

LIVING IN THE WILL OF GOD
GENESIS 24

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Carey is one of the more godly guys whom I have known. He was two years ahead of me in seminary. He was single and lived on the same dorm floor that I did. He was very evangelistic. Whenever I was with him outside of the seminary, I could expect that he would be handing out evangelistic tracts. He also had a firm commitment to prayer.

Although Carey was single, he wanted to be married. He also wanted to make sure that he got connected with the woman whom God had for him. But how was he to know which one out there was the person for him?

At one point he came across Psalm 37 v. 4, which says, **“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”** He promptly sat down and drew up a list of about twenty characteristics that he felt were the desires of his heart. They included physical characteristics, spiritual characteristics, and personality characteristics.

Soon after that Carey met a gal whom he thought matched up with those listed characteristics very well. He asked me and several other friends to pray that she would have an interest in him. So we prayed. Carey then found out that this young woman had a boyfriend. He asked us to pray with him that she would break it off with this other guy, who was clearly out of the will of God. After that Carey discovered that this couple had just become engaged. He asked us to pray that the woman he was convinced was intended for him would break it off. She did not. She married the other guy.

Carey was crushed. He had been so sure that this was the woman whom the Lord intended for him to have. Today Carey works for a missions agency that seeks to get churches to adopt unreached people groups around the world. He has played a key role in getting a Christian college and seminary and high school established in Bangalore, India. From what I can tell he has been greatly used of God. Carey is also still single.

Most of us, I suspect, have struggled at one time or another about knowing God's will. Perhaps some of us are trying to figure it out right now. Whom should I marry? What is the right job for me? What am I supposed to do in retirement? How should I proceed in the relationship with this one person who is giving me grief?

In our study of the life of Abraham we have seen that God had revealed certain things about His will for this patriarch and father of the Jewish people. He told Abraham that he was to go to the land of Canaan. He told Abraham that He would make of him a great nation and that He would give Canaan to his descendants as a permanent possession. The Lord did not give the details about how or when all of this would happen. So

Abraham's faith was tested. At times he did not do so well. But we have seen that he did finally have a son by his wife Sarah in their old age. Last week we saw that Abraham acquired the first piece of real estate that he could really call his own. He bought a grave site for Sarah, who died at the age of 127.

Their special son Isaac, however, was still single. If a great nation was going to come through him, he needed to have a wife and kids. In that ancient Near Eastern culture it was the responsibility of parents to arrange a marriage. So Abraham needed to get to work.

I.

Thus in vv. 1-9 we learn about ABRAHAM'S COMMISSION. (PROJECTOR ON--- ABRAHAM'S COMMISSION) In vv. 1-3 we read, "**Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. 2 And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, 'Put your hand under my thigh, 3 that I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell...'**" How Abraham has his servant take this oath might seem a little strange to us, but the purpose of the mission was to find a wife and produce grandkids.

In the next chapter we are told that Isaac was 40 when he got married. Abraham was about 100 years old when Isaac was born. So at the time of our story Abraham was approaching 140. Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham. She died at age 127. So almost three years have passed since she died.

The family in recent times had been living in Hebron (HEBRON MAP 2) in south central Canaan. We saw last time that Abraham bought a burial plot for Sarah there. Now Abraham felt that it was time to work on finding his son a wife. If Abraham is going to have lots of descendants, he needed to have some grandkids. That meant that he needed to get a wife for Isaac.

So he commissioned the senior servant in the household to help out. Back in #15, which was about 60 years earlier, Eliezer was called the head servant in Abraham's household. Perhaps this is Eliezer who is being called to this mission.

Abraham charges this servant with the responsibility of finding a wife for Isaac. The servant is given three specific directions. **First**, he is told not to take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites. (CANAAN HARAN MAP) There may have been political and material benefits that would come from marrying into the people who were living around them in the land of Canaan. But in #9 God had placed the Canaanites under a curse. Even more importantly Abraham wanted Isaac's wife to be a believer in the one true God. The Lord's design for marriage is that there be unity between a man and his wife. Spiritual unity is foundational. It is impossible to have a spiritual unity if a believer does not marry another believer in the true God. The New Testament makes it clear that Christians should only marry other Christians. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Secondly, Abraham told his servant to get a wife from among his relatives. Abraham knew that there was faith in YHWH, the God of Israel, among his relatives. He wanted a believing wife for Isaac. So it was among these people where the servant was to look.

