

God and the Servant
Genesis 24

The story of Abraham's servant is in Genesis 24. It is by far the longest single story in Genesis. So we know for sure that it is an important story. Why is the story so important? I am not even sure. What's important is that we know the story. It will do its work after that, whether or not we can say why it is important.

Remember that in Genesis, once God made promises to Abraham at the beginning of Genesis 12, everything after that in Genesis shows God remembering his promise to bless. Everything from then on in Genesis shows God taking care of Abraham and his descendants.

Our story describes Abraham's servant going back to Abraham's home land and Abraham's clan to get a wife for Isaac. That's the story. Abraham himself is only in the start of the story, but he's mentioned several times. This is one more story that shows God working to make Abraham into a great nation of blessing.

My Bible titles this chapter, "Isaac and Rebekah." But those two are not the main characters in Genesis 24. By far the most important human character is Abraham's servant, who is not named. Maybe it is still Eliezer, the head servant from Gen 15, but that is 60 years ago.

The writer probably knows the name of the servant, but the name is omitted on purpose. What we need to know is that he's Abraham's servant. That's important. He is truly a servant.

I have named this story, "God and the Servant." Those are the only two characters mentioned right through this story. This story never says, "God said this" or "God did this." But people talk about him, and pray to him, and worship him, and it is clear that he is active.

I find the servant an attractive character. I want to be like him. The servant knows that he is a small part in a big machine. He has a small job to do in a big plan of God that does not center on him at all. The servant is not at the center of God's plan. The big plan of God centers on Abraham and Abraham's family. That's how and where God is working.

But the servant knows his faithfulness is important, and he *needs* God's help to serve well, and he *asks* for God's help, and he *gets* it, several times. And he worships and praises God as much as anyone in Genesis. I want to be like him.

The Servant's Oath

Abraham made his servant solemnly promise *not* to get a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites, where they lived, but to go back to Abraham's homeland and clan, and get a wife for Isaac from those people. Abraham was not impressed with Canaanites.

Abraham's family and clan do not worship YHWH, the God of heaven and earth. I'm sure heard about Yahweh from Abraham before he left, 65 years earlier, but they have other gods (Josh 24:2). But to Abraham, those people were still much better than the Canaanites.

The servant has one fear: "what if she won't come out here? What if she won't move? The woman has to be willing, what if she's not?" The servant find a woman, and must persuade her family, but he's not so worried about that. This will be an arranged marriage, but the woman has to be willing. "If she's not willing to move here, Abraham, shall I take Isaac to live over there?"

"No," says Abraham, "absolutely not. God promised with an oath to give *this* land to my offspring, Isaac must *stay* here. God will send his angel, it will all work, don't worry. But, if she's not willing, you are free from this oath to me." Once the servant has this cleared up, he leaves. Ten camels loaded with valuables, and the trip would take perhaps a month.

The Servant's Prayer

They travel about a month. The servant gets to the well near of a town in Abraham's homeland. It is late in the day, the time when the younger women come to the well to get water.

The servant prays: "LORD, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today. If I say to a woman, 'Please give me a drink,' and she says, 'Sure, and I'll water your camels too,' then, God, let her be the one you have chosen for Isaac. Then I will know that you are showing kindness to my master Abraham."

So the servant asks God for a sign, but it is not a random sign. No, this sign, where she waters the camels, this sign measure character. I asked professor google how much camels drink. When they are thirsty, 20-30 gallons, 100 liters. Ten camels means 250 gallons of water. If her pail holds 2 ½ gallons, 10 liters, she will need to pull up 100 pails of water and pour in the trough.

So whoever passes this test must be unusually energetic, and unusually hospitable to strangers. This servant want's God's help selecting this woman for Isaac, but he's also using his mind, and he is looking for character.

Rebekah at the Well

That's how the servant wants God to show him that he's chosen the right young woman. Before he had finished praying, Rebekah was coming out. He looked up, she seems to be the first one to show up, and she's very beautiful. The servant asked her for a drink, she said, "Sure, and I'll water your camels too." She gave him a drink, and ran to the well to get started with the camels.

And the servant watched closely to see whether or not the LORD had made his trip successful. He's watching to see if she will finish what she started. This is an endurance test.

And we read, “when the camels had finished drinking.” She quit when the camels lost interest in water. That’s how long she hauled water. The LORD made clear: Rebekah’s the one. At that point, the servant gave her jewelry, bracelets and a golden nose ring. He put these on her.

The servant asked who Rebekah was, and if her family could put him and his camels and men up for the night. She is the granddaughter of Abraham’s brother Nahor. And she says, “we have plenty for your camels and your people to stay with us.”

