

The Servant

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[0 : 0 0] Today we are going to look at what did not appear to be a romance, but what did turn into be a romance of much greater dimensions, having consequences that the participants just could not have gazed in their wildest imaginations.

But first of all, we want to dispose of two distractions. If we stand and look back at the Bible, the Bible has absolutely amazing stories, the best of literature.

We can think of the story of the book of Ruth. We can think of that description, Ecclesiastes, which starts, remember your creator in the days of your youth, and that is that incredible description of old age that follows.

Then we can jump on to the New Testament and find Paul's discourse on love in Corinthians. These are outstanding pieces of literature that stand on their own, even in secular terms.

But we must not let these things distract us. And perhaps the biggest distraction of this story, or this account, is its sheer beauty and the sheer wonder and all the sequences of events that take place in it.

[1 : 2 2] But if we look upon this as just a story, we've missed the point entirely. It would be a huge mistake to look at this as a story, just as a story, because it is God working out and God's plans working out in the lives of individuals, showing incredible links.

So don't let's leave this as a story. It's much, much more than that. Then before we look at it, there's another distraction. There's this distraction of fine literature.

But perhaps the biggest distraction, we would let the idea of arranged marriages cloud our picture of this account.

We are used to love marriages. It's not all that work out. But sufficient to say that arranged marriages were the norm for the time.

And in an age not enlightened with the gospel of Christ and Christian ethics, it was perhaps the best thing to do to make sure that there was a stability, a foundational stability, not based on shallow, hasty attractions and passions, but something that was much, much deeper.

[2 : 5 1] So don't let this story of an arranged marriage distract us, because we believe that in a pre-Christian era, that's what might have worked.

But in Christ, relationships are transformed, so there's no need or little need for arrangers. So these are the two distractions, arranged marriages and a wonderful story.

Let's then look at the setting of all of this, because the setting is very important. Abraham was a man of destiny, called by God to leave Ur of the Chaldees.

In other words, Babylon, the cradle of civilization, one of the most fertile places on earth, one of the most highly developed cultures.

He was called by God to become a nomad, seeking a land which God had promised to him. And he traveled much, having left a prosperous life.

[3 : 57] In obedience to God, he went out, without question, and it worked. He came to the land of Canaan. There are two places mentioned in Canaan, Shechem and Bethel.

Among his journeys, these were absolutely special places, because we are told that in these places, Abraham called on the name of the Lord, and God spoke to him.

And he promised that God, God promised that he would have this land of the Canaanites, which seemed absolutely crazy. This land was inhabited by these horrible people.

We'll come to this in a moment or two. And yet, you're going to have that land, and that land is going to be a blessing to the whole world. So, when he met with God at Shechem and Bethel, he built there an altar.

And these were life-defining experiences. These journeys of Abraham were marked by points of commitment. But he paid a special, a second visit to Bethel, again calling on the name of the Lord.

[5 : 15] Many years later, his grandson Jacob went to Bethel. And you have there the much more better-known story of Jacob having a vision of the angel to have a ladder up to heaven, and the angel of God ascending and descending on that ladder.

And there Jacob vowed to follow God and purge the idols away from his people. And again, each occasion, Abraham and Jacob built altars to the God.

It was at Bethel. It was a special place of revelation. And so, in Christian tradition, the name Bethel has assumed a special, very special connotation.

It lives on in Christian experience. And it's become the place of naming of houses and especially naming of places of worship because it is a symbol of God coming down to man, man coming to God, a symbol of commitment.

And we can well ask ourselves, what points of commitment do I have? Have I had a Bethel in my life where I came face to face with God, face to face with his requirements, where I have bowed down and worshipped and, spiritually speaking, built an altar to him?

[6 : 47] Because the connection between commitment and following Christ cannot be ignored. So, there was Bethel. Then, Abraham was not a saint.

It was a great mistake to regard Abraham as a saint. He had serious failings. There were two whoppers of mistakes that he made.

On his travels, he thought his wife was very beautiful. And he thought that because of that, he might face hostility or, even worse, murder.

So, he traded off his wife on two occasions as his sister, at enormous risk, totally misleading the people that he dwelt among and, in fact, his hosts.

He passed off his wife, Sarah, as his sister. And Pharaoh in Egypt and Abimelech, the king of Gerar, both were very, very kind to Abraham.

[7 : 56] They let them off with this deception and they were not punished. And Abraham was also not too good in other senses.

When his wife, Sarah, took a dislike to Hagar, who had borne a son to Abraham, when she took a dislike to Sarah, to Hagar, what did he do?

He was very upset, but he did nothing to stop her being ejected from the household. So, he was a flawed character. But the amazing thing is this, that God uses this sort of person, and God has done that down through the ages.

