

Faith in God's Providence

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[0 : 01] Today's passage in Genesis 24 has all the ingredients of a classic love story. It has a rich young ruler. It has a beautiful maiden.

It has a happy ever after because the distance between them is overcome. You see, overcoming the distance is the key to a classic love story.

So Romeo and Juliet. Romeo is a Montague. Juliet is a Capulet. Warring families. Prince Harry, Meghan Markle, he is British royalty.

She is a commoner from America. Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy. Kermit is a frog. He says it's not easy being green.

She is a pig with spectacular anger management issues. Today is no different. She lives in Mesopotamia.

[1 : 01] He lives in Canaan. It's about 800 kilometers difference. And there are more distances than meets the eye in this classic love story. Genesis 24 is the longest chapter in the whole of Genesis.

So we won't be doing every verse. We'll be skimming through it at a bit of a pace. But chapter 24 of Genesis works like a sandwich. So chapter 23, Sarah dies.

Chapter 25, Abraham dies. And therefore chapter 24 in the middle is about carrying on the family line. And carrying on the family line, that's really important, isn't it?

Lots of parents want that. A few years ago, my mother sent my brothers and I an email in true sort of mum fashion. And this is what she said. Dear boys, your cousin has just had a baby.

That means I'm the last of my siblings to be a grandparent. What's wrong with you boys? Get your axe together. Love mum.

[2 : 09] It's classic, isn't it? Some people want to carry on the family line for grandchildren. Some people want to carry on the family line to keep the surname alive. All good things.

But if you're Abraham, carrying on the family line is much more serious. You see, he is God's man of promise. He's about to die.

Will God's promises die with him? He has a son, I hear you say. Isaac. Fine. Isaac is now about 37 years old.

Not married. No children. Abraham's descendants are going nowhere. Will God's promises of blessings die with Abraham?

Abraham. In this series, Abraham, sometimes he's good. Sometimes he's bad. He's all over the shop. But today, as he finishes his life, he has a steely determination.

[3 : 07] He's determined that Isaac gets married and has a family so that God's promises can carry on. And so he gives his servant a mission.

This is point one in your handouts. Do look at the handout. That will help you. Today, do you know, today is the end of our Genesis series. And what we see are Abraham's final words in the whole Bible.

And these final words, they're sort of like a last will and testament. Let's look at them. Verse one. Abraham was now very old and the Lord had blessed him in every way.

God keeps his promises. He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a son for my wife from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I'm living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.

Isaac will inherit all his father's wealth. And in an arranged marriage culture, that would be an easy mission to get a rich young man, a bride.

[4 : 20] But Abraham makes it harder. You see, he says the servant is not allowed to get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites. Isaac will inherit the promised land of Canaan.

It would be tempting to make a marriage treaty with the daughters of Canaan to make it more peaceful. But Abraham trusts God to provide rather than taking matters into his own hands. Clearly, he doesn't want Isaac to have the same troubles that he had with Hagar. Remember Hagar, another pagan wife? Instead, he says, verse 4, go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.

You see, like Sarah, Isaac's wife must be from his own country and from his own family. It's a hard mission.

He says in verse 5, 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?

[5 : 29] He says, Make sure you do not take my son back there. Again in verse 8, If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you'll be released from this oath of mine.

Only do not take my son back there. This hard mission is about to get even harder. You cannot, you must not take my son back there.

You see, suppose Isaac went there to find a bride and she says, I'm not willing to move to 800 kilometers to Canaan. And so Isaac says, Oh, that's okay, dear.

I will live with you in Mesopotamia. What happens to God's promises then? Abraham says in verse 7, That the Lord has brought him out of that place and given his offspring this promised land.

We are not leaving, he says. In chapter 23, we didn't look at it, but in chapter 23, he negotiates really hard to buy a parcel of land in Canaan so he can bury Sarah there.

[6 : 34] In chapter 24, he warns that Isaac is not to leave there. You see, he trusts God so much to deliver the promised land that he buries his family there, that he wants Isaac to raise his family there.

Abraham has really matured in his trust of God. And so it means, though, he's got a very hard mission. He's got to find a woman from his own country, from his own family.

Finally, she's got to leave her homeland, follow a stranger 800 kilometers for an arranged marriage to a man she's never met. This love story has lots of distances to overcome.

And so let's see what happens. This is point 2. I'm going to read from verse 10. Then a servant left, taking with him 10 of his master's camels, loaded with all kinds of good things from his master.

He set out for Aram Naharim and made his way to the town of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down near the well outside the town. It was towards the evening, the time women go out to draw water.

[7 : 45] He travels 800 kilometers in one quick verse, says the author, and arrives in the town of Nahor. Nahor is Abraham's brother, so he's in the right place.

He stops at a well. Lots of people in the Bible meet their future husbands and wives at a well. So Jacob will meet his wife, Rachel, at a well.

