

A Wife for Isaac

Genesis 24:1-14

When I was young, somewhere around 8, I won a prize at Sunday School. I don't remember what the competition was, nor what I had to do to win the prize, but I remember being very disappointed with what I had won. I think that I expected something exciting--maybe candy, maybe a toy, or even a book. Instead, I got a plaque. For an active 8-year old, that was a pretty boring reward.

But as time passed, and especially as I became a Christian several years later, that plaque took on a much greater significance. In fact, that plaque remained on my desk throughout school, and it has remained on my desk my whole life. It is still on my desk, some 55 years later. On that plaque are the words of Proverbs 3:6, so boring to my 8-year old self: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths."

Those words have always remained in my heart and mind, and they express a commitment by which I have always sought to live when seeking to discern and know the Lord's will. "In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." There is a confidence in that expression, a confidence with which can live with the freedom to know that God will direct our paths. But our responsibility is very clear as well. "Acknowledge Him in all your ways."

That's true in all the so-called little or small matters of life. And it is true in the big things too. Our subject this morning is one of those big things, namely marriage. The time has come to find a wife for Isaac. As we study that occasion, there are obvious ways in which the principle demonstrated in this text is timeless. In other words, the principle applies to us just as it did for Isaac, and

Abraham. "In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." What we find in this chapter of Genesis is this broad principle,

I. GOD'S PEOPLE MUST MARRY ONLY IN THE LORD.

As we study today how Isaac came to find a wife, it would be good for all of you who are married to reflect a bit upon how God directed your paths in bringing about your marriage. And it will be good for all of you who are unmarried, but wanting to be married, to deeply consider the patterns and principles described here regarding marriage. Consider the broader picture, how God does, in fact, direct all your paths as he calls you to acknowledge him in all your ways.

The first stop of acknowledging the Lord with regard to marriage is that marriage for God's people ought to be only with others of God's people, in the Lord. Interestingly, those exact words are used in 1 Corinthians 7 as addressed to adults, those whose spouse had died. The temptation to marry non-believers isn't restricted to young people who have never married. It often comes to anyone who finds themselves single, whether because of death or even through divorce. In the case of a marriage ended by death, Paul gives such people the freedom to remarry if they wish to do so, but with this one significant restriction.

1 Cor. 7:39 "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."

This is a lesson that we need to embrace fully, and teach our children from generation to generation. From the earliest moments of life. From the first experiences of interacting with friends. From the first time they form close friendships. All through childhood. And we need to embrace that fully as adults as well. If you are not married, and you are one of God's people, then you are free to marry...anyone. Anyone from among God's

people. Anyone in the Lord.

So children, and you young adults, you can expect that in God's will, someday you will be married. That is God's normal plan for your lives. But the person you marry must be a Christian. You must marry in the Lord.

I want to stress that point as the context for all that we will study in this chapter, and we haven't really come to any direct exposition yet. So let me go on to answer two questions, two simple one-word questions "why" and "how." First, why? Why must we marry only in the Lord? The simple answer is seen by recognizing...

A. The spiritual dangers of marriage to unbelievers.

Notice what Abraham says to his servant, the one to whom he gives the responsibility to see that Isaac finds a wife,
v.2-3

The prohibition is clear. Swear "that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites." Why not? The Canaanites were heathen. They were unbelievers. Idolators. God's commands are clear.

Exod. 34:10 And He said: "Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD. For it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. 11 Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I am driving out from before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. 12 Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. 13 But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images 14 (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), 15 lest you make a covenant with the

inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, 16 and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods."

Even more clearly,

Deut. 7:1 "When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, 2 and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. 3 Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly."

This prohibition is not against marrying a person of another race, but rather a person of another religion. How sad it is that too often, especially in generations past, our society was quick to condemn interracial marriage while thinking nothing about the marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. The biblical issue is spiritual separation, not ethnic separation. Because of spiritual dangers. If you marry a person who does not share your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you may well end up being turned away from following the one true and living God, and turned toward serving other gods, the false gods of this world. If you marry a person who does not share your Christian faith, then you will almost certainly expose yourself to all sorts of spiritual dangers.

Therefore, according to God's commands, marriage to unbelievers is prohibited. And if you want another clear NT expression of that command, I'll read,

2Cor. 6:14 "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? 15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." 17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.""

"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?"