The Servant Worships God

Abraham’s servant bowed and worshipped God. “Praise be to the Lord, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to Abraham. As for me, the Lord led me to the right place.” “God, you are taking care of Abraham, being kind and faithful to him, and you’re showing this by leading me and guiding me, and giving me success. I worship and praise you.”

The servant bowed down, by the well, and worshipped and praised God. He was two thirds done. He has to find Abraham’s clan and people, and he must locate the woman God has chosen for Isaac. Those are both done. Now, she must be willing to come back with him.

In this story, Rebekah was the woman that God had chosen to marry Isaac. I am not convinced that God chooses the spouse of every believer who gets married. This story is a unique in that God had already chosen that family to plan an incredibly important part in his plan to bless the nations.

The Bible has lots to say about marriage, but not about God choosing a spouse or telling us who to marry. I don’t think that happens anywhere else. Scripture teaches little about spouse selection, except that a believer should only marry another believers. God’s great concern is how that couple lives together after they are married.

God likes love stories, and God is a romantic of sorts, I would say. This story of the servant finding Rebekah is a romantic story. But the servant’s test is all about the character of the woman, and that’s the kind of criterion that makes sense in the Bible.

Laban and the Servant

Rebekah ran home to tell her family. Rebekah’s brother is Laban. Her father is Bethuel, and Bethuel her father shows up a little bit in this story, but Laban her brother is mostly the one who speaks for the family. He listens to Rebekah’s story, sees the kind of jewelry that the servant gave Rebekah, these obviously mean wealth, and he hears that this man is Abraham’s servant.

By my reading of Genesis, it has been 65 years since Abraham left this area, when God called him to head out. That’s before Laban’s time.

But he's heard the story about YHWH calling Abraham to leave, and he knows that Abraham is his grandfather's brother.

So Laban hurries back out to the servant, who's waiting with his camels at the well. "Come," he says, "you who are blessed by the YHWH." The nameless servant is certainly blessed by God, and Laban can see that.

Yahweh is not Laban's God, but he knows that Abraham serves Yahweh, and if Rebekah heard the servant's worship, she heard the servant mention Yahweh two times in his praise. Laban knows that whatever God the servant has, that God has blessed the servant.

The Servant's Story, a God Story

So the camels are taken care of, and the servant and his men have washed up, and they bring out food to eat. But the servant won't eat yet. (Wow, good for him, that would not be Ed.) He won't eat because he's got something important to say. He needs to say why he's there before he eats.

So at this point, food on the table, the servant tells the whole story again. It took 24 verses for Genesis to tell the story the first time. It takes 16 verses for the servant to retell it again before they eat. There is little in the second version that we did not already know.

But the purpose is different. When the servant tells the story to Rebekah's family, he has a particular purpose. He knows that Rebekah is the woman God wants for Abraham's son, and now he must persuade this household that Rebekah is the woman God wants for Isaac.

He begins with Abraham's wealth, more detail than we got before, the Lord has blessed my master abundantly, he's wealthy. God gave Abraham all kinds of things. And he made me take an oath that I would get a wife for his son from his clan, you people here, not the Canaanites.

I said to him, "what if the woman will not come back with me?" Abraham told me, "The Lord will make your trip a success. But if they refuse, you are free from the oath.

So, when I came to the spring, I said, "Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success. If I say to a woman, "give me a drink," and she says, "drink, and I'll water your camels, too," let her be the one you have chosen."

Before I finished praying in my heart, Rebekah came out. I asked for a drink, and she said, "Sure, and I'll water your camels, too." And she did. So I put the jewelry on her, and I bowed down, and worshiped the Lord. I praised the God of Abraham, who led me on the right road, to find the granddaughter of his brother.

Response of Rebekah's Family

When the story was over, the servant looked at Laban and Bethuel, Rebekah's brother and father, and, "Now, if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master, tell me, and if not, tell me." And Laban and Bethuel answer together, "This is from YHWH, we can say nothing one way or the other. Here is Rebekah, take her and go, as YHWH directed."

These people do not worship YHWH. But they recognize the gods at work when they see it. This is new to them, but in their mind, the servant's prayer, and the sign he gives God, and then Rebekah doing this remarkable thing, make it clear that if they do not go along with marriage, they are fighting that God, and they don't want that.

They agree, not because they feel loyal to Abraham, or because they are impressed with the obvious wealth, but because the God of Abraham and his servant has chosen Rebekah, beyond doubt. They do not want to fight that. *This is from YHWH, we can say nothing one way or the other. We have no say in this. Here is Rebekah, take her and go, as YHWH directed.*

The Servant Worships

When Abraham's servant heard what they said, he bowed down to the ground before the Lord, YHWH. We can guess what he said, we've heard two stories of this already, we're not given his words this time. He bowed to the ground before the Lord. Then, after all this, they eat together.

