

Genesis 24:1-9, No. 37
"A Father's Last Task"
November 27, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

After more than a year in the book of Acts we return this morning to the interrupted series of sermons on Genesis. We left the narrative as Abraham buried his wife Sarah in a burial plot he had purchased in the land of Canaan, an act of faith in the promise of God that his descendants would one day occupy that land. The story of Abraham's life is nearly done, but he has one final task to perform and the fact that so much attention is paid to it is an indication of its importance. We have learned in recent years how the historical narratives of the Bible are written so as to teach both theology and ethics. In the chapter we are about to begin, both theology and ethics are front and center, both who God is and what he does, on the one hand, and what we are to do on the other. What we see being done in flesh and blood in chapter 24 is *what we are also taught to do* in the law of God and in the hymns of the Bible, the psalms. In other words, in this chapter we not only learn what Abraham did, but that his life is an example for us to imitate.

Text Comment:

- v.2 The privacy of the thigh, or, more probably the genitals, made the oath all the more solemn. [Sarna, 162] Jacob will make Joseph swear in the same way that he would take his bones back to Canaan for burial (47:29). It is a practice akin to placing one's hand on a Bible when one swears an oath. The reason for the solemn oath is that Abraham is aware that he is an old man nearing death. His son Isaac is still unmarried.

The passivity of Isaac in this account is notable, but we should be careful before building upon it some doctrine of arranged marriages, as some Christians have done even in recent times. The Bible shows us people finding mates in different ways and falling in love both before and after marriage. The Bible grants liberty to believers in this matter, so long as they conduct themselves in the pursuit of love and marriage in a manner consistent with Christian faith. God joins men and women together in many ways.

But Abraham's initiative and decision-making for Isaac does remind us that, in the Bible, how one lives *in* marriage has much more to do with how happy, romantic, erotic, and fulfilling a marriage will be and remain than the power of mutual attraction that first brings most couples together today. We all know people who were head over heels in love but divorced a year or two or five later. Do you remember how Elizabeth Taylor explained her two divorces from Richard Burton? "We loved each other too much," she said. Really? And here are Isaac and Rebekah, whom we later learn had a most romantic and affectionate marriage, who were chosen for one another by Abraham's servant and never met until the marriage was a *fait accompli*. C.S. Lewis, has Wormwood advise his demon nephew Screwtape (Letter No. 18 of *The Screwtape Letters*): "Humans who have not the gift of continence can be deterred from seeking marriage as a solution because they do not find themselves 'in love,' and, thanks to us, the idea of marrying with any other motive seems to them low and cynical.... They regard the intention of loyalty to a partnership for mutual help, for the preservation of chastity, and for the transmission of

life, as something lower than a storm of emotion.” Admittedly, romance normally brings men and women together, often even in the Scripture (think, for example, of the Song of Songs), but it is not an indispensable prerequisite to a happy, romantic marriage.

- v.5 The servant’s question assumes that Abraham may not be alive by the time the servant returns, with or without a wife for Isaac. [Sarna, 162] And, as it happens, that seems to have been the case. It seems that Abraham never met his daughter-in-law, Rebekah.
- v.7 The entire orientation of Abraham’s life is toward the promise of God. But Abraham has matured as a believing man. He no longer attempts to engineer the solution to a problem – as he had by lying to Pharaoh about Sarah or having a child by Hagar when Sarah remained childless – but instead trusts the Lord to provide according to his promise. God made a promise, he will give us the means by which that promise shall be fulfilled. So many heartaches can be avoided by God’s people waiting on the Lord. [Waltke, 327]
- v.8 Abraham has also learned that God does not always act in the ways we expect. So he does not presume that he knows God’s will. Accordingly he frees his servant from his oath should he be unable to find a willing woman.

Verses 6-8 record the last words of Abraham. And they are from beginning to end the words of a man of faith, a man who believes that the promises God made to him will certainly be fulfilled. We will find a retrospective genealogy of Abraham in chapter 25, but with this paragraph the narrative of Abraham’s life comes to an end. Here we say farewell to one of the most consequential human beings ever to live in this world!

- v.9 This “chief servant” is one of the most attractive minor characters in the Bible, for his loyalty, piety, and competence. If this is the Eliezer of chapter 15:2, he is all the more to be admired, for here he is faithfully seeking the welfare of the one who displaced him as Abraham’s heir. Like John the Baptist, he is as much as saying of Isaac, let me decrease and let him increase. As the chapter continues we will see that this servant fully shares Abraham’s faith and that this was the reason Abraham entrusted him with this crucial final task. And so Abraham leaves the biblical history having done what he could to provide a proper wife for his son.

