

**Genesis 24:10-28, No. 38****“A Powerful Prayer”****December 11, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We read last time of Abraham’s determination to get a wife for his son Isaac, a woman who was not a product of Canaanite culture but was spiritually fit to be the matriarch of the covenant people. He had not told his servant precisely how to find such a woman so the servant was on his mettle to fulfill his assignment.

**Text Comment**

- v.10 Characteristic of the Bible’s narrative art, these details – the camels and the gifts – are mentioned here because they will figure significantly in the story as it unfolds.
- v.11 It was understandable that he would stop at the well, not only to replenish his water supply but to gather information, for the well was the local meeting place. The servant rested his camels but did not water them. Water was typically drawn by the young, usually unmarried, women and done after the sun was down so they could not only take their time but engage in conversation with their friends in cooler temperatures. [Sarna, 164]
- v.14 Nothing is more characteristic of the biblical world view than the sense of the pervasive presence and absolute rule of God in, under, and over the affairs of men. Theologians call this providence and it is the presupposition of Christian prayer for help in time of need. God is present and able to help his people by altering things in the world! It also presupposes, as does this man’s prayer, that God *cares to help*, that he is a loving and faithful God. [Wenham, ii, 143]

The prayer this man prayed is what the masters of the Christian life have long called an "arrow prayer." *Preces ejaculatoriae*, “darting prayers.” These are prayers offered on the spur of the moment; prayers, as it were, shot upward all of a sudden. Andrew Bonar in his diary, after a frustrating day trying to pray at length, observed, “Led to think today that my way of praying is chiefly to be by bolts upward, not by very long prayers at one time.” [Diary, Aug. 25, 1849] And, as often is the case with arrow prayers, as quickly as they are asked, so quickly are they answered. As the Lord says in Isaiah, “Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24).

Notice, by the way, what the servant asks for: that he would be directed to a woman who was hospitable, generous, and kind to animals! She would have to be generous. A single camel will drink 25 gallons of water to recover the weight it lost on a long journey. It can drink that much in about 10 minutes. [Sarna, 164]

- v.16 The servant did not know her name or family yet, but the narrator wants the reader to realize how perfectly the servant’s prayer had been answered by the Lord. Her virginity may have been indicated by her dress, or the reader may be here given information that

was learned only later by the servant. [Wenham, ii, 144] The impression is that she was a teenager.

- v.19 The servant made the test even more demanding. He didn't ask the young woman to water his camels, he waited for her to volunteer to do so. And she offered to give them as much water as they would drink, which, as I said, was a great deal of water.
- v.20 This in other words was enthusiastic hospitality. 25 gallons of water times 10 camels is *250 gallons, almost five 55 gallon drums of water!* Everything in the narrative suggests that the young woman surpassed even the servant's highest hopes. She did even more than the man had asked for in his prayer and did it all willingly and cheerfully. [Sternberg, *Poetics*, 137-139]
- v.21 Any ancient near eastern reader would have appreciated the scene as the man had plenty of opportunity to observe the young woman. It takes a long time to water ten camels!
- v.22 We have here one of a number of texts in the Bible that celebrate the cultivation of beauty with jewelry, cosmetics, etc. even as the prideful use of such things or pride in one's appearance is condemned. The weight of the jewelry is mentioned because it could be used as currency. [Sarna, 165]
- v.24 In other words, he had come looking for a woman of the right character from Abraham's clan, and the Lord had taken him straight to Isaac's cousin. Notice, however, the narrator's precision here. Rebekah had no idea who this servant was and so no reason to mention her father's relationship to Abraham. The reader is interested in that, but at this point Rebekah has no reason to be.
- v.27 The servant began with prayer seeking help from the Lord; he finished with prayer giving thanks for that help. Success, which inflates the ego of the natural man, humbles the spiritual man. His first thought is of the Lord who granted him this kindness, his second for his master for whom this will be the most happy development, and only his last for himself: And as for me – for me – he led me straight to the house of my master's relatives. As we learned in Sunday School years ago: JOY, that is, Jesus first, others second, yourself last!

Now I want to treat this text as an exercise in hearing the Word of God. What do you make of it? What do you carry from it? What lesson does it teach you? You know that you are to be an active hearer of the Word of God. You are to be seriously engaged with the text when it is read and preached? God is speaking to you. But what is he saying? If you should always carry away something important from the reading of God's Holy Word, what is that something in this case?

There is obviously something of importance here. The time and attention given to the details of this story – the specifics of the servant's prayer, the specifics of the answer given to the prayer – all of this is of obvious importance to the narrator. Though economy in words is a hallmark of biblical narrative, when the pace of the story slows down and we are treated to the details, something important is being communicated. What is it?