The next question becomes, How? How can marriages between believers and unbelievers be prohibited? How can marriage "in the Lord" be promoted and established? There is much to be learned in this text about the answer to that question, but the simple answer to the question of "how" is to note...

B. The responsibility of fathers in marriage.

And the right of fathers to be involved, both positively and negatively. Negatively to prohibit marriage when that is required. And to be involved in the whole process of promoting marriage. Notice what Abraham did. He accepted his responsibility to find Isaac a wife.

v.2-4

He put his servant under solemn oath, "put your hand under my thigh." We'd just sign a contract today, or maybe shake hands. But notice the nature of the oath, Abraham invokes an oath upon his servant to find a wife for his son. By today's standards, that's pretty radical, isn't it?

Now, I haven't worked out all the implications of my views of courtship yet, and I intend to do so, or at least to attempt it. Both for the benefit of the church as well as for my own application to my own daughters. But I can tell you one universal biblical principle for marriage. The parents, and specifically the father, are to be actively involved. It is the father's responsibility to prohibit the marriage of their children to unbelievers.

The Bible doesn't spell out all the details of how you get from there to here, in terms of marriage, but the basic starting point for that process of marriage with reference to our children is this, that we as parents assume our rightful role in the marrying and giving in marriage of our children. Especially in prohibiting what God prohibits. That is the biblical example.

God's people must marry only in the Lord. But let's go on in the text.

v.5-9

Now, what do I get from that? First, a very practical and foreseeable question.

v.5 "And the servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I take your son back to the land from which you came?"

Let me explain that in a way that I hope you can relate to. The servant somehow believes that it will be made very clear whom Isaac should marry. But, he also foresees the possibility that the

woman will be unwilling. Or at least, unwilling to move to Canaan. So the question is, “In that event, should Isaac be allowed to return to his home land in order to marry that woman?”

And the answer is, NO.

v.8

Isaac, through the promise given to his father Abraham, had been commanded to live in Canaan. And even if there were no woman whom he could marry, even if no Hebrew woman would consent to be his wife and move with him to Canaan, he must be faithful to God. Thus we have an obvious priority.

II. GOD’S PEOPLE MUST NEVER IGNORE HIS COMMANDS AND PROMISES.

The desire to get married must not take precedence over God’s commands and promises. To say the very same thing in a positive way,

A. Faithful obedience to God’s commands must be a higher priority than getting married.

v.5-6

Some people, so eager to get married, so focused on marriage as the only hope for their lives, compromise their standards and sometimes even their values. That might come in the form of a young woman so desperate to get married that she falls in love with a man who doesn’t meet her standards, and gets married against the wisdom and advice of those who know her and love her the most. Or to a young man so eager to get married that he falls to notice obvious warning signs and red flags. Too often, they end up miserable.

The argument is often made, at least in the thoughts and fears of the mind, “If I hold to my standards, and refuse to date or marry

someone who doesn’t live up to my standards, I may never get married.” My gentle and compassionate pastoral response is that your obedience to God’s commands must be a higher priority than getting married, even if, for a time, it might seem like you will never get married.

Faithfulness to God is a higher priority! If you make getting married your priority, you will make yourself vulnerable to all sorts of disaster.

Abraham tells his servant that if the woman is unwilling to come back to Canaan to live with Isaac as his wife, then Isaac must not marry her. Obedience to God comes first.

But let me quickly add something else here. God had actually made a promise to Abraham to provide a wife for his son. Now, in terms of infallible revelation, God no longer gives us that promise. I do not have an inspired revelation that God will provide everyone a spouse according to their desire, and most certainly I have no ability to make that decision for anyone—telling them whom they should marry. I can’t claim inspired revelation. But I can claim God’s promise, and I can claim his general principle that it is not good for a man to be alone. I can claim the general truth that God made man and woman to be married. And under normal circumstances, in the ordinary course of life, I can expect that to happen, and give you that encouragement and expectation as well.

So, to the person who despairs of ever getting married because of the high standards necessary for a prospective mate, I would give the encouragement of God’s promise. God will provide. In the case of Isaac, that promise came as a revelation,

v.7

The simple point of application for us is that,

B. Faithful trust in God's promises must be the basis for getting married.

That must be the foundational confidence of those who are married, and those who are unmarried must trust God to provide the perfect spouse for them. Despair of getting married, especially when it causes a young person to grasp at the first opportunity that comes along, actually betrays a lack of trust. The promise is that God will provide, and never is that more evident than when it comes to marriage.

