

Genesis 24:10-27
The Choice of Rebekah Made

Making decisions is a part of life. Some of the decisions we make are relatively meaningless and very routine, such as what to wear, where to eat, and what to do on a Friday night. Other decisions have the potential to be life changing, such as who to marry, what career to follow, and where to attend worship. Some decisions we can make without much thought, because we know that if we get the decision wrong, it really does not matter that much anyway. Other decisions compel us to fall on our face before God and seek His wisdom, because we know that if we err, the ramifications are significant.

As Abraham entered his later years, he realized that he had one more significant decision to make. He looked at his adult son and realized that Isaac needed a wife. The time had come to continue the family line, to ensure that the promises of seed and land would continue. Therefore he called in his most faithful and valuable servant and charged him with the task of going back to the land from whence God had called him to find a wife for Isaac. The servant had questions of course, since he wanted to serve his master faithfully. The most important of these questions centered on the issue of whether Isaac should leave Canaan and return to his ancestral homeland if his future wife refused to join him in the land Abraham had been promised. When Abraham insisted that Isaac remain in Canaan beyond any other consideration, the servant had his answer, and he made his preparations for the journey.

The Journey and the Test

Having accepted the responsibility of finding a wife for Isaac from whatever selection was available from Abraham's relatives in the homeland, "the servant took ten camels from the camels of his master, and set out with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor" (v. 10). The ten camels were laden with both supplies for the journey as well as gifts for the girl and her family should he find her. This indicates that the journey was intended to take some time. It is also likely that the servant did not travel alone; other servants would no doubt have been required to care for the animals and add to their numbers as they traveled. One man with such a cargo would have been too tempting for robbers along the way.

Those gifts were the *mōhar*, or bride price. It was the custom for the husband's family to compensate the future bride's family for the loss of a family member who was a productive worker. The price was negotiated between the leading men of the two families, in this case the servant, who was acting as a proxy for Abraham, and the father of the future bride. The future bride had no formal say in the matter and, in fact, need not even be told of the arrangement until after the fact.

The servant knew where he was going, in general. He knew the family he was seeking. The precise destination was Aram-Naharaim, a word that means "Aram of the two rivers." Thus, though it was a place of undetermined location, it was likely in central Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. This region is referred to in Scripture and other extra-biblical texts as Paddan Aram (Genesis 25:20). To get there from Canaan would have taken the servant at least one month. The servant likely took the same trade route, though in reverse, that Abraham had taken when he moved into Canaan some

three score years before. Scripture is silent on how the servant knew exactly where to go, but perhaps this is simply an indication of the work of God in guiding the man to the desired location.

After the long journey, the servant arrived at a potential destination. He had likely traveled throughout the day and, now that it was late in the afternoon, he rested by the town well. Scripture informs us that when he arrived, “he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water” (v.11). The purpose in stopping at the city’s water supply was twofold. First, there is no doubt he and his camels were tired and thirsty from the day’s travels. But also, the well would have been the congregating place for many travelers as well as the local inhabitants who need the precious resource for their preparing the evening meal. The task of getting the water usually fell to a young girl who was at least old enough to have the physical strength to carry the water, and so the location would have been ideal for beginning his search for a bride for Isaac. In fact, the meeting of a prospective bride at a well is a common motif in the Old Testament. Consider,

“¹Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east. ²He looked, and saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. ³When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

⁴Jacob said to them, ‘my brothers, where are you from?’ And they said, ‘we are from Haran.’ ⁵He said to them, ‘do you know Laban the son of Nahor?’ And they said, ‘we know him.’ ⁶And he said to them, ‘is it well with him?’ And they said, ‘it is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep.’ ⁷He said, ‘behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.’ ⁸But they said, ‘we cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.’

⁹While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. ¹¹Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. ¹²Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father.

¹³So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister’s son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. ¹⁴Laban said to him, ‘surely you are my bone and my flesh.’ And he stayed with him a month” (Genesis 29:1-14).

“¹⁵When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. ¹⁶Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. ¹⁷Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock. ¹⁸When they came to Reuel their father, he said, “‘why have you come back so soon today?’ ¹⁹So they said, ‘an Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock.’ ²⁰He said to his daughters,

‘where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat.’ ²¹Moses was willing to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses” (Exodus 2:15-21).

As he waited for the young women to come and draw water, the servant prayed. And he prayed what might seem to us a rather peculiar prayer.

“¹²He said, ‘O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham. ¹³Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; ¹⁴now may it be that the girl to whom I say, “please let down your jar so that I may drink,” and who answers, “drink, and I will water your camels also” - may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master”” (v. 12-14).

He asked God to bless his endeavor. That is not surprising. He appealed to God’s kindness. That also seems appropriate. We cannot know how much the servant knew about the relationship between God and Abraham, but as Abraham’s most trusted servant, it is likely that he knew a great deal. No doubt over his years of service he had come to understand the promises of God to Abraham, and no doubt he had served Abraham faithfully as the fulfillment of those promises were a long time in being realized.