Well for many Christians through the ages the great lesson of this text was *how to obtain guidance from the Lord*. Or, even before that, the lesson was that the Lord *would provide this sort of guidance for his people*. In other words, as had been done for this man, heaven would send us signals by which we would know what God wanted us to do. In this case the servant needed to know how to find the woman he was looking for, a fit wife for his master Abraham's son Isaac. And so he asked God to give him a sign, to direct him to the right woman in a very specific way so that there would be no question that she was the one. And, sure enough, who showed up first at the well and offered to do the very things the servant had asked God that she do, but Rebekah, Isaac's cousin. He didn't ask Rebekah to water the camels; she volunteered! And, as we often are wont to say, the Lord, in answer to the servant's prayer, gave him more than he asked or thought. He just wanted the right sort of girl. The Lord gave him a relative who met all the moral qualifications and was pretty to boot!

If heavenly direction was given in this way to Abraham's servant, why, so goes this thinking, why not to us as well? And, of course, believers have drawn similar lessons from other episodes in which God granted specific guidance to individuals who sought it. When I was a boy, we heard all the time about Christians who laid out "fleeces." That was the term of art: lay out a fleece. That practice, of course, came from Gideon's request that God confirm, and unmistakably, that he really wanted Gideon, of all people, to lead Israel into battle against the Midianites and that he was not kidding when he said that he would deliver the Midianites into Gideon's hand. You remember what Gideon did, not what the servant did here but similar in some ways and especially in this way: it was a direct request for very specific guidance. He asked God to prove that he could count on the promise God had made to him by asking him to cause the dew the next morning to rest only on the fleece – the animal pelt he had laid out on the ground outside his house – and not on the ground. And, sure enough, the next morning the ground was dry and the sheepskin was soaking wet. Then, risking the trying of God's patience, the timid Gideon asked that God would prove his word once more, this time by putting all the dew on the ground and none on the fleece; and so it was the next morning.

It is incidents like this one in Genesis 24 or that one in Judges 6 that have through the ages led a great many Christians to expect the same kind of guidance, the same sort of specific direction, the same sort of signals from the Lord, especially at times when critical decisions are to be made. I grew up thinking this to be the case, even if my confidence was based much less on my own experience than on anecdotes told by others.

And I was hardly unusual. Through Christian history believers have looked in many different ways to find the sort of specific direction that was granted to Abraham's servant here. They have sought that direction through the casting of lots, since something like lots were used by the high priests in the OT to obtain divine guidance and were used by the apostles to discern whether Joseph or Matthias was to fill Judas' vacancy among the twelve apostles. Or if not lots the flipping of a coin. Those of you who know Francis Schaeffer's life story know how at a critical juncture in his early life as a Christian he sought the Lord's direction by flipping a coin, three times it came up as requested. Later Dr. Schaeffer would advise people *not* to do what he did, but it was the sort of thing Christians did and they did it on the assumption that God would give them such guidance or direction.

Or Christians looked to mental impressions, strong feelings that surfaced in their minds, thinking that it was something like an impression that the Holy Spirit used to direct Paul away from the province of Asia and toward Troas on his second missionary journey. And so it became commonplace to speak of the Lord *speaking to us or leading* us in this way or that; sometimes we would say that the Lord opened a door before us – by which, of course, was meant he told us to walk through that door – or we consulted the Bible at random – a process that came to be called “lucky-dipping,” opening the Bible at random hoping to find a clue as to what we ought to do, what choice we ought to make, where we ought to go, hoping very much we didn’t land on the text where it reads that Judas went out and hanged himself!

Even the finest of men have sought the Lord’s direction in such ways. It was the cause of unending problems during the Great Awakening because both Wesley and Whitefield attempted to discern the Lord’s will for themselves and for their conduct of their ministry either by impressions or by the casting of lots, often to contradictory results. Whitefield was talked out of much of this by Jonathan Edwards, but Wesley continued to rely on such methods of receiving divine guidance to the end of his life.

The problem, of course, was two-fold. First, believers have assumed that what was given to prophets and apostles, or other officers of his theocracy, would be given to them. They did not respect the utterly unique role in history that such men had. For example, in Gideon’s case, he was to lead Israel in holy war against the Midianites. Before God’s people were to serve as the instruments of divine judgment and kill large numbers of human beings, they needed to know that they were in fact supposed to make war on a people. In fact, when Israel attacked other people without divine instruction to do so, as, for example, when the tribe of Dan fell without warning on the people of Laish and seized their land, they were severely judged for their wanton violence. We no longer practice holy war as the people of God and cannot expect, therefore, to be given the same sort of guidance that was given to Israel when they did.

