

# Three Shining Examples

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well friends, we've come to the end of our series in Genesis, for this year at least. This is our third year at it. And over the last two, we've focused on Abraham's life and his life of faith.

And so before we launch into tonight's passage, Genesis 24, I thought it might help if we just reflect on how Old Testament narratives work. No doubt we've enjoyed the fascinating stories, but what's their purpose in the Bible?

How are they relevant for us? Well, if you've been following the series closely, then you may know the answer to those questions. First, one of the things these stories do is show us how God is faithful to his promises.

We see how God works in history to bring his plan of salvation to pass. So in tonight's passage, finding a wife for Isaac is part of God's plan for Abraham to make a great nation of him.

And it is from this nation, Israel, that God fulfills his plan to save the world. By sending his son, Jesus. At the same time, these stories show us God's pattern of working.

[ 1 : 04 ] We're given shadows of what God will ultimately do in Christ. So for example, with Genesis chapter 22 from last week, the ram is a shadow of Jesus.

As a substitute for the sin offering, it foreshadows what Jesus will be. But Jesus is the real thing. Just like if you look down at the back of the church, it's dark at the moment, but near the organ, there's a model of this church.

But the real thing is the church that's standing, the one that we're in. The model is simply a shadow of the real church. Now the technical term for this is type.

So the ram is a type of Christ. And in the Old Testament, there's actually many, many types of Christ. Shadows or models for which Christ is the ultimate reality.

There is, however, a third way in which these Old Testament stories function. And that is the characters of these stories often form part of the great cloud of witnesses which Hebrews 12 talks about.

[ 2 : 08 ] They're the heroes of the faith whose lives give us examples to follow. So in our reading just then, in Hebrews 12 and verse 1, it says this, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

The lives of these heroes show us how to live by faith, how we are to throw off everything that hinders and to overcome the sin of unbelief which so easily entangles.

We are taught how to run the race that is marked out for us. And so in our passage tonight, we have three such witnesses, three shining examples, as it were, from this great cloud.

So with that, let's turn to Genesis chapter 24. And now I'm going to invite Karen to come up and she's going to read the first portion of this story, verses 1 to 9. Thanks, Karen.

So verse 1 to 9 on page 21. Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, Put your hand under my thigh.

[ 3 : 30 ] I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.

The servant asked him, What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from? Make sure that you do not take my son back there, Abraham said.

The Lord, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land, and who spoke to me and promised me an oath, saying, To your offspring I will give this land.

He will send his angel before you, so that you can get a wife for my son from there. If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine. Only do not take my son back there.

So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham, and swore an oath to him concerning this matter. Now, Abraham, we learn, is old and well advanced in years.

[ 4 : 40 ] He's also been widowed. Sarah dies and is buried in chapter 23, a chapter that we've skipped over. Now, the Bible tells us that Abraham has had an amazing life.

The Lord had blessed him in every way. But there was still one thing that Abraham needed to do, and that is to secure a wife for his son, since God was going to fulfill his promises through him.

And as we heard in the story, how Abraham goes about it shows us the maturity of his faith. You see, here God no longer instructs Abraham anymore.

I wonder whether you've noticed that. He doesn't need to. There's no voice from heaven, no dream, no personal visit by an angel. In fact, if you look through the whole chapter, God actually doesn't utter a single word.

And yet, as we read the story, there's no doubt that Abraham is doing exactly what God wants of him. Now, why is that? Well, I think it's because the penny has finally dropped for Abraham.

[ 5 : 42 ] He finally gets God's promises for him. And so convinced is he of God's faithfulness that it actually becomes the guiding force for how he lives and the choices he makes.

So he's absolutely clear that Isaac needs to find a wife, and he needs to do it from his home country and from his relatives. He knows the danger that if he marries a Canaanite, that first, there will be the risk that the future generations will turn to idols to worship the gods of the Canaanites.

But second, Abraham didn't want there to be any hint that Isaac and his descendants inherited the land by marriage, rather than solely through God's gift.