Now, we're getting nearer to the point. As time went on, obviously, Abraham was aging. His wife was aging. And there's no son being born to him through marriage to his wife, Sarah.

And then God intervened. And past the age of fertility, they were granted a son, a son, Isaac. Now, you imagine a son, the birth of a child, as many of us have experienced, is one of life's most precious experiences.

[9 : 18] But imagine, past the age of childbearing, that this child was born to Sarah and Abraham.

And Isaac, therefore, must have been very precious. God had done the impossible. And then, naturally, as Isaac grew up, Abraham was very, very concerned.

And, is my boy going to get a nice wife? How many mothers and fathers have asked that, I wonder? Is he going to get a nice wife? But it was more than just a nice wife.

It was to have someone who would promote the link, keep up the link of God's promises. So, it was much, much more important than that.

He could not have a wife from amongst the Canaanites, because although Abraham had managed to keep himself pure, so relatively speaking, amongst the Canaanites, he had not adapted their way of practices.

[10 : 23] The Canaanites were said to be promiscuous, horrible people, depraved, with terrible customs, not just of idolatry, but of cruelty to children, and obviously the accompanying of sexually transmitted diseases.

So, it was absolutely critical for Abraham not to get a wife for his son from that group of people. It would have broken the line.

And the Canaanites were in self-destruct mode, and he could not have a wife from there. So, Abraham gave his servant a special commission.

And we see it very clearly in the passage that we've read. Go and find a wife from my own people, Abraham's own people, whose way of life was very different from that of the Canaanites.

So, here the servant comes in and given a special role in fulfilling God's purposes. Now, one of the most intriguing things about the story we've read is that in any story, there's a main character.

[11 : 43] And the main character in this story is not who you'd expect it to be. The main character is not Abraham or Isaac or Sarah.

The main character was the servant, given a critical role in fulfilling God's purposes. So, the minor character in the story becomes the principal character.

Yes, that's true, but it brings a timeless reality to what it means to be a true servant of God, caught up in his purposes.

So, this hits home to us. Whatever our position, we may think that we were very minor players, but we matter. Every individual here matters in fulfilling God's purposes.

And so, we look at the servant, and it hits home to us. Now, could we have this little bit more about the servant, please? That screen's not working, so.

[12 : 51] I'll tell the next two. We've got the servant's commission, and the next one, his care, and finally, his joy. The servant's commission, the servant's care, and the servant's joy.

And these can very easily be picked out of the story. And as we look at this, one sort of blends into the other, the commission, the care, and the joy.

Abraham's sense of purpose. Look, first of all, the commission. Abraham's sense of purpose must really have been communicated, shared by his servant.

He was the oldest servant he had. He was the most senior. He occupied the most important place in Abraham's household. He had charge, as the Bible tells us, of all that he had.

And you can't go much further than that in terms of management. So, he was given clear instructions to go back to Abraham's old country and was put under oath not to get a wife from the Canaanites.

[13 : 58] The terms of the oath were absolutely onerous. Swear by the God of heaven. Now, you can't get a stronger oath than that. Swear by the God of heaven that Isaac should not be betrothed to a Canaanite.

Somehow or other, Isaac had managed to keep himself from being absorbed into the Canaanite way of life. But the servant must have had a sense of destiny about how Abraham went about instructing him.

The servant was thinking things through. Will Isaac come with me? I seemed very sensible. Well, why doesn't he go back to the old country and try and find a girl there?

But Abraham sensed a danger. And here we suggest that what if he would go back to the old country? What if Isaac went back to the old country?

Hello, it's great here. I'm back with my pals. I'm back with my own folk. I'm going to absolutely settle here and life will be great. That would not work.

[15 : 05] Abraham was absolutely emphatic, quoting God's promise as he stressed, the land on which he stood, that was the land of the Canaanites, was promised.

And there was no other place for his son of promise. Son of promise was to be in the promised land.

And no matter how unlikely that seemed, that was the land of the Canaanites. And the servant, really thinking things through, said, now, what if I'm successful?

Unsuccessful? Well, Abraham quite wisely said, you're going to be released from your promise. So, the servant went back to Abraham's home country with ten camels laden with good things.

It was meticulous planning. See these things in the early part of the Bible? A parallel would be when the spies were sent into the promised land. It's an incredible set of instructions that I think that even modern management could not match.

[16 : 17] And this was meticulously planned. And it comes clear he took lots of things. And after his long journey with his retinue, the camels, and the servants, the servant came at even to the well, a place called Nehar in Abraham's home country.

And so we've got this very evocative sundown scene. You can imagine the heat of the day and it's now getting a little bit cooler.