Second, in most cases Christians didn’t actually do what the biblical figures had done – Abraham’s servant or Gideon – and so their methods were pale imitations of the rigorous approach to guidance followed by such men. When *we* laid out a fleece we did *not* do what Gideon did. We didn’t put some cotton in the backyard and ask God to have the dew the next morning on the cotton but not on the grass. I think we knew *that* wouldn’t happen. I think we knew the difference between our fleeces and Gideon’s. Our fleeces rather were regularly in the form of some bargain that we *only assumed* God agreed to. A high school girl would say to the Lord something like this: “Lord, whichever fellow calls me first, let that be the one I should go with to the prom.” But, of course, one fellow or another was likely to call her eventually. How did she know that God was actually sending her a message? I had a girlfriend in college who went to Covenant College in part because, while seeking the Lord’s guidance and one day lying on the dock behind her lakefront Florida home thinking about where she should go to school, she saw what she took to be a “C” formed by the clouds above her. Of course, was it really a “C”? And did it mean “Covenant” or perhaps Calvin or Cornell or the Community College? Or, for that matter, “cooking”?

Think instead of what this faithful servant did. He asked for very specific things in his prayer. He wanted the Lord to present him a candidate for Isaac. He wanted her to display her character in very specific ways. And so she did. But what if no such young woman had appeared at the well that afternoon? Or what if the young woman had been churlish and unhelpful? What if she had never volunteered to water his camels? What if, when he finally asked her to serve him in that way she had replied that she had her own water to draw and that if he wanted his camels watered he should do it himself? Or what if she had been willing to do the chore, but only if he was willing to pay for her service? In all such cases the servant would know that the Lord had not answered his prayer. That was all he would know. He couldn't then say that he wouldn't find the right woman, perhaps he would the next day or the day after that. Perhaps he would find her by conducting a search among the young women of that community with no striking providences to guide him. After all, even Abraham wasn't certain that his servant would be able to find the right woman. He had freed the man from his vow should it happen that he be unable to locate a worthy wife for Isaac. And consider how it went for Jacob, some years later. He came back to this same place, but he found Rachel for himself and then had Leah foisted on him by her scoundrel of a father. No heavenly signal in that case.

The fact is, we are not taught in Holy Scripture to expect the sort of guidance that was given – and only rarely given even to them – to prophets and apostles. We are free, absolutely free to pray as this servant prayed, to ask God for very specific guidance, but we must always be ready to accept that God may not, in fact, to put it bluntly, usually will not answer our very specific prayer for guidance in the same way he answered the prayer of Abraham's servant.

In the Bible we are taught to get our guidance from the Word of God and from the counsel of wise men and women around us. We do not require signals from heaven to live a godly life. Faithful obedience will take us where we need to go. And, at the very least, if we are going to seek such signals, let us do so honestly, not allowing ourselves to invent guidance for ourselves that we have no way of knowing God has actually given to us. As has so often been pointed out, the problem with all forms of "inner light," the notion that God is providing the individual believer with specific signals by which to direct his or her steps, is that it is impossible finally to tell whether the light has come from heaven or from within ourselves. I have far too many times been told by people that the Lord led them to do this or that when it is very obvious – as events would soon demonstrate – that the Lord had done nothing of the kind. If you want guidance of that sort, pray the sort of prayer the servant prayed by the well in Mesopotamia. God may answer, he may not. In any case nowhere does the Bible say that we need specific guidance of that kind in order to serve the Lord and do his will.

So if the text is not meant to illustrate how *we today* are to discover what it is the Lord wants us to do, or in what direction he wants us to go, what is the text teaching us? Well surely we find it in the prayer that the servant asked, the remarkable answer to that prayer, and then the prayer the servant prayed in giving thanksgiving for God's help. God has provided the means by which his promise to Abraham and to Isaac might be fulfilled. God was seeing to the preservation of his covenant, to the purity of his people in the rising generation. This chapter concentrates on a wife for Isaac because Isaac is Abraham's son and successor in the covenant and Abraham was about to die. He needs a godly wife to help him raise the next generation of God's people. And God sees to that through the faithful obedience of Abraham and his servant. He didn't drop Rebekah

from heaven. She had to be found. And it is to Abraham's eternal credit that he sent his servant to find her. And it is to the credit of the servant that he relied on the Lord to direct him to her by looking only for the kind of woman a devout man ought to marry.

Christians are always to do what Abraham and his servant did. Parents and young adult believers are to look for godly spouses precisely so as to preserve the purity of the covenant line, precisely so as to produce faith and obedience in the next generation. That is how God preserves his covenant in the world. And parents and children are to rely on the Lord to provide such spouses just as Abraham and his servant did. The provision is usually not as startling as it is in this case. In fact, even in the Bible it is never as startling or dramatic as it was in this case. Joseph didn't find Mary that way! It was as dramatic as it was here no doubt precisely to demonstrate the importance of finding a godly spouse, the divine approval that rests upon God's children when they take care to marry only in the Lord, and the importance of relying on the Lord to provide that someone with whom to continue the covenant in the next generation.