The point is, insecurity is a terrible reason for getting married. Fear of never getting married is a terrible reason for getting married. Desperation leads to compromise, and compromise is an even more horrible foundation upon which to get married. The blessing is found in learning to trust in God's promises, and to wait for his timing and his perfect plan.

In Genesis 24, Isaac would not go back to his hometown just to find a wife. He would remain in Canaan, even if it meant that he would never get married. But of course, God had promised that he would. And he did.

Moving right along. What happens next.
v.10-14

I want to emphasize one thing from those verses, the fact that marriage is a blessing. Marriage is a marvelous thing, a wonderful blessing. I've been sort of negative up to this point, but let me end on a very positive note.

III. GOD'S PEOPLE SHOULD SEE MARRIAGE AS A GREAT BLESSING.

Notice how this faithful servant prays.

v.12

The prayer for success means, "Let me be successful in finding a wife for Isaac." But notice how he describes that success--"show kindness to my master Abraham." Similarly,

v.14

Kindness is the Hebrew word for lovingkindness, hesed. It is the word which most deeply describes God's compassionate, covenant love for the people whom he calls by his own name. It is the family love of a father to his children, the faithful love of tender mercy. Providing a wife for Isaac would be a great demonstration of lovingkindness. And that lovingkindness would not just be for Isaac, but also for Abraham. Indeed,

A. Marriage is a blessing of God's lovingkindness shown to families.

v.12

v.14

If you are unmarried, and anticipate the day when you will be married, pray for God to show you this kindness. Pray to your father who loves you, that he would give you this greatest and kindest of all earthly blessings. If you wish to be married, above all else, pray for God's kindness to be shown to you in giving you a spouse--a husband or a wife with whom you can become one flesh.

And if you have children or grandchildren who are unmarried, and who wish to be married, pray for this demonstration of God's kindness upon your whole family. Feel free and be encouraged to ask for this great blessing of kindness, and wait upon God for his answer to come in accordance with his sovereign purpose, for indeed,

B. Marriage is a blessing of God's sovereign purpose for his people.

Notice again what this servant of Abraham prays for,
v.13-14

There is a form of a test in that, and in the Old Covenant system whereby God revealed himself “through the prophets at many times and in various ways,” it was an appropriate test. It was a request for direct revelation, much like the casting of lots. The servant asked God to supernaturally reveal the identity of Isaac's wife. Such was the nature of his revelation in the OT.

Continuing revelation has ceased with the coming of Christ and the authoritative and complete writing of the apostles, and now the exact identity of a future spouse is a matter of God's secret will. That is, you don't know who it is ahead of time, with any infallible or inspired knowledge. But it is still a matter of God's sovereign purpose. We read in Ephesians 1 that God “works all things according to the counsel of His will.” We understand from the definition of our Shorter Catechism that God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful governing and controlling all his creatures and all their actions.

So everything that happens, happens according to God's sovereign purpose. The fact that we don't know God's secret will ahead of time doesn't make God less sovereign, but actually emphasizes his sovereignty. And what we see in this chapter is that marriage is a blessing of God's sovereign purpose for his people.

In verse 14, Abraham's servant refers to the woman whom God has chosen for Isaac, the one whom he has appointed or elected. And as we'll see next week, Rebekah is that one. Yet to apply all this to our present situation, I believe that since God is

sovereign, and since he still does work out all things in conformity with the purpose of his will, that there still is, in God's plan, a chosen mate for each of his people.

From a human perspective, that is his secret will kept unknown to us. From a human perspective, even regarding marriage, there may be any number of possible and acceptable mates. We have the freedom before God to marry whomever we choose, only in the Lord. But God's secret will becomes so precious in hindsight, when it is often so clearly revealed.

Never should that be clearer than with regard to marriage. And so I'm back to that plaque that sits on desk. “In all thy ways, acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.”

Accept your responsibility to acknowledge him, to serve him faithfully. And believe that promise. He will direct your paths. Never is that sovereign direction more significant, never is it a greater blessing, than in God's provision for a man and a woman to be joined together in marriage.

Therefore, may we as a church, may we who are married and those who are not, demonstrate by the way that we live that marriage is a great blessing of God's lovingkindness and sovereign purpose.