And the servant knew his role. Three times in the prayer he referred to Abraham as my master. The language of the prayer indicated that the servant was focused on Abraham, rather than Isaac. Clearly the ‘lovingkindness’ for which the servant asked had more to do with the fulfillment of the wishes of Abraham for Isaac to find a wife from his homeland than any particular characteristics of the wife herself.

Yet the servant’s prayer asked for a very specific sign. The servant not only asked for a sign, but prescribed for God how God might reveal the young girl for whom he had been sent. The servant asked that he might know the chosen bride-to-be by her gracious act of hospitality. Practicing hospitality was a vital social custom in the ancient world where such things as inns had not yet evolved. We can recall a time when Abraham played host to God and His angels. (Genesis 18:3-5). Such hospitality was not uncommon in the culture; in fact the absence of such civility would easily be interpreted as a sign of disrespect.

This social expectation included the host being responsible for his guests for as long as they remained with him. And a generous host was expected to care for his guests’ animals, see to it that the feet of his visitors were washed, provide a meal, and even provide overnight accommodations if necessary. While the servant was certainly not under the roof of any particular host, the point was that travelers were to be treated with respect and dignity, and have their needs met to the best of their ability by those whom they encountered. A weary traveler by a well in a distant town was a prime opportunity to serve in this capacity, and a young girl who saw that acted to meet the traveler’s needs was precisely the kind of young girl that would make a suitable wife for his master’s son.

Asking for a sign was very common in the Old Testament. We can think of Gideon,

“³⁶Then Gideon said to God, ‘if You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken,
³⁷behold,

I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry
on

all the ground, then I will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken.’

³⁸And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. ³⁹Then Gideon said to God, ‘do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.’ ⁴⁰God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground” (Judges 6:36-40).

The Test Passed

Despite what might seem to us to be put on the spot, God did not take offense. Neither did He waste any of the servant’s time. “Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder” (v. 15). That is to say, before the servant had even finished speaking his prayer, God had already begun to answer it. God’s plan had already been in motion. We are not told if the servant had bowed his head, but the passage implies that as the servant looked up from his prayer, he witnessed God’s gracious response in the form of a young girl coming toward him.

This is an intimacy of events that reminds us of the promise of the relationship between man and God in the new earth, a time when “it will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24). Such is the confluence of divine will and human action. Together they achieve the providential purposes of our sovereign God.

The first thing we learn about the girl was her lineage. We are told the name of her father (Bethuel), grandmother (Milcah), and grandfather (Nahor). Only then do we discover something about the girl herself and what she was doing. “The girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up” (v. 16).

The girl was described as beautiful, which was convenient. She was also described as a virgin, which was mandatory. Her innocence protected the lineage of Abraham. It was demanded that she not secretly be carrying the child of another if she married Isaac. Implied in this description as well is the fact that Rebekah was of child bearing age. While the Hebrew word for ‘virgin’ can also be translated as “young girl of marriageable age,” the fact that Scripture adds that “no man had had relations with her” points to Rebekah being a virgin. The repeated emphasis of these facts - ‘virgin’ and “no man had had relations with her” - indicated that the indispensable requirements for becoming the wife of Abraham’s son were met in full.

The servant waited for her to fill her jar with water from the well before he approached her. Then he came up quickly and put forward the test. “¹⁷Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, ‘please let me

drink a little water from your jar.’ ¹⁸She said, ‘drink, my lord’; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink. ¹⁹Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, ‘I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking.’ ²⁰So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels” (v. 17-20).

The servant did not let the opportunity slip away. He ‘ran’ up to the young girl. In doing so, he set off a rapidly unfolding chain of events. The servant asked politely for a drink of water. Rebekah responded without hesitation as she “quickly lowered her jar” to allow him to drink. She acted not only without mistrust, but she also acted generously, demonstrating the character that the servant hoped to find. The servant had asked for “a little water” but she lowered her jar and let him drink his fill. The Hebrew for “gave him a drink” means to “drink all he wanted.” She responded as quickly to his request as the servant had in running up to meet her. The language reminds the reader of Abraham’s similar behavior when visited by God and His angels. Then, Abraham ‘ran’ from the tent door to greet them. He then went ‘quickly’ into Sarah’s tent to tell her to prepare the meal. Finally, Abraham ‘ran’ to fetch the calf to be served (Genesis 18:2, 6, 7).

Also, without being asked she offered to water his camels as well. And Scripture points out that she did not mean to give them just a little water, but to care for them until “they had finished drinking.” This would have been no easy task with only one water jug. She must have made several trips to the well and must have become very fatigued with hauling water back to the camels. Scripture here emphasizes that Rebekah was more than beautiful and more than of virtuous character. She was gracious and generous as well.

What did the servant think of this behavior? While Rebekah moved back and forth from the well to the camels, “the man was gazing at her in silence, to know whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not” (v. 21). As she watered his camels, the man took the time to ponder his success. He gazed at the girl. The Hebrew word implies that he watched her very closely. He noticed not just what she did but the attitude with which she did it. Did she show her fatigue? Did her face show signs of exasperation and frustration that his camels were drinking so much? Did she sigh as she had to make yet another trip back to the well to draw water?