At the same time, he knew that Isaac is not to leave the land. See that instruction to the servant? It's very clear, isn't it? Make sure you do not take my son back there. So confident is he of God's promises that he even dares to invoke God's name in verse 7 and promise that an angel will be sent to help his servant.

And as we shall soon see, Abraham's faith in God is actually fully vindicated. Now, the question is, how does Abraham attain to such maturity in faith?

[ 6 : 58 ] Well, I think seeing God's promises fulfilled would have done that. For Abraham to see that God had provided him with a son would have had a profound impact on his faith.

But for me, I think the real turning point occurred last week in Genesis chapter 22, when Abraham's faith was actually put to the test and he passed. You see, faith is like a muscle, isn't it?

Every time you exercise it and you see God's faithfulness, it grows stronger and more mature. It helps you to see clearly what you should do, so that when the next time another similar test comes, it provides you with a springboard for exercising it.

And in fact, if the test was even bigger, it gives you a platform for knowing what to do. And so I think this is what happened with Abraham. His faith grew after he was willing to offer Isaac back to God. His knowledge of God grew and he understood God's plan for salvation more clearly. And so without prompting from God, he knew to buy a field and a cave to bury Sarah.

[ 8 : 12 ] That is in chapter 23. Because he knew God would give him the land one day, and so it was important for his family to remain in it, even at death.

Likewise, he knows what he must do to secure a wife for Isaac. Understanding God's big picture clarified for him what he needed to do, the choices he had to make, to align his life with God's promises.

That, I think, is the mark of a mature faith, knowing God's promise, and aligning your life and your choices with those promises. Well, that's Abraham.

But let's now turn to our second example. And Karen will come up again, and we'll read from verses 10 to 33. So please look there with me. Verses 10 to 33 on page 22.

Then the servant left, taking with him ten of his master's camels, loaded with all kinds of good things from his master. He set out for Aram Naharam, and made his way to the town of Nahor.

[ 9 : 20 ] He had the camels kneel down near the well outside the town. It was toward evening, the time the woman go out to drill water. Then he prayed, Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful 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 young woman, 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 my servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.

Before he had finished praying, Rebecca came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel, son of Milcah, who was the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor. The woman was very beautiful, a virgin.

No man had ever slept with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up again. The servant hurried to meet her and said, Please give me a little water from your jar. Drink, my lord.

[10:23] 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 had enough to drink.

So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels. Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the lord had made his journey successful.

When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose ring, weighing a becker, and two gold bracelets, weighing ten shekels. Then he asked, Whose daughter are you?

Please tell me, is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night? She answered him, I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, Bo-o-teneho. And she added, We have plenty of straw and fodder, as well as room for you to spend the night.

Then the man bowed down and worshipped 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.

[11:30] The young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things. Now Rebecca had a brother named Laban, and he hurried out to the man at the spring. As soon as he had seen the nose ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and had heard Rebecca tell what the man said to her, he went out to the man and found him standing by the camels near the spring.

Come, you who are blessed by the lord. He said, Why are you standing out here? I have prepared the house and a place for the camels. So the man went to the house, and the camels were unloaded.

Straw and fodder were brought for the camels, and water for him and his men, to wash their feet.

Then food was set before him. But he said, I will not eat until I have told you what I have to say.

Then tell us, Laban said. Now we aren't told who this servant is, but it's the chief servant.

And it actually could be Eliza of Damascus, right? I don't know whether you remember back in chapter 15. He's the one that Abraham has said would inherit his wealth if Abraham did not produce an heir.

[12:47] Anyway, regardless of who he is, this servant is the one who is now sent on a long journey to carry out the mission of finding Isaac's wife. He's got the big picture from Abraham.

Remember the last passage? But now, he must work out the details. So what can we learn from the faith of this man? Well, I want to just raise two points. First, I think we see how he approached his task with prayerfulness.