Moses meets his wife, Zipporah, at a well. And here is Abraham's servant at a well, searching for a bride. And so he prays.

Did you ever pray before going on a first date? I prayed before going on a first date with my wife, Rachel. It's the same prayer I pray every time I get up to preach.

Please, God, don't let me stuff this up. Well, the servant's prayer is a little bit more grand. Verse 12. The servant prays, Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today and show kindness to my master Abraham.

[8 : 52] The word kindness there, in Hebrew, it's the word chesed. It's a very interesting word. It means lots of things. For example, it means overflowing, non-obligated, faithful and steadfast love.

Chesed is intrinsic or strikes the very heart of the character of God. Overflowing, non-obligated, faithful, steadfast love.

The word appears again in verse 14 and verse 27. The servant appeals, he prays to the God of chesed in his really hard mission because things are about to go from really hard to impossible. So he's in the right place, okay? But how does he know he'll get the right girl? He needs God to show him who the right one is. Verse 14.

He prays to God. May it be that when I say to a young woman, please let down your water jar that I may have a drink. And she says, drink, and I'll water your camels too.

[10:06] Let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know you have shown kindness to my master. It's a really common courtesy to offer a stranger a drink of water.

But the servant says, just so I know I've got the right girl, she has to offer to water all my camels as well. Now, this week I learnt about camels. Right.

Did you know a camel drinks a hundred litres of water per camel? This servant, he's got ten of them. So, the accountant in me took over as usual. I did a little equation on the handout.

Ten camels, each drinking a hundred litres of water. What's ten times a hundred? A thousand litres.

You're all awake. Well done. This woman needs to come up with a thousand litres of water.

Her jar typically carries about ten litres. Therefore, a thousand divided by ten? A hundred. Well done. She needs to take a hundred trips to the well.

[11:06] Now, a well is not the thing, you know in the Disney movies where a well was the bucket on the rope with the little roof thing? That is not what a well is. A well is a big open cut hole, essentially, with stairs going down.

You fill up your bucket of water and sort of step back up again. The servant's test is that the woman must take a hundred trips down into the well, fill up ten litres, which is ten kilos, and carry it back up.

A hundred trips. It's an enormous obstacle in this love story. So, let's see what happens. Verse 15.

Before he'd 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 up her jar, and came up again.

I love how it says, before he had finished praying. Before he'd finished praying, God had begun to answer his prayers. It's fantastic. She's from the right country.

[12:14] Correct? She's from the right family. She's Nahor's granddaughter. That means she's Abraham's great niece. She is a beauty as well.

Brilliant. She is a virgin, which means she's single. And let's see how she goes with this watering the camel's test. Verse 17. The servant hurried to meet her and said, please give me a little water from your jar.

Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. And verse 18. Drink, my lord, she said. And quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. Come on, hurry up. After she'd given her a drink, she said, I'll draw water for your camels too.

Until they've had enough to drink. The servant is overjoyed. He covers her in jewellery. He finds out which family she's from. And he's overcome with joy. Verse 26.

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 his faithfulness. He has said, Rebecca takes the servant back to the family.

[13:24] They see that she's covered in all this new sort of bling and jewellery. And they welcome the servant in. The servant retells the whole story. He wants Rebecca's family to see that their meeting was God's doing.

That she and Isaac will be a match made in heaven. And this is our third point. I'm not going to read all the verses. It's a really long story. But I'm just going to read a few verses.

Listen out for the emphasis on God's provision. Verse 34. So he said, I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has blessed my master abundantly.

He has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, camels and donkeys. Verse 40. He replied, The Lord before whom I've walked faithfully will send his angel with you and make your journey a success so that you can get a wife for my son from my own clan and from my father's family.

Verse 42. When I came to the spring today, I said, Lord, God of my master Abraham, if you will, if you will, please grant success to the journey on which I've come.

[14:44] I looked down halfway through verse 47. Then I put the ring in her nose and the bracelets on her arms and I bowed down and worshipped the Lord. I praised the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has led me on the right road to get the great grand, to get the granddaughter of my master's brother for his son.

Rebecca's family, hear the story again. They're persuaded that everything so far is God's doing and they answer, verse 50, This is from the Lord.

We can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebecca. Take her and go. Let her become the wife of your master's son as the Lord has directed. So in verse 58, they say to Rebecca, Rebecca, will you go with this man?

She says, I will go. Remember when we first met Abraham three months ago, God told him, said, will you go from your family land to Canaan?

And he went. Rebecca, will you go from your family's land to Canaan? I will go, she says. The family give Rebecca a similar blessing to the one God gave Abraham over the page.

[16:00] Verse 60, Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands. May your offspring possess the cities of their enemies.

It's a word of offspring and land and blessings, just like Abraham. She is perfectly chosen to live in his household.