We skipped over vv. 20-24 of #22 when we looked at that chapter. The events there set the stage for the trip that is undertaken here in #24. So if you would like to turn back a couple of pages in your Bible, let's take a look at #22 vv. 20-24: **“Now after these things it was told to Abraham, “Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: 21 Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, 22 Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” 23 (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. 24 Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.** These are the people to whom the servant of Abraham is being sent.

Thirdly, the servant was by no means to take Isaac back to Mesopotamia. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. If Isaac went back to Haran where his other relatives were, God's plan might be endangered. Abraham was Isaac's only immediate relative in Canaan. It was conceivable that Isaac would be tempted to stay in Mesopotamia among relatives there. God had made it clear that this should not happen. Canaan was the promised land.

The instructions to the servant are the last recorded words of Abraham. They reveal a faith that has come to maturity. In v. 7 he expresses his confidence, saying, **“...he [the Lord] will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.”**

II.

In the next section, vv. 10-27, we learn about THE SERVANT'S FAITHFULNESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE SERVANT'S FAITHFULNESS) This chief domestic servant sets out on a 450 mile journey north to the upper Euphrates River to the city of Nahor. (CANAAN HARAN MAP) Nahor was Abraham's brother. Nahor's city was Haran.

The servant went first to the well outside of the city. Not only would this man and his camels need water, but a man looking for women was likely to find them there, too. Carrying water was a woman's job. The servant and his entourage happened to arrive in the evening when it was cooler and the women of the community would come for water. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In vv. 12-14 the servant prays, **“O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. 13 Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. 14 Let the young woman to whom I shall say, ‘Please let down your jar that I may drink,’ and who 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 have shown steadfast love to my master.”

No sooner does he get done praying than Rebekah approaches. According to v. 16 she was very beautiful. My translation adds that she was a maiden, which might be more accurately translated as “a young woman of marriageable age.” The text then adds specifically that no man had known her.

Rebekah quickly proves to be an answer to prayer. She gives the servant a drink and then offers to water the camels--- all ten of them. That meant a fair amount of work. One thirsty camel could drink 25 gallons of water. He in turn gives her a generous reward. He proceeds to ask a key question in v. 23: “Whose daughter are you?” She identifies herself as the daughter of Abraham’s nephew. This would make Rebekah Isaac’s first cousin one removed.

Rebekah offers this servant a place to stay. Abraham’s servant recognizes all of this as no mere coincidence. This is the hand of God. This is God’s providential care. The Lord has specifically answered his prayer. The man acknowledges that fact in worship in v. 26. He praises God in v. 27, saying, “... **the Lord has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen.**” The servant has been faithful, and God has demonstrated His providential care.

III.

In vv. 28-60 we learn about THE MISSION’S SUCCESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE MISSION’S SUCCESS) Rebekah runs home to tell her family about what has happened. The ring and the bracelets catch the eye of Laban, Rebekah’s brother. In later chapters it is revealed that Laban has an inappropriate attachment to material things. But now he takes a lead in welcoming this representative of his relatives from down south.

Rebecca’s father Bethuel is also around, and we might wonder why Laban seems to be in charge so much. Tablets discovered from a town down river from Haran called Nuzi (NUZI MAP) tell us that in this culture usually one son in the family was appointed to have considerable jurisdiction over his other brothers and sisters. Such seems to be the case here.

It was also customary in this society for business to be postponed until after hospitality had been adequately displayed. (PROJECTOR OFF) But in v. 33 we find that the servant is insistent upon discharging his responsibility before he eats. So in the next 15 verses he describes his mission and what has happened to him. The whole story is repeated in the text for a reason. The author wants his readers to see clearly how the providence of God has been at work. There may not be any supernatural miracles that have taken place. But clearly God is directing and guiding and leading His people.

So the servant concludes in v. 49: “Look, I’ve laid my cards on the table. Will you let me take Rebekah back, or not?” Notice the response of Laban and Bethuel in v. 50: “**The**

thing has come from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good." This is clearly the work of God. Laban and Bethuel see God's providential care at work. They have some kind of faith in the God of Abraham.

Thus they grant permission for the servant to take Rebekah. In v. 53 Abraham's servant brings out gifts for Rebekah and for her family. There is a big feast which follows. The next morning the servant asks to be able to leave with Rebekah. Understandably the family is hesitant. The servant fears that a prolonged departure will just make leaving harder.

The family decides to ask Rebekah what she wants to do. That also sounds reasonable, but in most of the cultures of that general region, dad would simply have decided. But again one of the documents from Nuzi adds insight to the cultural situation. A statement from a married woman at Nuzi was found with this comment: **"With my consent my brother Akkenlenni gave me as wife to Harazzi."** Thus both the authority of the woman and her brother are recognized in a situation involving marriage.

