

Responding to God's plans

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[0 : 00] Well, imagine, if you will, Isaac and Rebecca, happily married couple, very much in love, at a dinner party, arranged by some Hittite neighbors, in a small gathering, just a few other couples to get to know each other.

And then after the main course, well into the small talk of the evening, the inevitable question comes up, so, Isaac and Rebecca, how did you two meet? Now, if you're married, you'll know that's a common dinner party question to get a conversation going, and it often makes for some very interesting stories, doesn't it?

My mom and dad, for example, met when my dad mistakenly stepped on my mom's toe while they were coming out of the train in rush hour. He was looking for some way to meet her.

He had been spying her out in the train for, I think, a number of months, and so he decided, well, that's the most immediate and most effective. I think her toe eventually healed.

But you might know some other interesting stories of how couples met. Thing is, when we look here, Isaac and Rebecca's story is a little different from most, but it's what this entire chapter in the Bible is about.

[1 : 12] That's what Genesis 24 is about. It's all about how Isaac and Rebecca met. And the reason their story is different from most and recorded in the Bible and so much space is devoted to it, 67 verses.

I mean, you must understand and appreciate that in the olden days, when they wrote this stuff down on parchments, these parchments were very valuable. They're not going to waste time writing 67 verses on something that's not important.

And the reason this story is so important is because Isaac and Rebecca's relationship was, in fact, part of a much bigger story.

You see, their small lives were swept up in God's big plans for this world, which we've been reading about so far in Genesis, if you've been with us. We started Genesis last year.

And as we read the story, and then we see this couple and how they're caught up in the story, that's what makes this particular marriage such an interesting one. Now, like most marriages of the time, it was an arranged marriage.

[2 : 14] So everything, and it was typical of those times, especially amongst the nobility of the ancient world, everything was organized before the bride and the groom even got to meet each other most of the time.

And so this was an arranged marriage. But as we read the story, what we soon realize is, yes, it was an arranged marriage, but it was arranged by God.

And in that sense, I suppose every Christian marriage is an arranged marriage, isn't it? We don't decide where and how we're going to meet our future spouse or whether or not we'll even get married.

It's God who decides those things for us according to his purposes for us. You'll be surprised to know that God arranges more in your life than you think.

And also, that means don't worry if you're not married or will never get married. This story, in fact, is a good reminder that God is in control of the smallest details of his people's lives. And so the situation you're in right now is exactly where God wants you to be.

[3 : 15] And that's also why this story is more than just a romantic love story of how boy meets girl. It's more than just a story like you see on the Valentine's Day movies that you may have been subjected to on Friday night.

Those cheesy love stories. No, this is a story about God working in the little things to fulfill his big plans. And it's a very encouraging story when we see it in that perspective because it also shows us

how his people get caught up in his plans and the roles that his people play in him working out his big plans for the world, his ordinary people.

And to see that in the story, what I want to do this morning is explore three characters in the story and what roles they played in God's plans coming to pass. And the three characters we're going to be looking at this morning are Abraham, Abraham's servant, who I think is the main character of the story, and Rebecca.

So let's have a look at each of them in turn. Firstly, and I do want you to keep your Bibles open so you can follow along. I will be referring to certain verses there in Genesis 24. So the first character we see is Abraham.

Now we by now know Abraham quite well. We know he believes in God's promises and is willing to do anything God tells him to do.

[4 : 37] We've learned that and he's learned that over his journey of faith for the last few chapters. He's a man who left everything he knew. He came to a strange land all because he trusted in God's promises for his future.

Last week we were reminded how even in the midst of death, after the death of his wife Sarah, his hope in resurrection and possessing the promised land someday in the future was an unshakable hope, a solid hope.

But it's here in this story, at the very end of his life, as we read, in fact, what are his last ever recorded words here in Genesis 24, 24, it's here that we find out one more important aspect of his unshakable faith before he moves on and the focus shifts to his descendants.

And that, the thing we learn about Abraham's faith in this story, it's a very important one. And that is that while he trusts that God is going to do what he said he's going to do, Abraham doesn't assume God's going to do it without him doing something as well.

And we see this play out right at the beginning of the story. So, follow along from verse 2. He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, Put your hand under my thigh.

[5 : 53] Okay, I know that's really weird. So, I may as well just comment on it. That was an ancient custom, in fact, of making a personal promise, similar to how maybe in a court of law you might put your hand on the Bible as you swear to tell the whole truth.

Well, it's a similar idea. That personal promise was made and sealed with this sign. Anyway, it goes on. Verse 3. I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.