Now this text concerns the provisions a faithful father made for the marriage and so for the future spiritual welfare of his son and his son’s descendants. God had made a promise to be Abraham’s God *and the God of his children*. But that promise was suspended on conditions and those conditions required that children be raised by faithful parents who were committed to the Lord’s covenant and to raising their children to love and serve the Lord. So this chapter is for us today instruction in the duty of parents. We see in Abraham what ought to be true of us. We ought to be equally concerned to train our children so to love the Lord that they would never marry, never place their children in the hands of a spouse who did not love the Lord as they did, who was not as concerned to raise their children for the Lord or as confident in the promises of God as they were.

What we find here in biblical history and biography, we find as well in the Law of God that teaches us to train our children in the way of the Lord, to discipline them so as to bend their wills to God's will, and to set an example for them of genuine faith, hope, joy, and love; to adorn the life of faith before them so they will want that life for themselves. In the OT and in the NT we are taught to marry *only in the Lord* and are taught that we are to do so precisely because God desires a holy seed. That is, it is godly parents who alone are equipped to raise godly children.

All of that lies on the surface of this text. It is all about Abraham's determination that his son not marry a Canaanite woman, a woman whose understanding of God and life and the future would have been shaped by the corrupt, sensual, idolatrous, polytheistic culture of Canaan. To be sure, we wonder how much Rebekah herself may have known of the covenant God made with Abraham, how faithful a woman she may have been before she ever met Isaac. We cannot answer those questions. But clearly Abraham thought a woman from his own family line was a far better choice than any of the Canaanite women Isaac might meet or have already known. He was trusting the Lord for the right woman.

But there is a larger perspective to be gained in this history. It is not only about the choice of a marriage partner and so of the woman who would be the mother of Isaac's children, the matriarch of the covenantal family. What we have here is a man concerned with God's covenant and with the continuation of that covenant in the generations to come. Abraham is clearly animated by a desire to see God's covenant promise fulfilled in generations *he will never live to see*. Abraham is here revealed to us as a man who so trusts God's word and so cares for God's promise that he takes steps to ensure that God's blessing will descend upon people he will never meet, he will never know, and whose fortunes will have no impact upon him personally. The last thing we see the great man doing, the man who is *the exemplar of faith in the Bible*, the man who is our first and finest example of what it means to walk with God in the world, I say the last thing we see him doing is *caring for the future of the kingdom of God!*

There is something of immense importance here. There is, as you may know, something of a cottage industry studying American evangelicalism. Scholars here and there devote themselves to surveying evangelical Christians to find out what they really think and how they really live. We are a voting block and so even among those utterly disinterested in our faith there is an interest in knowing what we think, what we believe. And the results, in one study after another, are frankly depressing. For a great many people who describe themselves as evangelical Christians God is conceived primarily as a personal helper, someone whose importance is found in his willingness to help them surmount their problems, to make them happy, and to give them things. The sterner dimensions of the biblical picture of God – his holy wrath, his categorical demand that his people obey his commandments – scarcely appear in the typical evangelical's view of God. He is rather an avuncular figure, well-disposed, unlikely to make an issue of anyone's faults, non-judgmental, of cheerful good-will, and polite enough never to intrude where he is not wanted.

We were told that some 80% of evangelicals voted for Mr. Trump. I have no idea what that statement means, of course, because what constitutes an evangelical Christian varies so dramatically from pollster to pollster – often, someone who self-identifies as an evangelical and who attends church at least once a year! But suppose it was 80%. What would *that* mean?

A recent issue of *Christianity Today* reported the results of a survey by LifeWay Research and Ligonier Ministries (the ministry of R.C. Sproul) designed to examine the theology of American evangelicals, or lack thereof. To define an evangelical they used the four-part definition endorsed by the National Association of Evangelicals. To be an evangelical, according to this definition, you must be someone who 1) strongly agrees that the Bible is the highest authority; 2) strongly agrees that evangelism is very important; 3) strongly agrees that sin can be removed only by Jesus' death; and 4) strongly agrees that salvation comes only through trusting in Jesus as Savior.

