

Where is Love?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of September 2000.
- The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Where is Love? and is from Genesis 24, verses 1 to 27.
- Please be seated. And you may like to turn to page 17 in the Bibles. Page 17 in the Bibles, Genesis chapter 24.
- We heard the first few verses of that read for us. And I'm preaching on the whole chapter. Let me say that the last few weeks in the evenings, we've looked at the story of Abraham.
- And you may remember a few weeks ago in the mornings, we had a few sermons on that. So for the next few weeks in the morning, we're continuing the story of Isaac and Jacob. And then later on in November in the evenings, the story of Joseph to finish the book of Genesis.
- [1 : 1 7] So let me pray that God will help us to understand. God, you've declared yourself. You've written your word, had it written for us.
- We pray that as we hear it and study it now, your word will be written on our hearts, that we may not only understand it, but also live it for your glory.
- Amen. Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match. Find me a find. Catch me a catch.
- Matchmaker, matchmaker, look through your book and make me a perfect match. So sing the daughters of Tevye in the musical Fiddler on the Roof.
- And where the old Jewish man Tevye is anxious to get the right husbands for his daughters, so in the passage that we're looking at today, Abraham, an old father, is anxious to have the right match for his only son Isaac.
- [2 : 2 5] And let me say, of course, that finding a wife is no easy matter. It seems to me... It seems to me, having studied this chapter, I've at last discovered the secrets.
- So I've sent off my servant to a far and distant land. He's taken my ten camels with him. And I'm sure that he'll return with somebody with a nose ring in due course.
- Because after all, that's what this chapter is about, how to find a wife, and I'm trying to put it in detail into practice, of course. No, this chapter is not about how to find a wife.
- And for those of you who are expecting something, well, you'll be disappointed. This chapter is about the faithfulness of God to keep his promises. And we see that in various ways in this chapter.
- It's broken into four scenes, in effect. Scene 1, Abraham and his servant, in verses 1 to 9. The issue and the problem, really, that this chapter is dealing with is this.
- [3 : 3 3] Abraham is old, and indeed about to die. These are his last recorded words in this scene. His son Isaac, for whom he's waited, of course, many years, is single.
- But the problem is not just that Abraham wants his son to get a wife. Most parents want their children to get married.

My mother does, and I don't think she's given up yet. But the issue is not just Abraham wanting a spouse, a wife for his son. The issue is, God has promised Abraham numerous descendants who would come through his son.

So the point of getting a wife for his son is not just so that his son can be looked after properly. The issue is, God's promises being kept.

That there will be the promised descendants through Isaac. And in order for that to happen, he needs a wife. He needs an appropriate wife. Abraham's instructions to his servant in this scene, as we heard it read, were to his servant to go back to where Abraham had come from, to his kinship, if you like, his homeland, back up in Mesopotamia, from the southern part of Israel, as it is today, up through what is now northern Syria, northern Iraq, to a place, as it's called later on in this passage, Aram Naharayim, up in a place called Aram of the two rivers, literally, the Tigris and Euphrates River in north Iraq.

[5 : 03] That's where Abraham had come from, back in chapter 12, so that's where he sends his servant. Later on in the Old Testament, there's a law that the Israelites are not to marry people from the area of Canaan in the promised land.

And though that law was yet to be given, Abraham, it seems, is abiding by that sort of principle, that the right wife for his son will come from his own people group back up in Mesopotamia.

It's the same sort of principle that applies in the New Testament, where Christians are told not to marry non-Christians. That is, our allegiance with God is compromised when we enter into such marriages.

So Abraham, in this scene, commissions his servant, his chief servant, one whom no doubt he relied upon greatly, to go and get a wife for his son Isaac. As I said, these are Abraham's last recorded words.

It seems that by the time the servant reappears back to Abraham's land, Abraham himself has died. His words, here, are full of confidence in the promises of God.

[6 : 12] Indeed, Abraham's life is some testimony to God being faithful to keep his promises. So the chapter opens with the statement, Now Abraham was old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.

That's not just saying that he was wealthy. Abraham had been promised by God back in chapter 12 that God would bless him. And now we're told that God has.

It's a statement that God has been faithful to Abraham and kept his promises thus far. And when Abraham commissions the servant, in verse 7 he says, The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, an allusion back to chapter 12 where God actually did that and sent him away from Mesopotamia to the land that he'd show him, and who spoke to me and swore to me, again an allusion to the promises that God made to Abraham in chapter 12 and reiterated later on with an oath in chapter 22, To your offspring I'll give you this land.

God will send his angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there. That is, Abraham is saying to his servant, God is faithful.

He's called me from that land where I came from to this promised land. He's sworn to me on oath that my offspring will inherit this land. I know that God will provide a wife for my son, an appropriate wife.

[7 : 46] I have confidence in God's faithfulness for this purpose. That's what in effect Abraham is saying to his servant. It's not just the issue of finding a wife for a single man.

It's so that the promises of God will continue. And because God's made a promise that there will be offspring through Isaac, Abraham has confidence that God will provide the right wife so that beyond that the offspring may come.

The question is, in a sense, will God in this chapter be faithful? Scene 2. Abraham's servant, this time with Rebecca at the well in her homeland.

And this scene covers the rest of what we heard read today, verses 10 to 27. The servant goes off in verse 10. He took 10 of his master's camels.

That indicates that Abraham was indeed very wealthy. Camels were a sign of wealth and to have 10 of them would mean that he was very wealthy. And he departed taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master.

[8 : 53] Betrothal gifts, if you like. A dowry to be paid if he finds the right wife for Isaac. And the servant set out and went to Aram-la-Haraim to the city of Nahor.

And when he got there, it's a 400-mile journey. He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water. Cities in the ancient world tended to be built on mounds or hills.

They were safer from enemies that way. But that would mean that their wells or springs would be outside the city wall down in the valleys around. Presumably, that's what's in mind here. He's outside the city.

He's down by the well or the spring where their water supply would be. And it was the woman's job, usually in the evening or maybe the early morning, certainly not in the heat of the day, to go out to the well or the spring to draw water for the night or for the day ahead.

And so that's where he goes for water. What he does is pray. And the servant prays not for guidance, not that God would provide a wife for Isaac, not even in a sense that God would just guide him simply to a wife, but it's more a prayer that God will be faithful to what he's promised Abraham.

[10 : 09] So notice what he prays in verse 12. Oh Lord God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today. How? By showing steadfast love to my master Abraham.

The word for steadfast love is one that's often used in the Old Testament about the character of God. The Hebrew word is hesed. It's a fierce determination and commitment of one person to another.

It's a solid and substantial loyalty between two people. Sometimes it's translated like this, steadfast love, other times as loyalty or even covenant loyalty.

That is, it's not just a sort of fleeting relationship between two people. It is an abiding and enduring commitment expressed from one person to another. So the servant here is praying that God will keep on being faithful, keep on being committed to the promises that he has made to Abraham.

Then he goes on to raise a criterion by which he will know his prayer is answered. He prays, I'm standing here by the spring of water and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water.

[11 : 30] Let the girl to whom I shall say please offer your jar that I may drink and who in return shall say drink and I will water your camels. Let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac.

By this I shall know that you've shown steadfast love to my master. Now this is not an arbitrary test like some person today might pray God, you know, I'm looking for a wife, I pray that the next girl that sort of walks down the street with a red carnation in that might be my wife or something like that.

It's not an arbitrary test like that. It's not like Gideon's test of God where Gideon said okay God, you've called me to go and fight a battle, I'm not really quite convinced, I'm going to throw out a fleece of wool and in the morning if it's wet and the ground's dry then I'll believe you and it was and then he said well I'm still a bit doubtful about this let me throw the fleece out and if it's dry and the ground's wet then I'll believe you.

That's a sort of arbitrary test of God in a sense. These words of the servant are not like that because it's actually a specific characteristic that he's looking for.

That is, by quoting the words the girl to whom I shall say please offer you a jar that I may drink and she responds by saying drink and I'll water your camels he is looking for somebody who is both hospitable and generous that is somebody who will not only give him water but of her own volition offer to provide water for ten camels.