The servant asked him, What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back from the country you came from? Make sure you do not take my son back there, Abraham said.

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 earth, 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.

Okay, so I want you to notice everything that Abraham says, everything that Abraham commands his servant, is based on promises that God has already made.

[7 : 06] So God said that Isaac will be the source of many offspring for Abraham, and through whom those offspring are the ones through whom God is going to fulfill his covenant plans for the world.

And that God said that Isaac's descendants would inherit this very land that Abraham is in, of Canaan. And so Abraham figures, well, Isaac needs descendants.

And that means he needs a wife, right? And she mustn't be from the Canaanites, because Abraham knows they were cursed, and destined to be the servants of Abraham's descendants, which we read earlier in Genesis chapter 9.

And so what Abraham does is he sits there, and he works it out, and he puts all of what God has revealed so far together, and makes his own plans based on those things.

So he goes, Okay, so no Canaanites, but Isaac can't live somewhere else. Okay, so this is what we're going to do. And he turns to his servant, and he makes this elaborate plan of how he's going to trek to Mesopotamia with his camels, and go find a wife for Isaac.

[8 : 14] But what's important to notice here, is how Abraham doesn't just wait around for God's promises to happen, but he actively makes plans for those promises to happen.

You see that? It's very important you see that. He's not just going, Oh, well, God's promised that, I'm just going to sit around and see what God does. He is doing things and planning and acting to make those promises happen.

Now, if you're very perceptive, and you were with us last year, you may be wondering how this is any different to Sarai, trying to make God's plans happen with the Hagar story.

You remember that? She tried to get descendants for Abraham her way and not God's way? Well, the difference between that and this, of course, is that while she acted out of a lack of faith in God to do it, Abraham is actually doing the opposite.

He's acting in full faith that God is going to do what he said, and make his plans happen. And so he's acting and making his plans in line with God's plans. That's what's going on here.

[9 : 15] That's why it's very different. Abraham is here, not just sitting back, but he's planning and acting in line with God's plans that he's revealed. And so in this story, you've got this tension between God's sovereignty in making his promises happen and his people's responsibility to act in line with those promises.

Abraham actually doing things was vital to the promises happening. And Isaac finding a wife and having descendants like God said he would. So think of it like this, this idea of the conflict between God's sovereignty and Abraham's responsibility to do something.

Think of it like this. You've won a plane ticket to an exotic destination somewhere far away, a place that you could never reach by yourself, but now you can because of this plane ticket that's got this destination on there.

But to get there, to get to the destination, you don't just sit in your room and read the ticket over and over, hoping that you'll arrive at this destination, right?

And you don't gather with the other passengers and just sing songs about the wonderful airline. No, you have to do something, right? You have to pack your bags, you have to get your passport, you have to get a lift to the airport, and you've got to board the plane.

[10 : 44] In other words, to go on that holiday, you need to access the means by which that holiday is being made possible, namely the plane. Well, Abraham knew that if God's promises were going to come to pass, he would need to act and make plans and access the means by which those promises will happen, namely a wife for his son Isaac.

Do you see that? And in that way, Abraham is an example to us. Because we have a ticket in the gospel of Jesus Christ to travel through death and be resurrected and reach a new creation we could never reach by ourselves, by our own works.

And that is possible all because Jesus died to take our sins to make us worthy citizens of that new creation that we can live there and enjoy God's eternal promises.

And so Jesus has given us a passport and a plane ticket to get where God intends for his people to go. But what that means is that we must now line up our lives and our plans with those promises that we have received and not just sit around and read the Bible and sing songs about God, but actually we've got to start doing what God has called us to do in order to make his promises happen in our lives.

Now I know you, or people often don't like the sound of this because it sounds too Catholic, doesn't it? But it's not. It's biblical actually. The Catholics say you've got to fly the plane as well yourself.

[12 : 14] That's the difference. But over history, the reaction to Catholicism has actually gone too far the other way saying, well, we've just got to let go and let God. You've heard that?

That's not true. Abraham didn't let go and let God here. He was a man of faith, but he acted actively in line with that faith and so must we. The Bible is quite clear that we have a responsibility to, as Paul says in Philippians, take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us.

He goes on and he says, brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

See, when you get called, you've got to respond, don't you? In Philippians 2, Paul says this, You see, it's both of those.

You notice that? We must work to respond actively to the gospel in our lives, but as we do, God works in us. As we respond, as we line up our lives with God's plans, God makes His plans happen in our lives.

[13 : 50] It's a, it's a, we have a role to play just as Abraham knew. And that's exactly what we see in this story. We see both Abraham's working God's plans out in his life and God working those

plans out through what he does.

