

THE RUNAWAY BRIDE

GENESIS 24:1-28 APRIL 6, 2022

Every year, around 10,000 mail-order bride marriages occur in the United States.¹ Maybe, like me, you didn't know that in 2005 the US instituted the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act. One news article trying to put a positive spin on this practice wrote, "*The idea that men are buying women and the women have no say and no free will is not true. The mail order brides are very much in control - or at least, they should know what they're doing.*"² Not very reassuring.

Genesis 24 gives us the longest, single episode in this book.³ It tells the saga of Abraham's servant leaving Canaan to find a wife for Isaac. As we go with him, we're swept away in a story about God's fabulous providence, human faith, and the hard tensions we face when seeking the will of God.

Genesis 24:1 - Abraham was now old, getting on in years, and the Lord had blessed him in everything.

What does it mean to be blessed? At 140, Abraham was wealthy - he had a great house with servants and riches and flocks and all that - but the best blessings of his life were *spiritual*. He was the friend of God. Being blessed didn't mean that Abraham continually got *more* of everything. After all, he still only had one son and he didn't own any of the land other than a single field and tomb. God's blessing for us isn't necessarily more *stuff*. Psalm 1 describes a blessed life as one that is continually growing in understanding of the Lord and His ways - one full of heavenly success.

Genesis 24:2-4 - ²Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his household who managed all he owned, "Place your hand under my thigh, ³and I will have you swear by the Lord, God of heaven and God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I live, ⁴but will go to my land and my family to take a wife for my son Isaac."

In this text, the focus is on this nameless servant, sent out by the father to do his duty on behalf of the son. He is a wonderful type for us of our own service to the Lord. He's a fantastic example of how to serve faithfully, expectantly, prayerfully, and effectively, while also having to navigate real-life tensions we face in the exercise of Christian faith.

It's essential to Abraham that Isaac *not* marry a Canaanite woman. Once again Genesis gives a subtle teaching on Biblical marriage: Don't marry outside the family. Of course, we're applying these examples on the *spiritual* level. In First Corinthians Paul says, "[a woman] is free to be married to anyone she wants - *only in the Lord*,"⁴ meaning only a born again Christian. You single people

¹ <https://healthresearchfunding.org/17-incredible-mail-order-brides-statistics/>

² <https://www.wyvtv.com/news/daybreak/mail-order-brides-are-a-real-thing/>

³ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:39

looking for a spouse, stay within the spiritual family of Christians, don't settle for a Canaanite. It won't go well for you.

We notice two things about this commission Abraham gives his servant. First, the master invests a great deal of authority in him. He lets the servant act as his agent, going in his name, on a very significant quest. We've, too, have been given great authority to go in the name of the Lord and do His will. You may feel unqualified, you may have a lot of questions, like this servant did, but the Master is confident that you are adequate to do what He has asked you to do. And He provides guidance and principles to direct you in your efforts.

Second, this commission would be a long haul. The servant would be traveling over 450 miles,⁵ down new roads with lots of uncertainty along the way. The Christian life can be described the same. It's a long road, but the Master knows the way, He knows where we're headed and so we have to follow His guidance in order to get where we need to go.

Genesis 24:5 - ⁵The servant said to him, "Suppose the woman is unwilling to follow me to this land? Should I have your son go back to the land you came from?"

One of the things I enjoy about this servant is that he's a regular guy with honest questions. He's not cynical, but he's also not unrealistic about what might happen. He's thoughtfully working through the situation. But he's also full of faith. He believes in the quest. He believes God will go before him. He believes God answers prayer and directs and will provide. Even here we see his faith. He calls this mystery bride "*the woman*." He believes there is a *specific* woman whom God has prepared for Isaac and one that he (the servant) will be able to identify.

But he also acknowledges that human beings are free to choose. "What if she is unwilling?" She might say no to his offer, just as those we go out to fetch into God's Kingdom might say no to us.

Genesis 24:6 - ⁶Abraham answered him, "Make sure that you don't take my son back there.

Another translation puts it this way: "Watch yourself!"⁶ Abraham is very serious about Isaac *not* leaving the promised land.

We need to think about what God prioritizes in our lives. Those priorities will often *not* be in the same order that we naturally place things. For example: Does God prioritize your school district over which church He wants you to be a part of? Which is more important to Him: Your neighborhood or your workplace? I can't answer that for you, because those answers will vary from person to person and I'm not the Holy Spirit. But, we see that, in this case, it would be better for Isaac to *not* have a wife than to leave the promised land to get one. God has priorities for you. And you are responsible to discover what they are.

⁵ Bible Knowledge Commentary

⁶ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

Genesis 24:7-8 - ⁷The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, who spoke to me and swore to me, 'I will give this land to your offspring'—he will send his angel before you, and you can take a wife for my son from there. ⁸If the woman is unwilling to follow you, then you are free from this oath to me, but don't let my son go back there."

It's clear Abraham believes in God's providence, but does not believe in what is called "meticulous determinism." God is not *forcing* humans to do the things they do. We are free moral agents and God is so sovereign and so powerful that He is able to both do His will *and* allow for us to choose. To those determinists who say our view of free will limits the sovereignty of God, we would answer, that *they* limit the power of God, not to mention the goodness, justice, and mercy of God.