[12 : 59] That's a lot of water. Camels drink a lot especially after a 400 mile journey and for ten of them that's a lot of heaving up water from a spring or a well.

That is, what the servant is praying for here is the appropriate wife for Isaac. In the chapters that have preceded this there are several instances where the issue of hospitality and generosity is raised and it is always commended when people are hospitable and generous especially to strangers.

It is the characteristic that Abraham exhibited on various occasions his nephew Lot exhibited on at least one occasion. It's in contrast to the evil people of Sodom who were not hospitable nor generous.

So what the servant is praying here is for the right sort of person to become Isaac's wife. That is not just the person who happens to match the criteria of his prayer but rather somebody who is both generous and hospitable.

In the end they are the characteristics of God and they are to be exemplified in his people. Well what follows in this second scene is a very quick and obvious and accurate answer to the prayer.

[14 : 15] There can be no doubt in our mind as there was none in the servant's mind that God has answered this prayer very obviously. Indeed verse 15 tells us before he had even finished speaking there was Rebecca.

He presumably did not know her name nor did he know the details that followed but the point is it's such a quick answer. He hadn't even finished his prayer probably hadn't even said his amen at the end and all of a sudden there is Rebecca standing before him or close by him coming to get water and the criterion that he's prayed about is met.

So in verse 17 he goes up to her and says please let me sip a little water from your jar. There's a good chat up line. Drink my lord she said and she lowered her jar upon her hand she gave him a drink when she'd finished giving him a drink she said I'll draw water for your camels also until they've finished drinking.

Here is the criterion met. Here is a woman who is obviously an answer to prayer. Somebody who is generous and hospitable. A bit later on the servant asks is there room for us to stay in your household or your father's household.

And she says yes in verse 25 she says we have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night. Here is hospitality and generosity at work by Rebecca.

[15 : 46] Moreover she is enthusiastic to be hospitable and generous. She's not reluctant or mean. She doesn't say to him well I better go and check with my brother and my father to see if there's plenty of fodder or anything.

She's not mean in that sense. She's quick to respond. So when the man in verse 17 asks her about giving her a sip she quickly in verse 18 lowers her jar.

And when she offers to give water to the camels she quickly empties her jar into the trough and she runs again to the well. And when she goes back home to check on the hospitality she runs back home.

That is she's quick to meet the criteria that are set down even though she doesn't know of course about the prayer. Now as an added bonus she's beautiful.

We're told that in verse 16 she was very fair to look upon. We're also told that she was a virgin. At least that means of marriageable age. No man has been with her so she's ideal.

[16 : 49] She meets not only the criteria that the servant prayed about. As an added bonus she's beautiful and she's eligible. God has answered this prayer in an astonishing way and one more thing is added as well.

Abraham had sent his servant off to this land because he wanted somebody from the general kinship homeland from where Abraham had come. Not only does Rebecca come from his general kinship but she's actually Abraham's niece.

So in verse 24 she said to the servant I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah whom she bore to Nahor. And we discover a bit later on that she is the niece of Abraham.

That is very close family. Even a greater answer to prayer than the servant could even imagine I guess. And without a doubt God has answered his prayer.

And the servant appears overwhelmed by that. In verse 26 he bowed his head and he worshipped the Lord. At the end of verse 27 he says as for me the Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin.

[18 : 05] That is he's in effect saying I'm staggered that I a servant have had a prayer answered like this. That's in effect what he's doing by bowing down worshipping the Lord and his words at the end of verse 27.

The words of Abraham about God's faithfulness are fully justified. And the servant finishes the scene by praying a prayer of thanksgiving.

Blessed be the Lord the God of my master Abraham who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. Scene 2 is bracketed by his prayer and his thanksgiving.

Both of them highlight the steadfast love of God to Abraham. We should pause a minute before considering scene 3. God does not always answer prayers as quickly or as obviously or as abundantly as that.

