

A wife for Isaac

By Revd. John White

Sermon given on 5th July 2020 at St Michael's church Sandhurst
the readings are Genesis 24, 34 to 38 and 42 to 49 and 58 to 67.

This is the last sermon on the adventures of Abraham and this one is entitled, "A wife for Isaac."

50 years ago, an Indian friend of mine rang me from Basingstoke and asked me if I would come and pick him up and take him to Heathrow, which I agreed to do.

I dropped him off at the appropriate terminal and asked him to give me a ring on his return. He rang me about 6 weeks later and asked me to come and pick him up.

I drove to Heathrow and found him arm in arm with a beautiful Indian lady who he introduced to me as his wife. Rather than take them straight to Basingstoke I brought them to Sandhurst and introduced her to Jill who gave her her first meal on British soil. They still live happily in Basingstoke.

My friend and his wife could be Isaac and Rebekah because the circumstances of their marriage is similar, except that it was Rebekah who went to meet her future husband, whereas it was my friend who went to meet his future wife.

Our reading starts, "So he said, 'I am Abraham's servant.'" So who is this servant who is talking, who is he talking too and where are they when they are talking?

To answer those three questions, we need to go back to the beginning of chapter 24.

At the beginning of chapter 24 we are introduced to Abraham's oldest and clearly his most trusted and worthy servant, who had been given charge of all of Abraham's possessions, but we don't know his name.

This is probably because the servant is a slave, in fact later we hear that the servant referred to Abraham as his master and also to Isaac as his master, this is because Abraham had given all that he had to his son Isaac.

We are also told that it was at a well, where God had shown Isaac's future wife Rebekah to Abraham's servant.

Now Rebekah had a brother Laban, and it was to him that the servant first told the story of what had happened at the well before Laban had arrived.

Now just before our reading Laban had invited the servant to his home for the night so that he and his father Bethuel could talk in private about Rebekah becoming Isaac's wife, and it is that conversation which is recorded in our reading.

Now Laban and Rebekah's home was at Nahor probably near Haran where Abraham's father Terah had taken his family, which we heard about in the first sermon in this series.

So, in the first verse of our reading it is Abraham's trusted servant who said to Rebekah's brother Laban and to her father Bethuel, "I am Abraham's servant."

"The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy, he has been given flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels, and donkeys."

When I reflected on the list of goods and chattels now owned by Abraham, I couldn't help but notice that human slaves came after flocks, herds silver and gold but before camels and donkeys, in the order of importance to the writer of Genesis.

The servant continues by saying that all Abraham's wealth had already been given to his only son; so, Laban and Bethuel were made fully aware of the considerable advantages of Rebekah marrying Abraham's son Isaac who is clearly now very wealthy.

The servant adds that his master Abraham, had instructed him not to go to the Cananite's for a wife for his son, but to Abraham's house, to Abraham's kindred and get a wife for his son from there.

At this point Rebekah's brother and father would probably know who Abraham was and his relationship to themselves and Rebekah, because Rebekah and Laban were the children of Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother.

From that we can say that Abraham's son Isaac married his cousin's daughter, who was a generation younger than he.

Now this wouldn't have been at all unusual at that time, marrying cousins wasn't at all unheard of, as for the age difference, this too was common.

Jesus' father Joseph would have been very much older than Mary, and probably died of old age when Jesus was a teenager and Mary was in her late twenties, or early thirties.

In verses 42 to 44 the servant is relating to Laban and Bethuel the prayer that he prayed to God at the well, which would make God's choice of Isaac's wife clear to him.

The servant said that God had told him that if he asked a girl for a drink, then the correct girl would not only give him a drink, but she would also give his camels some water to drink as well, then the servant would know that the girl was the one that God had chosen to be Isaac's wife.

And the servant goes on to say to Laban and Bethuel that before he could finish his prayer, Rebekah appeared with her water jar on her shoulder and that when he asked her for a drink she not only offered him a drink, but without being asked also gave his camels water to drink, so he knew that she was God's choice to be Isaac's future wife.

Now what Rebekah did was no small thing. The servant had 10 camels, and each camel could drink 20 to 30 gallons of water.

So, Rebekah with her small container, which she would normally carry on her shoulder, would have to take more than 200 gallons of water from the well to fill a trough so that the camels could drink. So Rebekah was not only a beautiful young woman, but she was also very strong.

So the servant knew that it was God who had selected Rebekah to be Isaac's wife, and when the servant asked who she was she told him the names of her family, then he knew for certain that she was the one for Isaac, so without further ado he adorned her with rings and bracelets, as a sign that he would accept her as Isaac's future wife.

I think a word more about the servant is appropriate here; because although he is probably a slave, nevertheless, his loyalty and all his actions are always in the best interests of Abraham and Isaac, even though he is now probably 500 miles away from home. Also, although probably not a Jew, he nevertheless worships the God of Abraham.

When the servant had finished explaining to Laban and Bethuel, what had taken place between Rebekah and himself at the well, he then bowed his head and worshipped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of his master Abraham, who had shown him Rebekah, the daughter from Abraham's kindred, to be the wife of Abraham's son Isaac.

The servant then asks for a clear commitment from Rebekah's father and brother that they agree to the marriage of Rebekah to Isaac, because if not he would have to start looking elsewhere for a wife for Isaac.

However, it must have also been clear to Laban and his father that it was God who had chosen Rebekah to be Isaac's wife, and they would have to think very carefully before they went against God's will.

So, they called to Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" and Rebekah said, "I will."

In saying that she will go so promptly, Rebekah was showing a great deal of self-confidence and faith in God in leaving her family with somebody she hardly knew and marrying someone she had not seen.

This too may be an indication of the type of society that they lived in in those days and the status of women in their society.

However, having said that, in this case Rebekah was given a clear opportunity to say that she would not go if she didn't want to; but I think she too knew that this was God's will that she should go, and therefore through her faith in God knew that all would be well.

Before Rebekah, along with her nurse, were sent on her journey, Rebekah's family blessed her by saying, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes."

This blessing dovetails nicely with God's blessing of Abraham when God said, "I will bless you and make your offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven."

This blessing also mirrors the blessing that God gave Abraham after Abraham's act of faith in God, shown when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac.

Rebekah followed the servant, and in following him to the Negeb, where Isaac now lived, may well have taken the same route that Abraham had taken all those years ago when he left Haran for the Negeb.

Now one evening Isaac went out for a walk in one of his fields and looking up saw camels coming, and when Rebekah looked up she saw Isaac walking in the field, so she immediately got down from her camel and asked the servant who the man was, and the servant said that he was his master, if you remember Abraham had given everything to Isaac.

Now once the servant had explained to Isaac all that had taken place, Isaac took her straight to his mother's tent. although his mother was not there, she had died some time before the servant had embarked on his journey.

We are also told that Isaac took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her, and I am pleased to report, that in this case, it was love at first sight.

But the important point being made here by the author of Genesis in writing that Isaac took Rebekah straight to Sarah's tent, is that Rebekah had now taken the place of Sarah, and consequently Isaac had taken the place of Abraham to carry God's blessing of Abraham's Descendants forward, to the next generation.

Nearly 2,000 years later somebody said to Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are outside and want to see you." And Jesus replied, "Those who have faith in me are my mother and my brothers."

And the same principle applies to us, we are the descendants of Abraham through faith in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen