

Fetchin' a Bride: A Study In Romantic Providence

Genesis 24.1-15

6.26.22

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.

I thought I might break from our present series on how to BE the Church... We're ordaining new officers today (and they're asking themselves – "how did I get here... and WHAT have I done?!"). AND it's Dwight Taylor's birthday and for the last several years our birthdays have fallen on the same day.

I was born on 6.26.62; that means today is actually my 60th birthday... And I thought I'd invite my friends and brothers and sisters to reflect with me on the passing of time. We first came here when I was 27 years old, what seems to be about 12 years ago and all of a sudden – I'm 60! AND I TOO am asking "how did I get here and what have I done?!"

This sermon combines two themes that don't fit or belong together. It's a little like when you find a business *that tries to combine* two different specialties like "Wilson's Funeral Home and Sports Fishing"

or “Bright Way House of Pancakes and Plumbing Supplies” – there’s a jarring incongruity here... at least at first glance.

The obvious focus in our passage is romantic love, a young couple about to meet and start a family.

But there’s another theme and THAT second emphasis is a philosophical issue that triggers a host of implications and ancillary questions about destiny and free-will, decision-making, prayer and possibilities.

This second focus – which seems sooo very different from a love-story (one is the domain of emotion and the other is a matter of philosophy and logic – one is of the heart and the other of the head). AND the second has to do with a word Christians have always used sometimes almost as a synonym for God. Those who are not-yet believers call it “the universe” or “fate”. Christians prefer the word “providence”, God’s preserving/governing ALL circumstances. In other words – it’s a story of emotion and philosophy, a love story and evidence that all things are predetermined.

Let’s look at: 1) The Servant’s Quest

2) Providence, Prayer and Promise

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... fate is thwarting their efforts to be together. 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 movie.

Interesting dilemma: DO we chose 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 predetermined...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 IS this teaching of providence and *how does it play out* in this long chapter (summarizing)?

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 without fanfare. The *matriarch, Sarah*, has already died (she’s buried in that cave, by the field, the down-payment of the promised land...last chapter).

Sarah’s tent is now empty – there’s no mother in Israel and that’s a problem...because the Cure for evil and 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 place is vacant. And Abraham must find a wife for the promised son, Isaac... IF there’s even going to BE a next generation.

But where will Abraham find a bride for Isaac? And not any old bride ...but THĒ Bride. Verse 14 calls her “thē 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 section. (67vv!)

Abraham is painfully aware of the *absence* of his beloved Sarah... He's very old (way past 60! He's thinking legacy) and he needs a daughter-in-law who'll be a fitting matriarch for a new generation.

And 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's 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 (Abraham puts his "life" in the servant's hands) ...and says, "go to our old home in Haran ...Mesopotamia... a month-long journey...God has promised and He will give you success... And if she won't sojourn by faith...you're released from the oath."

So, off he goes with a huge caravan of ten camels...full of treasure 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 thĒ appointed woman by her willingness not only to 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) "thĒ appointed bride", the chosen, the pre-determined bride.

Then...immediately...there she is, Rebekah.

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...She would need help from friends.

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 practical and helpful for a matriarch. Big hospitality.

As he watches her, he marvels, "Could THIS be the one?" and she finishes the whole task. Then he honors her with jewelry – honor for a queen – 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) Abraham's Advocate/Agent gets the confirmation he needs from every angle.

Then Rebekah's brother enters the scene... 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 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; God 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 (way back when) 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, "Oh 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 that 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 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"* (66ff). 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 cannot be resisted ...it WILL/MUST COME TO PASS...then why pray? Why swear oaths? Why 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).28)

That means the tough stuff, like Sarah's dying AND the very tender stuff like the arrival of the bride Isaac 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 will keep His promise...His oath...His grace...THEN, WE WILL NOT BE PARALYZED BY THE IDEA OF PROVIDENCE – WE'LL BE FORTIFIED 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 a QUEST. 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 (Gal 4.4ff) – 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, the God of providence as mysterious but ALSO AS GOOD and that His whole Story is about a mission to fetch a Bride for His Son. (Look at John CH 4!)

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 (John CH 4!). And Jesus Christ's 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, on MY 60th birthday, WHEN I see that...and when I see that the great goal 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 (like in the movies). Hesus, 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.

I know I married the wife God ordained for me... have the children God ordained... suffered a fall from a roof that God ordained... accepted a call from a Church once known as St Andrews... now, by God's providence... known as Park Road Presbyterian. I know that providence determined that I would preach today on my 60th birthday... AND I prayed that God would bless it... because even my prayers were, by God's providence, ordained.

It's an approach to life that liberates us from the paralyzing effects of regret and of the great misnomer that it ALL depends on ME.

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." (Eph 2.10).

It makes every day a QUEST, in the faithful covenant loyalty of the God who mysteriously invites us to participate in what He has already determined to accomplish.