The significance of this is that it points to the reliability of the Biblical record in reflecting the way that things really were 4000 years ago in this part of the world. Liberal critics of the Bible claim that Moses did not write Genesis in his era of 1500 BC. They claim that Genesis was written in the 500s BC. But there is no way that people living in the 500s BC would know about this cultural custom involving the authority of brothers in Mesopotamia in 2000 BC. The reference to this cultural custom shows that the author was writing about stuff that truly happened in the time of Abraham.

IV.

Then in vv. 61-67 we come to ISAAC AND REBEKAH'S MARRIAGE. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAAC AND REBEKAH'S MARRIAGE) Rebekah is sent away with her family's blessing. In v. 63 it says that Isaac was in a field meditating, or praying. The meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain, but probably it means "praying." Isaac knows that the senior servant of the family has been sent to find a wife for him in Haran. Isaac, as well as Abraham, has much at stake in the outcome of this trip. No doubt that is a focus of his prayers.

Isaac has just returned from Beer-lahai-roi, the well that Hagar had named when God had appeared to her in the wilderness and answered her prayer for the survival of herself and Ishmael. The name of the place means "the well of the Living One who sees me." Now Isaac, as he is praying for God to see his need, looks up to see his future wife. Verse 64 says, **"And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel..."** In v. 67 we are told that Rebekah became Isaac's wife.

V.A.

(V. THE LESSONS) We come then to THE LESSONS that can be gleaned from this chapter. I find three principles at work here concerning our responsibilities as believers

who want to do the will of God. First, we need to FOCUS ON GOD'S REVEALED WILL. (V. THE LESSONS A. WE NEED TO FOCUS...)

God's revealed will to Abraham consisted of these factors: Abraham's descendants were to become a great nation. They were to live in the land of Canaan. The Canaanites were under God's curse. Isaac was the one through whom the promises were to be filled.

The circumstances in which Abraham was supposed to apply these principles were these: Isaac was not married. Abraham as Isaac's father in that culture had the responsibility to arrange a marriage for his son. Abraham's relatives in Haran worshipped the same God that he did. Abraham was too old to make a long journey to Haran. Abraham's servant was a reliable individual. God had proven Himself to be faithful when Abraham followed God.

Abraham applied God's revealed will to these circumstances and decided that the wisest course of action was to send his servant to find a wife for Isaac in Haran where his relatives lived. Abraham's focus was on following God's revealed will in the circumstance in which he found himself.

The servant knew that it was God's will to obey his master. Therefore it was God's will that he find an eligible girl among the relatives in Haran. The servant had a practical problem in getting to the relatives and finding just the right woman. So he prayed that this appointed woman might be identified in a certain way. The Lord in turn saw to it that his prayer was answered. But notice that there was no appearance of God or His angel telling these people what to do. There was no prophet with an inspired word from God directing them. There was no vision or even an inspired dream. There were simply wise decisions made based upon the revealed will of God and providential care in answered prayers.

My friend Carey thought that God had revealed His will to him about the woman that he was supposed to marry. That proved not to be the case. The key difference was that God had made specific promises to Abraham and his family. I don't think that was the case with Carey.

Christians often seek to use signs to determine the will of God. Signs, however, are often misused by Christians. Sometimes they are used to justify decisions that are at odds with God's revealed will in the Bible. Sometimes they are completely random in nature. Sometimes God has clearly made His will known to us. Oftentimes He simply expects us to make wise decisions based upon Biblical principles and common sense.

The servant here had a purpose for the things for which he prayed. He knew that Isaac needed a strong woman physically who would be able to endure the life of a nomad in southern Canaan. He knew that the mother in the promised line needed to have a kind, hospitable spirit. Thus he asked the Lord that this woman might volunteer to pour water for all ten camels. That was a lot of work. God answered his prayer. The servant also

tested the apparent answer with the revealed will of God. He needed to make sure that Rebekah was one of Abraham's relatives. She was.

Our primary focus ought to be on doing God's revealed will as it is taught to us in the Bible. William Carey, whom we have also been considering in recent weeks, was a shoemaker by trade. He was converted as a teenager and became involved with a group of Baptists in England. He studied the Bible in his spare time and began doing lay preaching. In 1785 when he was 28 he accepted the invitation to become the pastor of a small congregation. About that time he began reading a book about Captain Cook's voyages. He also began focusing on the last three verses of the Gospel of Matthew, which we often refer to as the Great Commission, because Jesus there commands His followers to make disciples of all of the nations.