So, he's taking action, making these plans for the servant to go get a wife for Isaac, but also knowing that God, as He does that, God is working in those plans.

He tells His servant, the angel of the Lord will go ahead of you. He knows that as he acts, He's not doing this out of a lack of faith, you see. He's not going, well, I'm going to have to make this happen myself. He's going, God is going to make it happen, but He's going to use my plans and my responses to His promises to make it happen.

That is how He's an example of faith. And so, how do we do that? How do we act in response to God's promises and work out our salvation like the Bible says we must?

Well, we get on the plane. We access the means that God has made available to us in His church to take us to where He wants us to go and become the people He wants us to be.

[14:58] So, if coming to church is not that important to you, then you are neglecting the means that God has made available to save you. And if being involved in the work of the church is not important to you, then you are not lining up your plans with God's plans.

And so, how do we do that? How do we get involved in what God is doing? Well, there's fewer better examples in the Bible of how to get involved in God's work than Abraham's servant to whom we now turn.

So, that's the second character I want us to see this morning, Abraham's servant. What I like about Abraham's servant besides his unquestioning devotion to his master is that before he carries out this vital kingdom mission that Abraham gives him, you know what he does?

He gets on his knees and he prays. Verse 12, then he prayed, Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today and show kindness to my master Abraham.

See, I'm standing beside this spring and so he prays on not knowing how he's going to achieve this mission that he's been given but entrusting its success to God. God, make me successful today.

[16:19] And then, not only does he begin his mission in prayer but as we read on and he sees God at work, he immediately, what does he do? He bows down and he praises God for answering his prayer.

Verse 26, then the man bowed down and worshipped the Lord saying, praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives. And so he realizes that God has been undertaking his mission the whole way and that comes out in his fervent prayer and praise.

Through God's promptings and answered prayer, he led this servant right to the very woman who he had traveled over mountains and deserts to find for Isaac. And then, as the story goes on, we get to learn a little more about this servant in the scene that follows and we meet a rather notorious character who's going to come up later in Genesis, Rebekah's opportunistic brother, Laban. He's a piece of work. You might know, years later, Laban tricks Rebekah's son Jacob into marrying the wrong woman and gets 14 years of labor out of him.

[17:34] Well, it seems in this story, his priorities are similar, that he's thinking what can he get out of this arrangement? So notice in verse 30, what causes him to arrive on the scene all of a sudden?

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.

Come, you who are blessed by the Lord, he said. Why are you standing out here? Come into my parlor. See, once he sees the money, he's suddenly very friendly, isn't he?

Anyway, so the servant goes to the house. He tells his story. It becomes clear that all this is of the Lord and the family agreed to give Rebekah to Isaac in marriage.

Not like she's got any say in the matter. That's how it was in those days. After which, the servant gives what's basically Labola. He gives gifts and money as a bride price for Rebekah and he's about to leave with her and he's packed his camels when Laban suddenly says, oh no, no, no, no.

[18:41] Can't she stay just, you know, for a while longer, a few days, maybe a month or two or ten, you know. Can't she just stay back for just a little while?

And I think the servant realizes what's going on at this point. And he realizes Laban might be trying to pull a fast one. And so he insists. He insists, no, I must take her now.

He's having none of this. Because this covenant mission must succeed. He's not going to let anything delay it or endanger it. And so we see in the servant an example for us. We see a great example of how to carry out missions for God's kingdom that God gives us. And that is to do them prayerfully, to do them wisely, and to do them persistently. Because Christians, you see, have not only been given salvation and eternal life, through Christ and the covenant that he brings us into, but we've also, as covenant people, been given a mission to make disciples and bring others into that covenant of salvation.

[19 : 49] And just as this servant's mission was to bring Rebecca into God's covenant people, so we must take seriously our mission to bring others into the covenant, and we must do that prayerfully, realizing that we can't succeed at all if God doesn't go before us and undertake what we're doing.

And then in praising him for answered prayer and recognizing how God is working through our prayers, which by the way means coming to our monthly prayer meetings that we're going to be having at this church the first week of every month, because it's through our prayers that God carries out his plans in our world and in our lives.

It's one of the means that he has given us to take us where he wants to be and make us who he wants to make us through our prayers. So we've got to take prayer seriously if we believe that. And then secondly, we must carry out God's mission wisely. We must watch out for things that may endanger our mission and not let anything get in the way of us carry out that mission and not be people pleasers.

Laban wasn't interested in being a people pleaser here. And often being a people pleaser is going to endanger us carrying out our mission to bring others into the covenant. We must be God pleasers, not people pleasers.