And so let's see if they live happily ever after. Verse 66, This is our last point. 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. Rebecca is brought into Sarah's tent.

She comforts Isaac after Sarah dies. The author is showing that Rebecca's position in the community is the new Sarah. As mum and dad pass away, chapter 23, chapter 25, Isaac and Rebecca take over as the new Abraham and Sarah, the new possessors of God's promises.

[17:16] And since we've met, as we wrap this all up, since we met Abraham three months ago, the prevailing issues have always been about family.

So having children, finding a wife. But this passage is not saying when you really want a wife, all you need to do is grab some camels and head to the nearest well.

When I first met my father-in-law in Tasmania, when I first met him, he offered me a bunch of camels to marry his daughter. That's a true story. I've still got them. If anyone wants 11 camels, come to my house.

Back up the truck because they're causing havoc on the vegetable garden. No, I'm joking. Chapter 24 is not about how you get a wife. Nor is the Abraham story about how God will bless us with children.

Getting married, having children, great things. But if that's all God's promises are, then you can replace God with IVF and adoption. You can replace God with a good dating agency.

[18:21] Chapter 24 shows God is determined that Abraham has descendants so that his promises will continue. And you may be here thinking, well, good for them.

What do I even care about that for? Except that, except that through Abraham's greatest descendants, the Lord Jesus, all Christians are adopted into God's family.

All Christians are children of Abraham. As we put our faith in Jesus, it resembles Abraham putting his faith in God.

Remember, God promised Abraham as many descendants as the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth and the sand on the seashore as millions and billions of Christians down through the centuries put their faith in Jesus.

All of us inheritors of Abraham, the man of faith. It matters immensely that Abraham has descendants. The promises to Abraham, our inheritance, what we stand to gain, is nothing short of a totally new world, a new people in a new place, living with God's blessings as he lives with us.

[19:47] That is the picture you get from Revelation 21, our second reading. And if all of that, if all of that seems a bit remote to you, if all of that seems a bit, well, I couldn't really care less, I want to highlight as we finish, I want to highlight how important that is in 2018.

So, these past few weeks in 2018, have you had a gutful of Australian politics? Do you know a gutful, for those, you know, my stomach is, I've had enough, I've had a gut, have you had a gutful of Australian politics?

I have. Have you had a gutful of disasters in 2018? Typhoons, earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides, bridges collapsing, have you had a gutful of cancer and loved ones dying?

Have you had a gutful of ISIS terrorism and children on the news? Have you had a gutful of Christians persecuted for their faith? Have you had a gutful of the church in disarray?

Have you had a gutful of family disappointments? Have you had a gutful of loneliness and unmet expectations in life? Have you had a gutful of your own sin and hurting other people?

[21 : 03] Have you had a gutful? God's promises to Abraham are for a totally new world, a new heavens and a new earth where none of these things exist anymore, not even death, just constant relationship with Jesus and his people.

If you have any sense, you will want that for yourself. Chapter 24, that's a classic love story. we saw distances overcome.

The whole story of Abraham is a love story as well. But there is also a distance that needs overcoming. The distance in Abraham's life story has nothing to do with God's ability to deliver on his word.

chapter 24, another demonstration of how God does what he says. I hope you realize since we started this series three months ago, I hope you realize it's been the same sermon every week. Have you noticed that? It's essentially the same sermon for three months. God can be trusted. the distance, the issue each week is will Abraham trust God in return?

[22 : 24] That's the distance in our love story. Will we trust God in return? Chapter 24, God says, trust me, I am the God of Chesed.

You see, like our father Abraham, we are always tempted to fear man more than God. We're always tempted to try and take matters into our own hands.

We're always tempted to distrust God because of appearances, because of the odds stacked against Christians in Melbourne. We're tempted to doubt God's word.

We're so fickle, you see. This is the distance in our relationship with God and it must be overcome so that we too can live happily ever after.

And so I want to suggest right as we finish two ways we can overcome this distance in our relationship. The first way is looking forward. So looking forward to revelation.

[23 : 27] Revelation is really important. Like Genesis 24, the whole Bible ends in a wedding. It's called the wedding banquet of the Lamb. Revelation 21 is a snapshot of that.

This spurs us on to trust God in return, to keep going, regardless of what's happening to us in our lives. Looking ahead.

But looking back is equally important as well. Looking back as Jesus dies and rises to make all things new. Looking back at the life story of Abraham, we see God can be trusted.

His promises don't die. They continue to Abraham's descendants and his descendants, as many as the stars in the sky, even to descendants like us in 2018.

And therefore, therefore, put your trust in God in return. Be like Abraham. Be like Rebecca, who put their faith in God to deliver on a totally new world, just as he said, because he is the God of overflowing, non-obligated, faithful, and steadfast love, the God of chesed.

[24 : 49] And so let's pray.