Such memorably dramatic examples as these, that illustrate important principles for all time, are characteristic of the Bible. Take, for example, the dramatic conversions that we find a few times in the Word of God. Zacchaeus is a case in point, or the Apostle Paul: in both cases this was a sudden, dramatic transformation of life through an encounter with Jesus Christ. But, of course, most people are not converted, do not become Christians, in such a sudden or dramatic way. Covenant children grow up believing in Jesus and, as in my own case, have no experience of stepping out of darkness into light. Even many converts do not have Zacchaeus' or Paul's experience. For them it wasn't nearly so sudden or so dramatic.

In fact Christian conversions are not usually spectacular. But from time to time God will show us, in a particular case, what conversion actually is, what it means for a person to become a Christian, what happens to a person's life when he or she recognizes that Jesus is Lord and begins to follow him. Those conversions serve as a kind of paradigm, an example by which to learn about conversion in general. The Puritans called these extraordinary conversions "election conversions," because they so powerfully and clearly demonstrate the intervention of God in a human life, his powerful working in a person's heart to draw him or her to Christ, and the transformation of life that must follow a true encounter with the Lord – think of Zacchaeus promising to give back everything he had stolen and more. Most conversions in the Bible and in Christian history are not such dramatic lessons in the nature of conversion, but the few that are teach us what a great exercise of divine power is involved when anyone comes to faith in Christ, however that person comes to faith.

Well, in that same way, finding a spouse for a Christian man or woman does not ordinarily happen in such a dramatic way as Rebekah was revealed to Abraham's servant. More often than not it happens through young believing men and women meeting and falling in love. They find one another because they grow up in the same community, or go to the same college, or are introduced to one another by mutual friends, or nowadays, find one another through an internet dating site. Believe me, if we were to describe all the ways in which the husbands and wives of this congregation found each other, we would all be fascinated by the variety. But not a single couple, so far as I know, would have been matched in the way Isaac and Rebekah were. *But, and here is the point, whether in a striking way or a more prosaic way, it was still the Lord who*

*matched them and brought them together.* Didn't the Lord Jesus say this explicitly? "Whom God has brought together," he said, "let no man separate." It is always so when a man marries *in the Lord*.

As surely as it is God's work when a person is transformed from an unbeliever into a believer, it is God's work when a Christian man or woman finds a believing spouse and marries him or her. And, of course, for the same reason. Salvation is at stake and salvation is the work of God. A person's conversion is salvation, but so is a believing marriage for the children who will be born and raised in that home.

The great lesson of this text is not about *how to find* a spouse, even how to find a godly spouse. The great lesson is that God will provide what is needed for the salvation of his people. He will provide the means by which his promises of eternal life are fulfilled in your life and the life of your children. He will do this sometimes dramatically, in ways that make us sit up and take notice; but he will do it, he will provide in every case because salvation is of the Lord. We have our role to play, but no one reading Genesis 24 can think that the servant imagined that *he* had found Rebekah. No, as he says in his prayer of thanksgiving, it was the Lord who led him to Rebekah, it was the Lord who provided for Isaac, and it was the Lord who had enabled him to fulfill his responsibilities that he had undertaken by oath as a servant of God's covenant.

That, brothers and sisters, is the lesson of this text and it is a lesson we are to take to heart for every part and dimension of our lives. We live in the sure and certain expectation that God will fulfill his exceedingly great and precious promises to us, and so we live in the expectation that, by looking to him and relying on him and trusting him for his provision, those promises, every one of them, will come good for us and for our children.

I do not mean, of course, that you can always or even usually find God's provision as easily as the servant found it out in this case. Nor do I deny that the manner and timing of God's provision will not in many cases baffle us and concern us. Many of God's providences confuse us terribly. In this world, as the Scripture itself makes clear in many cases, it is only all too possible that this servant might well have concluded that Rebekah was the one for Isaac, only to discover later that she would not go back to the Promised Land or that she had already been betrothed to another.

But the point of the history is this: one way or another God will provide what you need, brothers and sisters, everything you need to obtain salvation for yourself and for your children. However it is provided it will be he who provides it. And that is why we are to trust him for everything in our lives, absolutely everything! *Trust and obey, for there's no other way!* You and I ought to be, must be, as alive to the presence, the faithfulness, the power, and the willingness of God to provide for his people, as was this servant long ago. You and I both know how often this is not the case; how dull to the Lord's presence and power we are; how little it even occurs to us to look to him for what we need. That we must change, no matter how hard it is for us to change or how long it takes us. We should not rest content until we are as quick with our arrow prayers as this servant was. I promise you this: if we are, we will have more answers like the one he received!