There is wonderful comfort in verse 7. When God calls us into service, He goes before us. That's why it's so important that we concern ourselves with where *He's* leading us individually. Abraham had *lots* of servants. Only a few were meant to be about *this* particular business.

Christians today have endless opportunities and ideas of how we might serve God. That's great. But what's *good* is for us to go where He's sent us, where He's leading us. We see this very clearly in Acts. Paul and friends try very hard to get into Asia, which is a great idea, except it's *not* what God wanted *these* guys to be doing. Instead, He's wanted them in Greece, where the Lord had gone before them to accomplish a specific and timely work. Paul was Godly enough to do what the Lord wanted instead of what *he* wanted and the result is that the Gospel was brought to Europe.

In verse 7 we have a gentle reminder of God's gracious work in our lives. He brought us out of the household of sin and into the Kingdom of Promise. He's the God who speaks to us and swears to us by His love. And now He sends us back into the world to invite *others* out, that they might be brought into the household of faith, too.

Genesis 24:9 - ⁹So the servant placed his hand under his master Abraham's thigh and swore an oath to him concerning this matter.

There was a lot of tension here. The servant has a great responsibility. The trip would be challenging. They had big expectations, but, in the end, they recognize that the woman *might* refuse to join the family. Along the way there would be many unknowns. So, the servant would need to stay focused and alert and keep his master's directions in mind.

Maybe the servant found himself thinking, "This is never going to work. This is impossible." It probably felt that way at certain points. We feel that way sometimes as we try to follow the Lord and obey our duties in the Christian life. In those moments remember that God goes before us and remember that God rewards those who seek Him, He will make your paths straight, and everything is possible for the one who believes.⁷

⁷ Hebrews 11:6, Proverbs 3:5-6, Mark 9:23

Genesis 24:10 - ¹⁰ **The servant took ten of his master's camels, and with all kinds of his master's goods in hand, he went to Aram-naharaim, to Nahor's town.**

Your translation may say he took, "all his master's goods," but what is meant was all sorts. It could be read this way, "Every good thing of his master was in his hand."⁸ God has not only sent us out in His name and with great authority, He sends us out with unyielding heavenly supplies. You and I have all kinds of our Master's goods, not to be hoarded, but used and delivered to others.

Genesis 24:11 - ¹¹ **At evening, the time when women went out to draw water, he made the camels kneel beside a well outside the town.**

The servant was practical. The goal was to find a wife, so he went where women would be found. Practicality doesn't make us less faith-filled. Being Spirit-led doesn't mean we're not thoughtful and that we're just weirdly mystical all the time. But, neither should we try to manufacture ministry and then claim God did it. What does the servant do? The entourage finally makes it to where they want to go and then he says, "Now we wait." I think it may have been a comical scene trying to hold back 10 thirsty camels from drinking when they're at a well. But he wants to be in step with God's providence, not getting out ahead, and so they wait.

Genesis 24:12-14 - ¹² **"Lord, God of my master Abraham," he prayed, "make this happen for me today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. ¹³ I am standing here at the spring where the daughters of the men of the town are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴ Let the girl to whom I say, 'Please lower your water jug so that I may drink,' and who responds, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels also'—let her be the one you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master."**

Should we pray this way? We see this passage as a type of how we're to serve the Lord. We see these great principles working themselves out through this faithful man. We admire his reliance on God. And, I've suggested that God wants to specifically direct us in our real life choices - things like spouses and where to live and ministries to be a part of. So, should we mimic this style of prayer, asking for tangible proof of what God wants us to choose?

Jesus said, "an evil generation demands a sign." He said it right after saying "blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it."⁹ Now, Jesus was speaking specifically to those who didn't want to believe He was the Messiah - which He obviously was - but He demonstrates a difference between those who have the Word of God to refer to and those who don't. Abraham's servant didn't have the Bible or the indwelling Holy Spirit, Who is given to us as a Counsellor and a Teacher, and convicts us of right and wrong and Who reveals the things of God to us.¹⁰

⁸ NET Study Bible Notes

⁹ Luke 11:28-29

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

We have these powerful sources of direction which inform our decision-making. But, when choosing between two 'goods' - "should I go preach the Gospel in Asia or Macedonia?" - then we're to go to the Word of God, seek the Spirit of God, and go to prayer, not asking God to jump through hoops but asking Him to give us peace.¹¹ As we choose to love God and honor Him and listen to what He has said, He is then able to conform us and give us the mind of Christ, and we become fuller and fuller with the knowledge of His will, which then gives us all we need to make heavenly decisions that align with God's desires.

The focus of the servant's prayer was not, "Lord, let me off the hook and make it easy for me." It was, "God, I want to do what I've been called to do. I'm unable to do it in my own power, so I trust You to be with me and do this great thing to bless my master, his son, and his future bride. Help me that I might be a profitable servant."

Notice what he prays: Not, "God, bring me the most beautiful woman." He prays, "Lord, bring me a lady who is full of kindness and compassion - a lady who is willing to serve and bless those around her." This bride would need to be ready for a strange life, based on faith and service and others.