An opportunity came for Carey to present his concern about making disciples in the remotest parts of the world to a group of pastors. When he was done with his presentation, one of the senior members of the group said, **"Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine."**

If Carey had taken that remark from an older pastor as a sign from God, he might have never pursued his ideas further. But his focus was on the revealed will of God. The Bible said that Christians should take the gospel to the ends of the earth. He decided to write up his convictions in a book. Shortly after it was published, he spoke to the Baptist Association Meeting in Nottingham, England, and challenged the pastors there to consider the implications of the Great Commission. He uttered this challenge to them: **"Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."**

The following day the Baptist Missionary Society was formed, and a bit later William Carey became one of its first two missionaries. There were serious obstacles that threatened to undermine his efforts to get to India. If he had regarded any or all of these obstacles as signs from God, he might never have gone. But his focus was on the revealed will of God in the Bible.

Sometimes we Christians think that God has this individual plan for us to which He holds us accountable to figure out. We are supposed to use signs or circumstances or mystical feelings or advice from others or a feeling of peace to find out what it is. If somehow we miss this plan, if we take a wrong step, then the rest of our life may go right down the tubes.

What I find in this chapter is that the focus of our concern ought to be doing the revealed will of God. It is His Word to which we are accountable, not some secret, hidden plan that lies out there. If we are faithful to do what the Bible says, we can be confident that God will guide our path through life.

B.

The second principle which I find in this chapter is that we should PRAY FOR GOD'S DIRECTION. (V. THE LESSONS A. B. PRAY FOR GOD'S DIRECTION) Doing and

living in the will of God means prayer. In vv. 12-14 the servant prayed that God would bring along the appointed woman for Isaac. In v. 63 it appears that Isaac was praying and that a likely focus of his prayer was that the servant would find the right wife for him. Probably Abraham was also praying for the success of this mission.

Famous British pastor, writer, and Christian leader Steven Olford points out, **“Prayer is not overcoming the reluctance of God to give, but prayer is the bringing into adjustment of our will to His will so that He can righteously do what otherwise He could not do.”**

The Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.” When we as individuals are praying for God’s will to be done and when we are focusing on doing God’s revealed will, we can be confident that we are living in the will of God.

We also need to pray for God’s will to be done in our church. In the Great Commission Jesus gave us our basic marching orders. We are to be about the work of making disciples. That involves evangelism and building up the saints in the faith.

C.

The third lesson which I find here is that we need to TRUST GOD’S PROVIDENCE. (V. A. B. C. TRUST GOD’S PROVIDENCE) Abraham trusted in the providential care of God when he gave his servant the responsibility to find Isaac a wife. The providential working of God was obvious to Abraham’s servant. In v. 27 he declared, **“... the Lord has led me in the way to the house of my master’s kinsmen.”** Then he repeated the story to Rebekah’s family to show the evidence of that providence. The response from Laban and Bethuel in v. 50 was, **“The thing has come from the Lord.”**

Throughout this story there were no visible miracles, no revelations from God, no appearance of angels, no prophets, no audible voice from God. Yet the providence of God is clearly evident. I suspect that it is more often in this providential working of God that His purposes are accomplished than in direct miracles.

(EPHESIANS 1:11) In Ephesians #1 v. 11 the Apostle Paul writes, **“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will...”** God’s sovereign purposes are always accomplished. In Romans # 8 v. 28 (ROMANS 8:28) the same apostle says, **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

In the American Revolutionary War George Washington suffered many more losses than victories. He was outnumbered and outgunned and outsupplied by the British. The British army had superior forces and arms. They had much better training. The Continental Army was often on the brink of disaster. Yet the Americans won the war. George Washington was a Christian man who was very much aware of the providential care of God. In August of 1778 he wrote a letter to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson in which he wrote, **“The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that**

he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations, but, it will be time enough for me to turn preacher, when my present appointment ceases; and therefore, I shall add no more on the Doctrine of Providence.”

When we are looking for a mate, we need to focus on doing God’s revealed will, and we need to pray for the Lord to provide in His timing. When we are running a deficit in our family budget, we need to focus on doing God’s will---living within our means by God’s help, and we must pray. When we are dealing with health problems, we must act wisely in the decisions available to us, and we must trust the providential care of God.

How then do we determine the will of God? The best way is to read the Bible. It is our best guide to making right decisions. It contains not only specific commandments but also principles that can help us to make wise decisions. Our primary responsibility is to focus on doing God’s revealed will, to pray, and to trust in God’s providential care. As we do that, we can be confident that God will guide us and that we are following His will.