

## Genesis 24

### Match Making

#### Match Fit

*"Abraham was now old and well advanced in years"* (v1). Right at the very beginning of the chapter we are reminded that Abraham's life is about to end. He is no longer "match fit". The previous chapter has dealt with the death of Abraham's wife, Sarah. There is a need for new players to enter the field, players with match fitness. Abraham and Sarah need to be replaced. Isaac will take over from Abraham, but we also need someone to take over from Sarah.

Every soccer team has some players sitting on the bench. Sometimes a soccer team has difficulty scoring a decisive goal. Suddenly, the coach calls one of his substitutes on to the field and it is not unusual to see him score a goal soon after. For top teams you cannot conclude that because a player is sitting on the bench at the start of the game he is an inferior player. Usually, the coach has strategic reasons for delaying the introduction of the substitute. It is now time for Abraham and Sarah to leave the field and for Isaac and Rebekah to take their place.

The whistle does not sound. The game goes on. The decisive goal has not yet been scored. God promised Abraham he would give him the land. Yet Abraham will die with only a small plot of land which he purchased at great cost. Abraham and Sarah will leave the field without much evidence that the goal will be scored. Genesis 24 shows how God brings new players on to the field who will make a dramatic difference. Of course, this is a World Cup game that is being played, because God intends to make his side, his people the most exalted team in the world.

An office Christmas Party I attended many years ago was a Masquerade. We were to come wearing a mask and a matching outfit. I went as a Mexican bandit, wearing a Zorro mask, a sombrero, a poncho. On my belt I had a sheath with a Stanley knife in it. I carried a rifle under my arm or rather a large plastic water gun which was loaded in case anyone dared to insult me. I won first prize, a large box of Roses chocolates. To win first prize in a fancy dress contest you have to match things.

In Genesis 24 we see an Isaac being matched up for the life that lies ahead of him as the one God has chosen to receive first prize. If you've seen the movie *Forest Gump* then you will know that life is a box of chocolates. However, first prize in Genesis 24 is not a box of chocolates but "the land." Abraham says to his servant, *The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me on oath, saying, 'To your offspring I will give this land' - he will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there* (v7).

Abraham realises that Isaac's life must match up with this promise. If he is to inherit the land he must stay in the land. If he is to produce descendants as many as the stars in the sky then he will need to meet his match, to be fitted up with a wife. If he is to remain a worshipper of the true God he must not marry a woman of the land, a Canaanite, a person who worships other false gods.

I trust that everyone of you, as a child of Abraham, is quite clear that you must never develop a serious romantic relationship with a person who has not made Jesus his or her Lord.

Regarding the essential match-ups for Isaac's life, Abraham's servant crystallizes the issues in his question: *"What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?"* (v5). Abraham's answers to this question reveal two essential match-ups: (1) a woman willing to marry Isaac; (2) an Isaac who stays in the land.

I can identify with this. When I was studying at Moore College I found it hard to see how I'd develop a relationship leading to marriage. I was absorbed in my studies. I didn't have time to develop a big social circle. Also, having come from New Zealand my circle of friends was much smaller than that of my classmates. God was very gracious in providing a wonderful wife when I was limited in what I could do to find a wife for myself. Isaac was even more dependent on God bringing a wife to him because he couldn't leave the land to get himself a wife.

### Test Match

Many years ago when I lived in New Zealand I became convinced that a certain girl was the one God wanted me to marry. On one occasion, I was sitting in a large university lecture theatre for a Christian conference. We had a lot of people in the lecture theatre but there were still lots of vacant seats. This girl arrived late and as soon as I saw her at the door I prayed, "Lord, if she is one you intend as my future wife cause her to come and sit next to me." She came and sat next to me and I took this to mean that God had chosen her to be my wife.

Abraham's servant prayed for a similar sign:

O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too' - let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master (12-14).