Genesis 24:15-16 - ¹⁵ **Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah—daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor—coming with a jug on her shoulder. ¹⁶ Now the girl was very beautiful, a virgin—no man had been intimate with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jug, and came up.**

In this case, God's providence worked out with *millisecond* precision. *Before he finished praying*, there she was. That's incredible! At other points, God's providence can be put on hold for decades or centuries. His providential work for the nation of Israel is currently on hold, for example. But it will also be accomplished down to the specific day during the time of Jacob's trouble.

So why pray at all when God's providence can work *this* well? Well, the Lord uses human agents to accomplish much of His will. Without prayer, Rebekah would've seemed like every other woman at the well. As we seek the Lord, He's able to reveal His movements and these opportunities that He is working out. God has, in His infinite wisdom, decided to include us in the things that He does. We see that interplay here. This incredible, miraculous providence is happening in conjunction with a willing servant who took the long trip and made himself available.

Genesis 24:17 - ¹⁷ **Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me have a little water from your jug."**

Now, this would've been an interesting scene. Because he's well-stocked for a long trip. He would've had water and skins to drink from. They would've had all their gear to tend the camels. And Rebekah would've seen it. Yet, here he is asking for a drink.

¹¹ Philippians 4:6-7

Genesis 24:18 - ¹⁸ She replied, "Drink, my lord." She quickly lowered her jug to her hand and gave him a drink.

Now, he was waiting for her to offer about the camels. But at first, no such offer comes. One commentator points out there is a moment full of pressure.¹² I wonder, how long did he drink?

Genesis 24:19-20 - ¹⁹ When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I'll also draw water for your camels until they have had enough to drink." ²⁰ She quickly emptied her jug into the trough and hurried to the well again to draw water. She drew water for all his camels

Scholars estimate this likely would've been hundreds of gallons of water. Rebekah is bringing back and forth 2,500 pounds from the well to the trough.¹³ And, remember, she does it all while other servants are just standing around! What a heart she has! Both she and Abraham's servant give us such great examples of how to honor God in our service with hearts full of faith and humility.

Genesis 24:21 - ²¹ while the man silently watched her to see whether or not the Lord had made his journey a success.

Wasn't that obvious? After all, she *did* the thing he asked for, right? *But* he still wanted to make sure that it was *all* in line with what his master had said. She still had to be one of Abraham's family. The sign had to fit the command. This guy is just a great example of how to balance faith and fidelity to the Word and seeking the Lord and moving forward with thoughtfulness and expectation.

Verse 21 also reminds us that it is the *Lord* who makes our work a success, not us.

Genesis 24:22-23 - ²² As the camels finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing half a shekel, and for her wrists two bracelets weighing ten shekels of gold. ²³ "Whose daughter are you?" he asked. "Please tell me, is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?"

This is quite a tip for her service - it'd be worth at least \$7,500 today. Recently, a group of businessmen went to a restaurant planning to each give their waitress a \$100 tip. They ended up giving their server \$2,200 in gratuity. Great story. Except, then the restaurant fired her for not giving the tip to be pooled among all the wait staff.¹⁴

Abraham's servant was very generous, even if Rebekah wasn't the lady he was hoping for.

Genesis 24:24-25 - ²⁴ She answered him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." ²⁵ She also said to him, "We have plenty of straw and feed and a place to spend the night."

¹² See *Alter*

¹³ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

¹⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/arkansas-waitress-fired-after-4-400-tip-shows-why-tipping-ncna1286076>

What a remarkable lady Rebekah is. She *immediately* extends hospitality and provision to them. She doesn't wait for someone else to offer it, she's ready to welcome these guys. Between her and the other servant we see absolutely no stinginess or covetousness, just warmth and generosity.

Genesis 24:26-27 - ²⁶ Then the man knelt low, worshiped the Lord, ²⁷ and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld his kindness and faithfulness from my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives."

Our God does not withhold kindness from those who walk with Him. Looking back, Abraham's servant recognized the incredible providence of God. The tensions of how would he find her and would she say yes and how could it happen were all real, but all dealt with by God's ability. And so, through this story we see that God can be absolutely trusted to lead you right where you need to go in life. He knows what we need, He knows what is best, He know all the things we can't possibly know, and His great desire is to include us in His work. As we seek Him and His Kingdom, all these things will be provided for us. God *delights* to give us His Kingdom. Our part is to be ready for service - to focus our attention on the Word which directs us, to fill our hearts with faith, knowing the Lord has gone before us and wants us to experience His providence, and expect Him to be engaging in our lives in all sorts of ways.

What a mind-blowing series of events this all was. And then...

Genesis 24:28 - ²⁸ The girl ran and told her mother's household about these things.

Wait! Where are you going? She ran away! This is hilarious. She becomes the original runaway bride. What must the servant be thinking? He's left at well while Cinderella disappears into the night. For now, we end on the cliffhanger.

You can never tell what might happen next in life, but we know the Lord is with us. So, we can have joy, even when things are out of our control. Our part is to be ready, to serve, to seek the Lord, and to surrender our paths to Him.