But what the survey revealed was that self-identified evangelicals, even by that definition, were in huge numbers mistaken about any number of convictions that historically and biblically have always identified a Christian. More than a third of them said they believed that God will always reward faith with material blessings. 39% – that is, if you can believe it, closing in on *half of the evangelicals surveyed* – believed that their good deeds help to earn their place in heaven. *Half of these evangelicals* believe that God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. *More than half* agreed with the statement that everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature. *More than half* agreed that the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being. Meet your evangelical next door neighbor, very likely a heretic! Certainly he is an American; whether he is a Christian remains to be seen.

When someone tells me that 80% of evangelicals voted for Mr. Trump or that evangelicals in the main support this position or that one, I am unmoved. Who cares what Christians think or do if these are the representative evangelical Christians we are talking about?

Do you want to know how to tell a real Christian, how to distinguish him or her from the crowd of people who say they are Christians but have little idea what it means to be a Christian? Put a person to this test: do they care about what Abraham – the representative believer in the Bible – do they care about what Abraham cared about and do they act on the basis of such concerns. Do they realize that their lives are part of a larger story, that they take their meaning from the history of the kingdom of God to which they belong, that their importance is measured by the extent to which they contribute to the history of God's covenant with his people? Are they committed to seeing that covenant fulfilled even in the life of generations yet unborn? Do they know it isn't all about them; it isn't even mostly about them? In fact, in the largest sense, it's hardly about them at all.

There is some personal comfort and pleasure to be got in the Christian faith. We know that. To believe that God cares for us is hugely important to our experience of life, especially of life's sorrows. To believe that our sins are forgiven is liberating. But the person who really knows such things to be true, the person who is not glibly assuming things to which he or she has no right, is in the Bible always and everywhere a person whose faith in God and Christ leads to higher interests than one's own peace and prosperity, to larger concerns than the happiness of one's own life, and to deeper commitments than one's own welfare or the welfare of one's immediate family.

Here is Abraham at the end of his life, an old man and full of years, and with the eyes of true faith he is looking down the corridor of time to see the future of God's covenant unfold.

Abraham loves God and he loves God's covenant, and he wants to see it prosper and triumph in the world. True enough, in this particular instance he is concerned for his own family, because at this point the church of God and the kingdom of God *were Abraham's family*, at least so far as we know from the Word of God. But even in this case, the generations to come were people Abraham would never know. He had no idea that Isaac and Rebekah would have twin sons or what would come of Esau and Jacob over the course of their lives. He had no idea that Jacob would have twelve sons. He knew that his descendants would live for centuries in Egypt, because God had told him, but he knew nothing of the brothers' betrayal of Joseph, or of Judah's spiritual rebirth, or of the exodus. All he knew was that faithfulness in the generations that would follow required that Isaac have a faithful wife and so, as an old man, he took steps to ensure that such would be the case.

And in that concern and in that effort he left us an example that we should follow in his steps. That is what real believers do: they live and they act for the sake of the church and kingdom of God. They do not take God's gifts and selfishly hoard them; they exploit their knowledge of the truth for the sake of the progress of salvation in the world. In Abraham's case it was the future of his family, and in our case it will be for many of us the future of our families most immediately: the raising of our children to love and serve the Lord, instilling in them such concern for the honor of God's name, such faith in his promises, and such interest in his church and kingdom, that they would never marry someone whose interest in such things was insincere or only half-hearted, or, worse, who had no such interest at all.

But Abraham's interest in the future of his family, that of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren and so on in succeeding generations, *was in fact an interest in the future of the church and kingdom of God and so an interest in the future of the world*. And so must our interest be and so will be the interest of those who know and love the God of Abraham.

Does the state of American Christianity trouble you? It should. If you care about the kingdom of God – the name and reputation of Jesus Christ, his influence in the world – it should trouble you and worry you and dishearten you. If you love the church of God you should care about this! Do you care about *this church* and about its fortunes and its ministry? If you have Abraham's mind you will care; care deeply. We have much to be grateful for, but we are far from being the people we ought to be, having the gospel ministry we ought to have, wielding the influence we ought to wield for the grace and the truth of God in Christ. Do you care to see and are you working to see all of us grow together in the grace and the knowledge of God, or are you happy enough if you are getting something useful for yourself?

Abraham's life was over. He knew it. He was a wealthy man, an important man. He had all that life can give a man: comforts, prestige, and a store of great memories to occupy his quiet hours. But Abraham wasn't content with those things, blessings that they were and the gifts of God he knew them to be. He had higher interests. The future beckoned. He could not go forward into that future, but he could contribute something good to it and so he did. *That* is the mind and the heart of faith. To spend our days to their very end investing in the future that God has promised and doing what we can to bring it to pass.