Will you Go? I will go.

The next morning, the servant was ready to leave. "Send me off, please," he said, which is polite way of saying "I'm ready to go now." (I might try that.)

But her mother and brother think this is a little fast. They are not actually that eager. The NIV says they answered, "let her stay ten days or so, then go." The Hebrew line is not clear, but most translations read, "let her stay *at least* ten days." They did not fight it the evening before, but they are stalling a bit now. And, they have a point, this is all pretty fast.

"No," says the servant, "please don't slow me down. Yahweh has given me success, so send me off so I can complete my task." So Laban and his mother say, "let's ask the young woman about it." They probably assume that Rebekah will also want to stick around a while. So they call Rebekah in, and say, "Will you go with this man?"

This is important in the story. When Abraham first asked the servant to do this, this was the one thing the servant was nervous about. He was not concerned about the long journey, he's not concerned about finding Abraham's family – it is a big world out there, he's not nervous about finding the right woman, and he's not nervous about her family approving this.

All of these were real factors, but for the servant they were not the sticking point. What was he concerned about? What if the woman does not want to come? We've been waiting since the beginning of the story to hear about this.

This is an arranged marriage, and it is a patriarchal culture, but he knows very well it is her choice. Some will tell you that wives and daughters were just property. Well, they might have been in some cultures, but they were not in biblical patriarchal cultures.

So they say to Rebekah, "Will you go with this man?" And she says what Laban and her mother probably do not expect: "I will go." "I will go." She did not lack courage.

Rebekah was an impressive young woman. It seems she was the first woman from town to get to the well, she kindly gave the servant a drink, and she offered to water his camels, and she finished a long grueling job.

And now she is ready to do what Abraham himself did: at the call of YHWH, she will leave her homeland and her family and head out to a far place. Near the beginning of this story, Abraham explained to his servant, "Yahweh, the God of heaven, brought me out of my father's household and my native land."

And that is exactly what the same God is doing to Rebekah. He is bringing her out of her father's household and her native land, and taking her to the place and the people he had chosen for her. Back in Gen 12, when God told Abraham to leave, he did not hesitate. He packed up and left.

And Rebekah did not hesitate either. "I will go." And she did not need ten days. And just as Yahweh seems to have arrived out of nowhere to Abraham, and chosen him to bless, so now, from Rebekah's side of this, Yahweh arrives out of nowhere, and calls her, and her going is a clear act of submission to Yahweh, who she has not served to this point.

So they sent her. And they blessed her: "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands, may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies."

They cannot give her God's blessing, because they don't serve Yahweh. But their family blessing on her is much the same as God's blessing to Abraham, the last half identical.

So she goes back with the servant, and met Isaac. She became his wife, and Isaac loved her.

The Servant

Let's talk about the servant, then about God. The servant is nothing more or less than a good servant, and he finds all kinds of meaning in this. I want to be like him. He is not the center of God's plan, Abraham and his family are the center of God's plan, the servant serves Abraham.

For the servant, success is to do what his master asked him to do. Success comes up several times in this story. And his story is full of God. He asks God for help with the hard parts, the tricky parts, and once he's through that part, he bows to the ground and worships God, and praises and thanks God for giving him success in his task.

He knows that he's not the center, he knows that his small part is important, he knows that God is with him and will help me. He does not wait until it is all over to thank God. At every stage of success, he stops to thank God. Everyone stops and waits while Abraham's servant bows to the ground and worships God.

The God of Abraham

That's the servant. God? This story shows God keeping his promise to bless Abraham, and to make a nation of him. Abraham appears only at the start, but far away from Abraham, God is keeping promises he made to Abraham.

Imagine God at work far away from you, keeping his promises to bless you. Abraham had faith, as this story starts, and knew this was happening.

This is also the story of God choosing Rebekah, and God bringing her to Canaan. This is a God story from start to finish.

To summarize: God's in control. God answers our prayers. God keeps his promises. That's it. We've heard it many times, and we're hearing it again. Amen.

PRAYER: Make us more like this servant, God. Lead us to live like that. Help us understand that none of us is the center of your work, and all of us have a small but important part to play. We can stop and ask for help at any moment. We also can bow and worship you at any moment, and thank you. O God, whatever our service to you is, one day at a time, give us success.

Thank you for your presence with us everywhere, thank you that you answer prayer, and keep your promises. Thank you that you are also working far away from us to keep promises that you made for us. Thank you that the big picture of our lives, since you're our God, is blessing. You are a generous God, and it will only increase. Glory to you, our God. Thank you for choosing us calling us out and into your people, like you called Rebekah, and bringing us into your unimaginable blessing. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.