[21 : 09] And then thirdly, we must do that persistently. You know, had the servant said, yeah, okay, Laban, there's no rush. He probably would have been accommodated and wined and dined.

He could have had a blast in Mesopotamia. It was quite a great place to be, but he didn't do that. The mission was priority number one and he wasn't going to rest until he saw his mission complete. Well, neither should we as God's people. We shouldn't sit around while there's kingdom work to be done here in Plumstead and beyond. And that's the example that the servant gives us, an important example.

But then before we finish, we have one final example, the simplest but probably most profound in the story and that is the example of Rebecca herself.

So Laban wants to keep Rebecca back. Maybe he thinks if enough time passes, she won't get married and they'll be able to get another bride price from her because she was a beautiful virgin.

[22 : 13] She could fetch quite a price and if Laban can manage to get two or three bride prices, why not? But the servant doesn't let him. The servant insists on taking her now as agreed and so Laban comes up with a plan.

Well, let's ask her. He didn't ask her up until now. Let's ask her. You wouldn't want to force Isaac's future wife, your future queen, to do something she doesn't want to do, would you now?

He's putting the servant in quite a difficult position. No doubt, assuming that Rebecca isn't that keen to leave everything she knows with a stranger and marry a man she's never met.

And that's why it's so surprising when she finally speaks up and says, no, I think I want to go. You can imagine Laban's reaction.

What? But you see, it's that moment and that's the, almost the climax of the story when Rebecca simply says, yeah, I want to go. It's at that moment that we learn something about Rebecca.

[23 : 19] We learn her willingness to separate herself from the comforts and trappings of what she knows so that she can go off and be part of God's covenant and part of God's plan. You know, some of the greatest stories that have been told in books and movies are about the protagonist, often young and unsure of themselves, making a key decision to leave what they know behind and get caught up in something much bigger than themselves.

All the great stories basically have that formula. Lord of the Rings with Frodo, you know? Star Wars with Luke Skywalker, the young protagonist going off and being swept up in something much bigger than himself.

The Matrix with Neo, it happens as well. All the great stories, all the great popular legends have that similar theme, someone leaving the familiar to be part of something much greater than themselves.

Well, that's exactly what happened in Rebecca's life here. And this is the moment when she takes that, in the words of Obi-Wan Kenobi, first step into a larger world and goes back to Canaan and meets and marries Isaac and enters into God's covenant people and becomes an heir to God's eternal promises.

And that's how she is our example today. Because as Christians, we've also been caught up in something much bigger than ourselves, haven't we? Through faith in Jesus, we enter into God's covenant people and His plans to save this world from sin and brokenness and death and renew it into what He's always planned to be and we are caught up in that.

[25 : 06] But to enter into that involves deliberate separation. It involves that we make a decision to separate ourselves from this world and this world's priorities, from this age, from what is comfortable and from what we know.

Becoming a Christian involves a separation, doesn't it? A separation from sin and a separation from your own self-determination and it involves submitting to the rule of someone else, Jesus Christ. And living out as a Christian involves ongoing separations in our lives, doesn't it? From the things of this world, the values and the priorities of this age and lining up your life towards kingdom priorities and making decisions in life, not according to where you want to go or what you want to do, but according to where God wants to take you.

That is what being a Christian is. It's a life of willing separation and submission. And in fact, that's what we see all the characters in this story doing.

So ask yourself, I want you to ask yourself this morning before we finish, which of these characters, Abraham, Abraham's servant or Rebecca, which of these characters is most challenging you this morning where your life is right now?

[26 : 31] Think about it. Is it Abraham? Making his plans for the future in line with God's covenant promises? Do you need to start lining your plans up more with God's plans?

Or is it the servant putting the kingdom mission first and carrying it out in prayerful obedience? Do you need to make a better habit of praying and looking for ways to get more involved in God's work?

Or is it Rebecca willing to separate herself from what is familiar and comfortable and get swept up in what God is doing in this world? Do you need to make more separations from this world and the comfort and security it gives you so that you can step out in faith and be part of God's great plans for the future?

Let's pray. Lord we thank you for this chapter in the Bible we thank you that these characters in it are such great examples to Christians today and we pray Lord that we will take their examples to heart and that we will show the active faith of Abraham and work out our salvation as you call us to do as you work in us and through us according to your good purposes we pray that you would help us to be more like Abraham's servant wisely and persistently putting first kingdom priorities and Lord help us to be like Rebecca willing to separate ourselves from the comfortable and the familiar in order to get swept up in your great plans for the future Amen Amen