The sun's gone down and there's the palm trees and the wells and the shelter and everything seemed so lovely. It was an evocative scene and the weary travellers would have their feet washed.

The camels would have their loads taken off their backs and they and the human beings would be watered. It was an absolutely beautiful scene.

And so we come on from the servant's commission. He's about to fulfill, he's well into fulfilling it. Now we come into the other theme is the servant's care.

[17 : 34] Well, picture the scene. You might ask, what's the first thing the servant did? Well, there's a count amazingly said.

He prayed to God for success in this task. And isn't that wonderful? Before, if you get home after a weary journey, you want to get your feet up.

Prayer is not the first thing perhaps that we do, we have to admit. But he prayed to God for success in this task. And then he made this absolutely, you might say it was a wild prayer, it was an absolutely amazing prayer.

Let the first girl I speak to for water for myself and the camels be the one for Isaac. Was that not an impossibly bold, almost crazy task?

And then the story wonderfully goes on to say before he had finished praying, what happened? He saw Rebecca.

[18 : 39] Rebecca was the first one he spoke to. Not only did she offer him water, she got it for the camels too. And what a girl she must, she must be very fit for watering a servant and his retinue and the camels, but then it came to hospitality, including hospitality for the camels.

It's intriguing to guess, did Rebecca really know who she was dealing with? I guess not, but from that little bit she comes out as an extremely kind girl and, but there must have been something more even if she had no idea of the purpose of the servant's visit.

But that's one of the little things that make this story all the more intriguing. What did Rebecca feel at the time? She was helpful in the extreme anyhow. An Abraham's servant, the Bible tells us, watched her closely.

He must have been stunned. Then the first thing he did was inquire about her parentage. There's a wonderful expression in the Highlands, he was of good stock, which is more akin to cattle breeding than looking after people, looking after people, but he was interested in what stock that Rebecca came for.

He was rewarded with the knowledge that he was amongst Abraham's king's people. That was the first thing. And then we read in the Bible, and it takes a wee bit of working out this, Rebecca was the daughter of Bethuel, son of Milcah, who was the wife of Abraham's brother, Nahor.

[20 : 25] That remained sort of worked as a very distant cousin. She was a granddaughter, in other words, of his master Abraham's brother. And that relationship was sufficiently far apart to avoid inbreeding with all its unfortunate consequences.

There's another intriguing thing. he gave her gifts of a nose ring and two bracelets. You know, I don't know how you feel about facial adornment in terms of rings, etc.

But if anyone thinks they're trendy in wearing such things, where's the first version mentioned of nose rings?

It's in the book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. So this is very intriguing in itself. Don't think you're in a cutting-edge position if you want to wear facial jewellery.

But we missed the picture there. We smiled, but we missed the picture. Not an age of, a thing that comes over in the story, it's a age of innocence.

[21 : 37] That we're not suspecting it. She wasn't suspecting his motives. There was nothing underhand about that. Innocence of this action was lovely. The other lovely thing about this was that Rebecca watered the camels and then offered fodder for the camels and offered hospitality to the servant and his people.

We come out of this, a lovely family relationship. Here was this girl in the household. She was perfectly happy to say on behalf of her folk to that stranger, you're very welcome here.

It's not lovely, they had an open home, a home of hospitality, which is one of God's greatest blessings. Then Rebecca's brother Naor came to the well and invited the servant to his home.

And again, in an age of mistrust and broken motives and twisted thinking, the sheer innocence acceptance of this is wonderful.

The nature of broken relationships, the sheer openness and kindness, and the acceptance of a servant at faith value was absolutely wonderful. The other thing that was happening at the very same time, of course, was that the hand of God was in this.

[23 : 03] It wasn't just a servant. It wasn't just taking in a servant. I'm sure Naor and Rebecca sensed there was a very, very much bigger thing happening.

And that thing was so big that they couldn't imagine it. So what did the servant do next? He bowed down again, this time in a prayer of thanksgiving, because the impossible was taking place before his eyes.

servant was offered food, but before he accepted food, he explained the purpose of his visit. And we read that in the latter part of this chapter.

We haven't had time to read it. I would advise you to look at it later. He explained the purpose of his visit in very, very great detail, fascinating detail.

And he did that, made that a condition of accepting food. I've got such important news that I can't start eating feasting until I've told you my purpose.

[24 : 10] There was a sense of urgency in this, that he had to tell them the purpose of his visit before he could relax over a meal.

And so, of course, we blend into our third point, the servant's joy, where the servant's commission, the servant's care, and then the third point, the servant's joy.

what an immense sense of privilege that servant must have had when he explained the purpose of his visit. I don't know if you've ever been witness to something that's much bigger than you are.