It is interesting that even though God had very specifically answered his very particular prayer, the servant still had doubts. Perhaps he was trying to be cautious but not presumptuous. Perhaps he was trying to be careful not to rush God’s timing. After all, for all we know this was the first girl he had met on his journey. Certainly others would come to the well to fetch water for their families. There was no need to choose the first option with which he was presented.

The Choice Made

After mature deliberation, the servant was convinced that this was the one. So, “²²when the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half-shekel and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels in gold, ²³and said, ‘whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room for us to lodge in your father’s house?’” (v. 22-23). He offered her gifts and then asked about her family. The

answer he received must have seemed too good to be true. Not only was the girl beautiful, unmarried, and gracious, but she was from the very family to whom the servant had been sent.

The specific value of the gifts is unknown, but their possession by a young girl would mark her out as a young lady of wealth and beauty. Yet, the purpose of the servant was not only to honor Rebekah, but to demonstrate the wealth of his master. Also, Rebekah may not have immediately understood that these were bridal gifts. She may have simply believed them to be tokens of thanks from a weary, but apparently very wealthy, traveler. She, of course, had not been privy to the deliberations between Abraham and his servant, nor had she heard the prayer the servant had offered as he waited at the well. To Rebekah, the servant's actions were all very sudden, and quite without any particular context.

We also should note that the servant gave the gifts to Rebekah before he knew to whom she was related. Also, the servant does not ask the girl her name, but only the name of her father. He knew with whom he would negotiate the marriage. Rebekah answered, “²⁴I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.” ²⁵Again she said to him, ‘we have plenty of both straw and feed, and room to lodge in.’” (v. 24-25). This was yet another example of both Rebekah's generosity and her trust. For a woman to offer to care for a weary traveler was not unusual, especially in such a public place as the town's well. But to invite him home, without first discussing the matter with her father, showed both her willingness to serve and her faith in her father's hospitality.

Notice that the servant did not treat Rebekah with any special honor, other than the gifts. She was not asked to ride back to her home, nor did the servant carry the water jug to ease her burden. He simply asked if he could stay with her family and then followed her home. Yet Scripture declares that his heart must have leapt at the news he heard. “²⁶Then the man bowed low and worshiped the Lord. ²⁷He said, ‘blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His lovingkindness and His truth toward my master; as for me, the Lord has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers’” (v. 26-27).

The man prostrated himself before the Lord. His immediate response to God's working out His sovereign plan was worship. He did not forget God in his moment of triumph. Still he was humble. Still, he understood that his success had been based on the relationship God had with his master, Abraham. He knew it was not his own shrewd devices that had discovered Rebekah, but rather the unfolding sovereign will of God. It was God Who had not forgotten His promises to Abraham. It was the Lord Who had guided him on his way and brought Rebekah before him.

One can wonder at what Rebekah thought of all this. She now learned (if the prayer was said aloud, and if she was listening) that the man was a mere servant and that his master was related to her father. She might have wondered Who this ‘Lord’ was, and if He was one of the many pagan gods that her family worshipped. Other instances of such a prayer indicate that it indeed may have been said aloud and, in fact, was as much for the benefit of the human audience as it was a genuine prayer to God.

“⁹Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the Lord had done to Israel, in delivering them from the hand of the Egyptians. ¹⁰So Jethro said, ‘blessed be the Lord who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under

the hand of the Egyptians. ¹¹Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people” (Exodus 18:9-11).

“¹³So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, ‘blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel.

¹⁵May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him” (Ruth 4:13-15).

“³²Then David said to Abigail, ‘blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me, ³³and blessed be your discernment, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodshed and from avenging myself by my own hand” (1 Samuel 25:32-33).

And so the two of them went on their way. A girl had been found who met all the requirements for a wife for Isaac. But the question remained as to what her family would say about the match.

Takeaways

We see in this passage the need to make a decision. And in so doing, we see the reliance upon prayer. And from the narrative we can observe not only how the servant prayed, but how he responded when God revealed his answer.

To begin, we must see that the servant was not afraid to pray specifically. While we might not be inclined to set such specific boundaries as to how God might reveal His answer, Scripture does not rebuke the servant for his specific request.

Second, the servant did not presume upon God when an apparent answer came. He waited until God revealed clearly His plan. He did not jump to conclusions. He did not presume that a little information was the whole. He waited and was patient.

Third, the servant worshipped. He gave God credit for answering his prayer. He acknowledged God as the source of the blessing he received. He had asked God and when God answered, the servant rejoiced in the answer.

Finally, the servant took the next step. He acted upon what God had revealed. He did not assume that because God had revealed to him this young girl, that the matter was settled beyond all doubt. He simply went forward in faith, trusting that the God Who had brought him thus far on his journey would see it through to the end.