See there, right there at the start of his mission in verse 12, he asked the Lord to give him success, to show kindness to Abraham. Prayer, after all, is actually an exercise of faith.

Think about it. It's an exercise of faith. It shows where our true dependence lies. Two people can do exactly the same thing, but if one doesn't pray, it actually shows a lack of dependence on God.

Now, back in verse 7, the servant learned what the Lord's will is. But by praying, the servant confirms his own faith in God, his own dependence on God. Further, his prayer is quite specific.

[13:55] He actually asked the Lord to validate his actions, to confirm his choice of a wife for Isaac. But secondly, even though he prays, he doesn't just sit idly by, like just wait for God to show up, show up who this, you know, wait for the woman to show up and for God to tell him who that woman is.

Rather, even though he prays, he goes into action and by using his God-given wisdom, he works out a plan of action. And so as he draws near to the town of Nehor, he parks his camels at the well because that's where the woman came to draw water.

He thinks, if you want to find a woman hard at work and productive, then this was the place to be. And yet, the servant actually sets the bar even higher than that.

And he devises a test which he asked the Lord to validate. And his test is this, to ask, what he's going to do is he's going to ask the woman for a drink but in order for the woman to pass or for God to validate that this is the woman, she is going to have to serve all his camels as well.

Now, please realize that this is not a random lottery kind of test because what he's asking is actually related to the mission itself. The test is actually designed to reveal the woman's character, to test her willingness to welcome a stranger, to be generous and to be capable of hard work as well.

[15:26] Now, I don't know whether you've ever, anyone's ever seen camels drink but you've surely heard the phrase to drink like a camel, right? Well, the jar that Rebecca had in her hands, I think, would have merely given one camel a sip of water.

And so, for a woman to offer to water ten camels shows great generosity on her part. This was a big challenge for Rebecca to rise to.

But without prompting, she actually says in verse 19, I'll draw water for your camels too until they have finished drinking. Now, let's just consider how big a job this was.

Historians know that with ancient wells, they're not like the ones we have now with those pulley systems, right? Where you put the thing in and then you pull up the thing. Rather, the wells in those times, there were steps actually that led down to where the water was.

All right? And given the size of the jar compared to the size of the camel's thirst, they reckon, someone calculated, that Rebecca probably would have had to make 80 to 100 trips up and down that well.

[16:33] Now, this was an arduous task, taking more than an hour probably. Nevertheless, we read that actually Rebecca was eager. Do you read that she was doing everything quickly and she was running to and from the well?

So this was Rebecca not just being hardworking, not just rising to that task, but being eager to do it as well. And all this while in verse 21, it says, without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful.

How quickly God appeared to have answered his prayer would have surprised him. And yet, he couldn't presume that this was the one. Not until he knows that she's willing to come with him.

And so that was the next step for him. He offers her gifts, probably sort of akin to marriage dowry kind of thing. And then he asked to lodge at her father's house. Next comes another confirmation.

Because when she reveals her identity, the servant realizes that she's actually a relative of Abraham after all. This was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother. Now still, she doesn't know about the plan to take her back to Canaan.

[17:47] And so, as he sits down for dinner, in verse 33, he's actually very keen to explain all to his host before he started to eat. Now we're not going to read verses 34 to 49, but it's actually a repeat of the verses that we've just heard.

What the servant does is step by step reveal all that has just happened to the family. But as he does that, he makes it a point to show how God's hand has been in it all the while.

So how the Lord has blessed Abraham in the land, how Abraham has promised that God will guide him, how he himself prays for the Lord to grant him success, and then Rebecca turns up to pass the test exactly as how he prayed, and then only for him to discover that she was a relative after all.

And so at the end of his recounting, the servant puts it to Laban and Bethuel, do you concur as well that this is the Lord's doing? Well, let's hear what happens next.

So please turn to verse 50 with me, and Karen will now just read the rest of the chapter. So now we'll be up to page 23 from verse 50.