I ended up having a long friendship with that girl who sat next to me. It did seem we would eventually marry. But my prayer for a sign was a mark of spiritual immaturity. Her sitting next to me was not a sign that she was my future marriage partner. There are some key differences between Abraham's servant's prayer for a sign and my misguided attempt. Abraham's servant was looking for a sign for the sake of his master. I was looking for a sign for myself. Also, I was just looking for a sign that would indicate God's will. Abraham's servant prayed for a sign that would go much further, a sign that would reveal a woman who had a fine character. The woman Abraham's servant was looking for was a woman who would go the extra mile, a woman who would show kindness to a stranger, a woman who would not merely give him water to drink but would offer to water his camels as well.

Let me warn you against seeking guidance by praying for signs. Don't use this example of Abraham's servant as a rationalisation for seeking God's will. You have all the guidance you need in God's word. You might say, "Ah, but what about Gideon? He too sought signs from God. He said to God,

If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised - look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said' (Judg 6:36-37).

We read: "And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew - a bowlful of water" (v38). Is that good enough for Gideon? No! The passage continues:

Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.' That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew" (vv39-40).

Gideon's request for guidance by a sign was nothing like that of Abraham's servant. Abraham's servant prayed for the sake of his master, just as we must pray for the sake of Jesus Christ. Gideon prayed for himself. Secondly, Abraham's servant wanted a sign that would reveal the character of a woman fit to be Isaac's wife. Gideon was not after a sign that would reveal character. His request was akin to asking God to perform a magic trick and his approach to guidance was akin to the way ancient people sought guidance through the evil art of divination. Thirdly, Abraham's servant genuinely sought knowledge of God's will. Gideon was not genuinely seeking to know God's will. He asked for these signs because he was desperately hoping there was a way out of doing God's will. So I repeat, do not, do not seek knowledge of God's will by praying for signs.

Remember, when Abraham's servant prayed his prayer there was no Bible to consult. But we are told:

All Scripture is inspired by God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3: 16-17).

When I prayed for a sign that that girl would be my future wife I was right out of line. My theology was woeful. Scripture is all the guidance we need not only to know the general will of God for our lives but also for making particular decisions in specific situations.

When Rebekah met that servant she didn't know she was being tested. She passed the test with flying colours and the result of this was that she became the wife of Abraham's son and a key person in the fulfilment of God's great purposes for the world. Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Lk 16: 10). Are you faithful in the little you do? Do you go the extra mile? Are you a person who relates to others with kindness? Remember, God is testing you and what he cares about is not your ability, not your gifts but your character.

### **Striking the Match**

A considerable portion of the chapter is concerned with the conversation of the servant with Rebekah's brother, Laban. Before we are presented with Laban's words we are told how to interpret them:

As soon as he had seen the nose ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and had heard Rebekah tell what the man said to her, he went out to the man and found him standing by the camels near the spring (v30).

You get the picture? Laban is introduced to us as a man motivated by greed, something that will be made even plainer at a later time in history when Isaac's son, Jacob, ends up in Laban's household. So whenever Laban says anything in this chapter you have to see his greed being expressed:

Come, you who are blessed by the LORD. Why are you standing out here? I have prepared the house and a place for the camels" (v31).

He sounds like a gracious host. But he is trying to fatten up the goose for Christmas dinner. He flatters the servant. He makes out as though he was primarily responsible for extending hospitality, whereas we know that Rebekah must take the main credit for this, since she first invited him to come to her home (v25).

The servant goes into a long explanation of how God showed he had chosen Rebekah to be Isaac's wife. One reason why God performs such a great miracle is to give Laban and Bethuel, Rebekah's father, the extra push they need to let Rebekah go. After they have heard the servant's story they say,

This is from the LORD; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has directed (vv50-51).

Whatever his faults Laban is a man who recognises the authority of God. But remember, we must never forget Laban's essential character as a greedy man. In verses 52-53 we are told:

When Abraham's servant heard what they said, he bowed down to the ground before the LORD. Then the servant brought out gold and silver jewelry and articles of clothing and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave costly gifts to her brother and to her mother.

