was leaving a young boy, who had lived in the neighborhood before, spotted him and recognizing him, told him that his whole family had been killed and his wife taken to Auschwitz, one of the worst of the Nazi concentration camps.

After weeks of fruitless searching, Bela finally gave up hope and set out on foot to leave Europe.

He manage to immigrate to the U.S. just three months before Marcel met him.

As Bela was telling his story, Marcel couldn't help but think of a young woman he had met a year earlier who was also from Debrecen.

She told of having been sent to Auschwitz then to a munitions factory and finally being liberated by the Americans and, since her family was all dead, she was brought to the U.S.

Marcel had been so moved by her story that he had written her name and phone number on a piece of paper, which he had in his coat.

Marcel turned to Bela and said "Is there any chance your wife's name was Marya?"

Turning pale, Bela said, "Yes, it was, how did you know?"

Marcel said, "Let's get off the train."

He took a stunned Bela by the arm and led him to a phone booth where Marcel called the number.

The phone was not in Marya's apartment but in the hallway outside and so Marya never answered it because it was never for her.

But this time no one else answered and it kept ringing so finally she responded.

Marcel asked her to describe her husband and give her address in Debrecen.

At that he told her to hold the line for just a minute while he asked Bela did you live on such and such a street.

At that Marcel said to Bela, "Something miraculous is about to happen. Here take this phone and talk to your wife."

Bela's eyes filled with tears and he took the phone and hearing his wife's voice he began to mumble hysterically.

Marcel took the phone and told Marya to stay where she was, he was sending her husband to her.

That day a reunion took place that was like few others.

The person retelling the story asked "Was this reunion by mere chance?

Did chance introduce Marcel to Marya a year earlier?

Did chance cause Marcel to take a different train that day?

Did chance cause Bela to be reading a Hungarian paper at that time?

Was it chance or did God ride that Brooklyn subway that day?

(From Focus on the Family magazine
December 96)

Moses makes certain we understand it was not coincidence that brought Rebekah to the well at that very time. It was God.

And so we expect what we hear next.

Genesis 24:17 "The servant hurried to meet her and said, 'Please give me a little water from your jar.' 'Drink, my lord,' she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, 'I'll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking.'"

I knew it, I knew that was the girl!

But the servant is wiser than that.

Genesis 24:21 "Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful", whether or not this was the girl.

Two of the conditions Abraham laid down were these:

Genesis 24:4 "...go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac."

She must not only be from that other country but she must also be from Abraham's family.

Genesis 24:23 "Then he asked, 'Whose daughter are you?'"

Now the next words out of the girl's mouth are what Moses' readers were waiting to hear.

When those first readers of this story heard these words, they were able to say what we wanted to say earlier: "I knew it, I knew that was the right girl!"

It may be a little more obscure for us because we don't know the history as well.

Rebekah said, Genesis 24:24 "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son that Milcah bore to Nahor."

My father is Bethuel.

Bethuel, my father, is the son of Milcah and her husband Nahor.

What the servant heard was that this young woman was the granddaughter of Nahor.

Do you remember who Nahor was?

He was the brother of Abraham.

Terah (3 sons)

Abraham&Sarah

Haran & ?

Nahor&Milcah

Isaac&Rebekah

Lot, Milcah, Iscah

Bethuel & ?

Jacob, Esau

Rebekah, Laban

She's from the right country and she's from the right family.

When the servant heard this he stopped right in the middle of it all to praise God.

Genesis 24:26-27 “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. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master’s relatives.’”

Just as Abraham had told him, so it has happened.
God is in it.

But the matter is not settled.

He knows this is the right girl but she hasn’t consented to move and marry someone she has never met.

And furthermore her family has not consented.

The third scene in the story moves to Rebekah’s house.

And there the servant must convince everyone that Isaac is the right man for Rebekah.

And again, even though the servant knows full well that God is in this, he doesn’t go to the house expecting that everyone will just fall over with excitement about his plan for Rebekah’s life.

Still trusting God, he will have to make his case.

And he does so by emphasizing four facts:

1. His master Abraham’s wealth. Genesis 24:34 “I am Abraham’s servant. The Lord has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy.”
2. Isaac’s age. The man that he is proposing that Rebekah marry is not some old dude but is the son that Abraham and Sarah had when they were very old. Genesis 24:36 “My master’s wife Sarah has borne him a son in her old age.”
Thus Isaac could be as little as only 10 years older than Rebekah.
3. Isaac will inherit all the wealth that now belongs to Abraham. Genesis 24:36b “...and he has given him everything he owns.”
4. God’s obvious guidance in the process.

The servant re-tells with almost every detail exactly what happened:

- He told how Abraham said an angel of the Lord would go with the servant.
- He told about his prayer to God asking for God's help.
- He told about the unusual test with its high, even unlikely standard.
- He told how even before he finished praying Rebekah came along.
- He told how she did exactly what he had prayed, how she was from exactly the right family.
- He told how he had prayed thanking God.

Then the servant **popped the question:** Genesis 24:49 "Now if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so I may know which way to turn."

Yes or No? Can she come with me to marry Isaac?

To that Laban and Rebekah's father, Bethuel respond,
Genesis 24:50 "This is from the Lord; ...Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has directed."

Again the servant worshiped God.

Genesis 24:52 "When Abraham's servant heard what they said, he bowed down to the ground before the Lord."

The next morning, the servant wanted to get on his way but another potential monkey wrench was thrown into the works.

Rebekah's brother and mother suggest that maybe they ought to wait awhile before she leaves.

The servant knows this threatens the results and so insists that they leave immediately.

Rebekah herself solves this problem by saying that she is ready immediately.

And with her family's blessing she leaves with Abraham's servant.

That brings us to the final scene of the story.

It is now 450 miles later on camel back – which probably means at least two weeks later.

Isaac was out away from the tents when the camel caravan approached.

Rebekah saw Isaac and asked who it was.

Learning it was Isaac, she covered her face with a veil – customary for an engaged woman.

The servant told Isaac everything that had happened.

We aren't told how long the next events took but we are told that Isaac and Rebekah were married.

In fact the story ends so abruptly that we come to realize that while the marriage is important, **it is not the reason for all the detail** of this story.

Last week when we looked at the account of the death of Isaac's mother, Sarah, we discovered that the story wasn't really about Sarah it was about the Promised Land.

This week, though the story is very importantly about Isaac finding the right wife and becoming the next in line for the future great nation of Israel, **the issue that is impressed on the readers most of all is God's faithfulness and God's involvement in life.**

Many years later the writer of Proverbs said,
Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

Do you believe that?

Do you believe that God is at work in your life – even your every-day life?

Do you seek his counsel, expect and watch for his working, and thank him for his faithfulness?

What's going on in your life now?

Do you live with an awareness of the presence and direction of God?