[19:01] Laban and Bethuel answered, This is from the Lord. We can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebecca, take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has directed.

When Abraham's servant heard what they said, he bowed down to the ground before the Lord.

Then the servant brought out gold and silver jewelry and articles of clothing and gave them to Rebecca. He also gave costly gifts to her brother and to her mother.

Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank and spent the night there. When they got up the next morning, he said, Send me on my way to my master. But her brother and her mother replied, Let the young woman remain with us ten days or so, then you may go.

But he said to them, Do not detain me, now that the Lord has granted me success to my journey. Send me on my way so I may go to my master. Then they said, Let us call the young woman and ask her about it.

So they called Rebecca and asked her, Will you go with this man? I will go, she said. So they sent their sister Rebecca on her way along with her nurse and Abraham's servant and his men.

[ 20 : 07 ] And they blessed Rebecca and said to her, Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands. May your offspring possess the cities of their enemies. Then Rebecca and her attendants got ready and mounted the camels and went back to the man, back with the man.

So the servant took Rebecca and left. Now Isaac had come from Beelahiroy for he was living in the Negev. He went out to the field one evening to meditate and as he looked up he saw camels approaching.

Rebecca also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel and asked the servant, Who was that man in the field coming to meet us? He is my master, the servant answered. So she took a veil and covered herself.

Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah and he married Rebecca. So she became his wife and he loved her and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Hooray! Laban and Bethwell agree. And so everything points to this being the Lord's doing. The servant bows low before the Lord and gives more gifts and exchange including clothing and then the party begins.

[ 21 : 27 ] Lots of eating until the late into the night presumably. But then the next morning Laban and Mom start to have second thoughts. They try to delay the servant and Rebecca.

Now remember this is the same Laban who many years later we will see probably in the next year or so will do something similar to Jacob's to Jacob Isaac's son.

He would make him work for years for a woman not of his choosing just to delay him. Anyway the delay here is only 10 days but was it a pretext for longer?

Well we don't know. Either way the servant would not be deterred. He was on his master's business not to mention his master's master's business. And so they decide to let Rebecca have the last say. Which is all just as well I think because it actually gives us a chance to see into Rebecca's heart to see her faith her own faith in action. I will go is the answer that she gives in verse 58.

[ 22 : 29 ] And with that she proved not just her character which was shown the day before but also her faith as well. Hers was a willing and obedient faith a simple trust in the Lord's promises.

The previous night she would have heard the servant's account and even though she didn't know him nor did she know the husband she would marry nor the land that she would go to she believed in the promises and therefore stepped out in faith to follow the servant.

I wonder whether it reminds you of someone else. Remember way back at the start of this grand story it's very similar to Abraham isn't it? He too believed in the Lord he left his country even though he did not know where he was going and we read tonight that the Lord blessed him in every way and now in verse 60 the blessing that her family pronounces on her will be a just reward for that faith for they say our sister may you increase to thousands upon thousands may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies and then the story ends with what I think is a fairy tale ending a happily ever after story if ever there was one something to make Hollywood directors proud I think so anyway the servant returns with Rebecca Isaac is in the field not working surprisingly but meditating and then he looks up from afar as does Rebecca their eyes meet from a distance cue the romantic music and then she puts a veil across her face quickly and then they meet close up the servant recounts everything that has occurred then Isaac marries Rebecca and for the first time since his mother's death finds great comfort in the love of a woman

Rebecca too is rewarded for her faith for we are told that Isaac loved her it's a wonderful story isn't it especially for you romantics out there so there we have it three heroes of faith each of them believing in God's plan of salvation each of them used by God in their own way to bring about the very plan in which they believed in surprising isn't it they weren't just being asked to believe in God's plan they actually became part of God's plan as well and I think each of them teach us an aspect of what faith is like so from Abraham we learn that maturity comes when we align our choices with God's plan from the servant we see the importance of continuing to depend on God in prayer even as God gives us wisdom to work out the details of how we are to obey him and then from Rebecca we learn what it means to step out in faith to have a willing obedience and a simple

trust even when there are unknowns ahead of us now what about us well of course God's plan for salvation is the same for us as it was for them we are very much part of that plan too even as they were you see