God does not always provide guidance as clearly as this. He doesn't always provide a wife or a husband as easily as this either. But the issue here is that God keeps faith with the promises he has made.

[19 : 22] That's the point. There are plenty of other instances in the Bible where prayers are not answered in the way they're expected. That God's guidance is not as clear. So we ought not to take from this passage an idea that God is going to answer every prayer exactly as we pray it and as quickly as we pray it and when he doesn't we can get angry and frustrated with God.

The issue here is that God is faithful to the promises that he makes. He keeps faith and that's highlighted by Abraham's words in scene one, by the servant's prayer and by the servant's thanksgiving.

God is steadfast in his love and faithfulness to the promises to Abraham. Now of course the whole scenario is not yet resolved.

The servant is convinced that Rebecca is the right person. She knows nothing of it at this point and he has to convince not only her but her family and then take her back to Isaac.

So there's still dilemma ahead, there's still hurdles to overcome if this whole mission if you like to go and get a wife for Isaac is to be satisfied. Rebecca's gone back at the end of that scene to her family and told them about what's going on.

[20 : 38] We're told that she has a brother whose name was Laban in verse 29 and Laban ran out to the man to the spring. But the motivation for that we're told in verse 30 is that as soon as he'd seen the nose ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms and when he heard the words of his sister that Rebecca thus the man spoke to me he went to the man.

That is Laban's motives seem to be somewhat qualified. One level perhaps he's being hospitable to this stranger but at another level he sees the expensive jewellery that has been given by the servant to Rebecca in scene 2.

He's motivated by money perhaps even greed. Laban's not actually a great character. We'll see a bit more of him in weeks to come when Isaac's son Jacob goes to look for a wife and ends up with more than he bargained for.

In some ways we could almost picture Laban spying the glittering jewellery on his sister's arms and the nose ring and other things that were given to her. Almost rubbing his hands like Fagan in the musical Oliver thinking of all the wealth that is coming his way.

Anyway he offers hospitality to Abraham's servant presumably to his ten camels as well. He offers a meal. They're about to sit down to the meal in verse 33.

[22 : 03] The food was set before the servant to eat. But at this point he stops. He doesn't eat. Something that would be acceptable in the protocol of Middle Eastern hospitality at this point.

But he wishes to speak. He says I will not eat until I have told my errand. Probably slightly unusual protocol but it shows the servant is not going to be distracted by the hospitality.

The purpose of his mission is to get a wife for Isaac and he places that first even above his own needs to eat which may have been great. So he gives now a pre-dinner speech.

The servant has been persuaded that Rebecca is the right person and God's answer for the prayer for a wife for Isaac. But now he has to persuade her family and her that this is God's will.

And that's the purpose of his speech. It's a lengthy speech verses 34 through to verse 49. It highlights a couple of themes. It doesn't tell us everything about what's been going on but it picks out the sorts of themes that may convince Rebecca's family to let her go to become Isaac's wife.

[23 : 15] It emphasizes for example the kinship issue in verses 37 to 41. It's saying in effect we want Rebecca to come and marry Isaac. We're not foreigners, we're family.

It also highlights Abraham's wealth probably appealing to Laban's own desires for money. So in verse 35 the first words of this speech in effect, the Lord has greatly blessed my master and he has become wealthy.

He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. Well which family would not be excited by thinking the possibilities of their daughter or sister being married into such wealth?

The servant is seeking to persuade Rebecca's family. family. He also goes on in the next verse 36 to say that it's not just Abraham's wealth but it's all being given to Isaac.

In effect he's an only son. So Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old and he has given him all that he has. It's not as though Rebecca's going to be conned by marrying the son of a wealthy man but the son may not himself be wealthy.

[24 : 27] All that Abraham has is Isaac's. Rebecca will be marrying into great wealth. It also shows the suitability of Isaac. Being a family, being wealthy.

But the climax of this man's speech comes over in verse 49 on the next page. He says to Laban at the end of his speech, Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me.

And if not, tell me. So that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left. The words that he uses there, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, are the exact words that he's used in his prayer of thanksgiving to God about God.