The nearest I ever got to this was, after many years of marriage, a lady whom I very rarely see, she's the other side of the world, said to me, you're the person that introduced me to my husband.

And it had huge consequences, but it wasn't a spectacular act, nothing like the servant's act, but sometimes you can see something very much bigger happening.

[25 : 13] And how do you know it's much bigger? Because you know that God is at work and his purposes are being worked out. So the servant told the whole story of what this visit was about.

Now the account that the servant gave was very detailed. he told about Abraham's instructions and how he met with Rebecca at the spring. And it was all part of God's plan.

He had been sent by the angel of the Lord, guided and kept. Then the family responded. The family's response was beyond his wildest dreams.

You can have her, you can have Rebecca, no strings attached. take her. What did the servant do next? Before he responded, he said, he bowed down and prayed.

You can think of the prayer life of this servant. Each key step he took, it was prefixed by prayer. He was fully committed there.

[26 : 20] He bowed in and prayed. The family wanted her to stay for ten days. I think this may have been just to say farewells, but they left the decision to Rebecca.

You know, you get stereotypes about the role of women in ancient times, but they respected that girl, they respected that she had a mind of her own, and she agreed to go right away, blessed by the family.

And all of this was complete harmony. We don't get one hint of any dissension. And then we come to the very last point, part of the story.

We don't know how long the servant was away for. It could just be sheer guesswork, so we're not going to guess. But then Abraham Sam Isaac was in the fields.

The scripture beautifully says he was meditating. I don't know what he was meditating about, but all of us could guess. when he saw the camel train returning with his servant and with the young lady on her camel.

- [27 : 35] What were his thoughts? Can you imagine? My father had sent me out to find a wife for me. What will she be like? Will she be good looking? Will she be fat or thin?
- What's she going to be like? Will she have a nice personality? Will I fall for her? And his life, it must have been a great turmoil of thoughts in his mind.
- But Rebecca got down off the camel, veiled herself, and the interesting thing is this, Isaac took her to his mother's tent, a safe place to get to know the girl.
- Isn't that contemporary of what should be contemporary, that it wasn't instant coming together, she was taken to a safe place to get to know her.
- They got married, and then there's a four-word phrase just at the very end of that chapter, and he loved her.
- [28 : 45] so that they arranged marriage with all its fears and pitfalls ended up in love. Isn't that wonderful?
- What a profound sense of fulfillment and joy that servant must have had. Certain things stand out as we trace the story.
- there was the care that the servant took on his tasks, was his loyalty to his master, was his clarity of vision, but above all else, the way he committed each step to God.
- And of course, I ask the scary question, how do I compare? Is my life daily committed to God? do I commit each step to God?
- Each step I take? And so we cannot ignore an ending Jesus' parable of the talents. Jesus would have known this story being immersed in Old Testament teaching, and did he have it in mind when he told the parable of the talents?
- [29 : 59] Talents, the servants given very talents, and the man who put everything out, all the talents out, and he returned to the servant, and the wonderful words were said, well done, good and faithful servant, enter the joy of your Lord.
- That's from the New Testament. The servant of Abraham perhaps could have said the same, but the wonderful thing about this is that the servant's joy was the Lord's joy.
- And as we seek to serve Christ and reflect his glory, our joy in doing that is also the joy of the Lord, the God of heaven shares in our joy.
- The servant's joy was the Lord's joy. The Christ, in that parable, put the seal of truth on the story in Genesis.
- And however great was the satisfaction of serving Abraham, serving Christ is infinitely better and more rewarding.
- [31 : 19] Service of Christ is infinitely better and more rewarding. And not to serve Christ is incomparable loss.
- We're almost finished. we end with what is missing from the story. I wonder if you guessed what is missing from the story. It's a very big thing missing from this story.
- The servant's name. It's not amazing. If his name was known, he would have gone down in history as a link in God's great plan for the world, from this great historical train, really right down to the coming of our Lord.
- He would have gone down in history, but he cannot be traced and cannot be praised for his extraordinary achievements. Perhaps that's the way he wanted it.
- I don't know. But the big question for me and for all of us is this. Am I willing to be such a person in Christ's service? Am I willing to be a nobody and give all the glory to him?
- [32 : 35] That's a challenge that we leave with us today. The servants commission, the servants care, the servants joy. Pray that God might give us all something to share in that.

Finished with the words of Mary Maxwell. How I praise thee, precious Saviour, that thy love laid hold on me. Thou hast saved and cleansed and filled me, that I might a channel be, channels only, blessed Master, but with all thy wondrous power flowing through us, thou canst use us every day and every hour.

Just a channel full of blessing to the thirsty souls around, to tell out thy full salvation, all thy loving message sound.

Amen.