Greedy Laban is rubbing his hands with glee. He wants to squeeze as much juice as he can out of this rich servant. The longer he can keep the servant with them the more he hopes to get out of him. So in verse 55 we read: 'But her brother and her mother replied, "Let the girl remain with us ten days or so; then you may go."' But the servant is adamant and the spotlight moves back from Laban. Rebekah is again placed in the spotlight: 'Then they said, "Let's call the girl and ask her about it."' So they called Rebekah and asked her, "Will you go with this man?"' (vv57-58). Remember, one of the essential match-ups is a willing wife. Rebekah answers, "*I will go*". Here is a woman who is willing to become Isaac's wife.

### Isaac Meets his Match

And now the scene changes. Genesis 24 closes by describing the romantic night when Isaac met his match. Every detail underlines the intensity and the intimacy of their first meeting. First, we are told that Isaac came from Beer Lahai Roi, that is, the well where Hagar discovered that God saw her as she really was. In the same way that God saw Hagar's need he has also seen Isaac's need for a wife. We are then told that Isaac "went out to the field one evening to meditate."

Isaac was not a man who dwelt in tents like his future son, Jacob, but a man of the field, of the outdoors, like his future son, Esau. Many years ago I shared housing with a man who would spend hours in the bath. He reckoned he did his best thinking in the bath. Isaac was a man who would go out into the fields to meditate, to do his thinking.

The first time Rebekah meets the man who is to become her husband she meets him as he really is, a man of the outdoors, a man who spends time meditating and thinking. Some people like to go out in the outdoors to work, to do things, to be busy. For Isaac the outdoors is a place to go and think. But in particular we are given a picture of a man alone with his thoughts. The language of the passage is all about seeing. He has come from the place that speaks of God's seeing. He goes into the field to meditate, that is, to see things with his mind. He looks up and sees the camels approaching. Rebekah looks up and sees Isaac in the distance. God has seen their need for each other and now they each see their perfect match. In eager anticipation, Rebekah gets down from her camel, ready to meet her match: "Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?" she asks, already sensing that this is the most wonderful moment in her life. "He is my master", the servant answered, indicating that now Isaac takes over this role from his father, Abraham.

When Rebekah's female intuition is confirmed she takes her veil and covers herself because her beauty is to be uncovered by Isaac only after they are married and not before. And please take this point very much to heart. It is a very special thing for two Christians to marry each other both as virgins. The servant tells Isaac the story of how God had clearly chosen Rebekah to be his wife. "Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (vv66-67). Isaac is the new master and now, since Sarah has left the field of play, Rebekah comes on to the field to play her part in the greatest game of all.

There are those who interpret this story in a typological manner. Abraham is likened to God the Father and Isaac to Jesus. Abraham's servant is the Holy Spirit. Rebekah is the Church, the bride of Christ and so on. This is an irresponsible way of handling the biblical text. The central point is this. God had promised to produce descendants from Isaac and that required that he first have a wife. Humanly speaking, Abraham's refusal to compromise made it harder to find a suitable wife. But as the Abraham and his trusted servant looked to God to provide and guide, trusting in him, God provided wonderfully. Similarly, Jesus, as the ultimate Son of Abraham, refused to compromise and when he died in humiliation and agony on the cross it seemed, humanly speaking, that all was lost; that the hopes of Jesus' disciples had been dashed to the ground. But God wonderfully provided, not only raising our Lord from the dead but providing him with a wonderful bride, the church, you and me.

I do not know whether there is some good thing you long for with all your heart. You long for it so much that you are tempted to do whatever is necessary to get it or at least to rationalize conduct about which, if you were honest with yourself, you have deep reservations. Don't compromise. Stick to that which you believe the Lord would have you keep on doing and trust him to meet your needs.