God is loyal and true or steadfast love and faithfulness. Same words, though the English translation doesn't quite pick that up. So in a sense he's saying God is steadfast and loyal.

That's been evident in the whole circumstances of this servant being where he is. And he's saying to Laban, you then be steadfast and loyal too. And Laban's response clears another hurdle because he says in the next verse 50, the thing comes from the Lord, we cannot speak to you anything bad or good.

[25 : 53] Look, Rebekah's before you, take her and go. Abram said to the servant back in the first scene, go and take a wife. And now Laban, using the same words, says take her and go.

And let her be the wife of your master's son as the Lord has spoken. And then in verse 53, the bride price is paid. The servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, of garments, gave them to Rebekah.

He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. The appropriate protocol in the Middle East for taking a wife. But there's another hurdle.

Laban has said take her and go, but words and actions don't always meet. Delaying tactics occur. The servant is anxious to get up and go and fulfill the mission and errand that he's been sent on.

Send me back to my master, he says at the end of verse 54. But her brother and her mother said, let the girl remain with us a while, at least ten days, although the Hebrew expression may actually mean an indefinite period.

[27 : 01] And after that she may go. Now it may just be that they're being typically hospitable and saying, look, stay a while, let's have some more hospitality. But it may be that they're trying to delay the whole process.

Maybe Laban's trying to get more wealth out of the servant. We're just not quite sure. But the faithful servant is adamant. Do not delay me, he says in verse 56, since the Lord has made my journey successful, let me go that I may go to my master.

Now the next hurdle. They say, well, let's ask Rebecca what she wants to do. So far the servant's been convinced, the family of Rebecca have been convinced, but what about Rebecca?

She's been silent in all of this. So they ask her in verse 57, we'll go and call the girl, we'll ask her, and they called Rebecca, they said to her, will you go with this man?

And she said, I will. And her simple agreement is just another characteristic of her suitability to become Isaac's wife. And when she leaves in verse 60, they bless her in words that echo God's blessings to Abraham.

[28 : 13] May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads. May your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes. Scene four.

The final scene and the final hurdle. Rebecca and Isaac. Verses 61 to 67. The servants convinced that Rebecca's the right person.

Rebecca's family's been convinced and Rebecca has been convinced. But what's Isaac going to do? Here comes a girl he's never met, being brought to him as his wife.

Now, arranged marriages, of course, mean that he's got no say. It's a system that I must say seems to have some merit in it. But what's he going to do? As they approach, Rebecca pulls the veil over her.

Who's the man over there walking in the field to meet us, she says in verse 65, and the servant said, it's my master, that is, it's Isaac. It seems that Abraham has died in the interim. So she took her veil, covered herself, and the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.

[29 : 22] And Isaac's response? He brought her into her mother Sarah's tent. Sarah has died. He took Rebecca and she became his wife.

And he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. Isaac doesn't just accept her, but Rebecca is put in the place of Sarah.

She's become the matriarch of the promised line. She's honored by Isaac, and not only is she his wife, he also loves her. Throughout this story, God has been utterly faithful to what he promises.

He's kept his promises, they've stayed alive, potential hazards are overcome. The servant's prayer is clearly and abundantly answered. Rebecca's family accede to the idea.

Rebecca agrees to go and Isaac accepts her. Let me say that we ought to be careful not to draw too much from this passage about guidance and relationships.

[30 : 31] Too many Christians in the area of relationships have prayed for particular outcomes, they've perhaps set tests of God's guidance, and been disappointed.

Maybe even become frustrated maybe even angry at God. And several, I think, and have met, have even lost their faith if the answer is not in their eyes the right one.

Too many people come to clergy or other Christians saying, I believe God has called me to this person. Trouble is that this other person is singularly inappropriate, maybe not a Christian, maybe already married, whatever the situation.

Too many people become blinkered trying to pretend that God's guidance is leading them the way their heart is leading. If anything though, this passage says to that issue but to Christian life generally it is this.

God is faithful. He provides what he promises and what we need. And our job is to trust him and obey him.

[31 : 45] It's as simple as that. He will happen you going to keepment