God's plan of salvation culminates in Jesus whether it's back in Genesis or today that hasn't changed his purpose is still to raise up people of faith people who will trust in his promises regarding Jesus who will put their trust in the death of Jesus to save them and then afterwards to align their lives with the gospel with this good news to make God's plan of salvation their plan for their own lives I know that for many of us some of the things that we want to know in life is what is God's plan for me in terms of this or that what should we do with our lives why am I here what career should I pursue who should I marry all those sort of questions and it seems like sometimes there's all these pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and we need God to show us how it all fits together but I actually want to say it's not as complicated as that rather the thing to realize is that there is only one jigsaw puzzle to figure out and that is God's big picture plan for salvation for this world and once we know that then actually each of our lives we are simply one piece of that jigsaw and like

[ 26 : 54 ] Abraham's once we know what that big plan is what's required for us then all we need to do is learn how we need to fit ourselves into that big plan to align our entire lives and our choices and our actions into that big jigsaw so do our priorities the way we live our life now align with that gospel are we making choices that promote God's agenda of making Christ known throughout the world of making and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ because when we begin to do that when we begin to align ourselves to that big picture it actually starts to clarify a lot of details in our lives just like it did for Abraham and it's the same for us as a church as a new congregation when we align our vision with God's big picture that becomes clear for us what God wants us to focus on as a church now sure there are details to work out and no doubt little things that we still need to pray and ask God for but there's actually no doubt about our mission to be making disciples of

Jesus and so if you belong to this church I want to say that you keep hearing that from us and you keep hearing me urging you to get on board with it you'll be asked to believe in the gospel to allow the gospel to shape your lives and then to share it with others now what that means for you individually the details well I don't know all that but just like the servant we'll pray and we'll seek God's wisdom to work those things out together and then when we know like Rebecca we'll be required we'll be asked to step out in faith to willingly obey even when sometimes we don't know all the details so it may be for example that you have a desire to go into paid gospel ministry well even though you don't know all the details what I want to urge you to do is to take that next step of faith perhaps come along to that MTS challenge conference perhaps start doing a subject at Ridley and then as you do we can then trust

God to confirm whether that's the right step or not conversely if you are faced with a lot of choices in life some of which don't actually align to the gospel then faith is all about actually rejecting those options even though it's costly to you and even though it might leave you in the unknown friends there's really only one common thread that runs through each of these three heroes of faith each of them came to know God's big picture promises they understood his plan of salvation and each in their own way exercised faith to align themselves to that plan all the details in our lives then followed after that and the same applies to us so tonight's passage is not about you know this passage is not here to help you find a wife guys in case you're wondering nor is it about helping you find God's will as though if you did this and had a sign for this and all that that's how we do to find out

God's will that's not what this passage is here for rather it teaches us first and foremost that we must align our lives and our priorities with the gospel as the writer to Hebrew says we must throw everything that hinders including the sin of unbelief we must fix our eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of our faith and run the race that is marked out for us once we've set our hearts and minds on doing that the rest will follow God will give us the wisdom to work out those details as we prayerfully depend on him and then we just need to take each day step by step by faith in willing obedience to him so let's pray and ask God to help us do that father we want to thank you that your plan for history is clear it's clear in the Bible and it is to be found is working towards glorifying your son

Jesus even as he's glorified you and he's done the work that he's done on the cross to bring all this about help us to see and believe that and to align ourselves with those priorities and help us to see how that actually shapes how we make choices and decisions in life father help us not to be

anxious as to what our future might be because you've revealed that to us not in the detail but in the big picture but dear God help us help us then now to throw off everything that hinders including the sin of unbelief so that we can run this race that has been marked out for us which you have prepared for us through the work of Jesus we pray this in Jesus name Amen