This little piece of history thus becomes for us instruction in the obligations we owe to the progress of the kingdom of God in the lives of our children, to be sure, but as well in the lives of others and to the welfare of the church and kingdom of God in days yet to come. There is a wonderfully unique other-centeredness and future-centeredness built into the fabric of the covenant that God has made with his people. There is nothing like this in the other religions of the world. When you think about it, when you realize who it is who has made this covenant and fashioned its laws and its conditions, it should not surprise us that living faithfully in *his* covenant requires us to be concerned not only for ourselves but for others, in fact for the whole world. That concern for others is such a central principle of believing life – such a perfect reflex of our experience of God's love for us when we were yet his enemies – that it makes us to care even for others we have never met, even others we can never meet or know. It is this covenant other-centeredness, future-centeredness that is so beautifully expressed repeatedly in the Bible. Take this example from Psalm 78:

“...we will tell the next generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, his might, and the wonders he has done.... that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God....” [78:4-7]

These godly folk are concerned that generations from now God's people will still be faithful to his Word. Let me ask you: do you care about the faith of your great, great grandchildren, people you will never meet? If you do you will work now to do what can be done now so that they will be believers then. And so it has continued to be ever since among the faithful people of God. I am a Christian today, instrumentally speaking – of course, I am a Christian today because of the election of God, the redemption of Jesus Christ, and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit – but, instrumentally speaking, with regard to the means by which God draws people to himself, I am a Christian today because my grandfather raised my father as he did so that my father would raise me as he did. My grandfather was a great man, an influential preacher of the gospel. One of my genuine regrets in life is that I have no personal recollection of him, though I owe him so much. He died in 1952, when I was two years of age. But, the Scripture teaches me that I owe him a great deal, for the process that led to my salvation passed through his hands and through his heart. And, of course, through my grandmother's hands and heart as well.

Many of you will remember Ted and Phyllis Brannen, missionaries to Japan who were with us here at Faith for some years in their retirement and old age. Dear people; faithful, delightful Christians! Mr. Brannen, you may remember, was a student at the high school in Newton, Kansas, when my father was a student there. LaVerne Donaldson was in the same class, later a missionary himself, and of interest to us because a relative of Miriam Shelden and Debbie Mellot. Little did they know, growing up in those godly homes in that small Kansas town what would come of their own lives, much less the lives of their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But they grew up to care about the church and kingdom of God and they did the sort of things that Abraham did and salvation flowed from them down the corridors of time. Whether he thought of it in these terms or not, my Grandfather, caring about the covenant of God, saw to the salvation of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren yet unborn by the scores!

I have told some of you a story that is a perfect illustration not only of Abraham's action here, but of Abraham's faithful mind and heart. Ann Hamilton was a Scot. No one knows for sure the year in which she was born or in which she died, but she lived in the second half of the 18th century. She touched my life across those many years because one of the fifth generation of her family was my pastor when I was growing up in St. Louis and some of the sixth generation of her family were my classmates at Covenant College. Ann Hamilton was a devout Christian and on her deathbed – at the end of a long faithful life as Abraham at the end of his – she was thinking of the generations still to come, of the future of the kingdom of God. She quoted to those who were by her bedside Isaiah 59:21:

“As for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord; My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring, says the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore.”

It was the word she lived by and died by; in effect the same word Abraham died by. She prepared her children for the fulfillment of that promise in their lives and the lives of their children. Just like Abraham she was thinking about the future of God's covenant and its triumph in the hearts of untold people yet to be born. And so it was. There are in Kenya today, thousands of Christians who are the product of the ministry of one of her great, great, great grandsons. They are in the covenantal way Ann Hamilton's converts and covenant children. There are Christians elsewhere in Africa who are the product of the ministry of one of her great, great, great, great grand-daughters and her husband. Her life mattered for generations to come!

To be sure, we are to learn from Abraham's example to take great care of our choice of a spouse, our choice and our children's choice. But more than that, we are to learn to have Abraham's mind and heart, committed to God's covenant, to his kingdom, to the salvation it brings to people today and to multitudes yet unborn. Our commitment to that divine grace and purpose for the world is to be writ large over our lives and clear for all to see. When we evangelicals are defined by that mind and that heart, the church and the world will know who and what the Christians are!