

Lessons We Should and Should Not Learn

I. The Main Message of Chapter 25 (part a)

I will start with the last chapter first in today's text range because there is very little in this chapter for personal application. Chapter 25 give a short account of Abraham's remarriage to Keturah after Sarah's death, then the account of the death of Abraham and how he passed off his assets to Isaac, the only rightful heir. The children of Abraham and Keturah are listed, but separated from Isaac as to heirship.

The lineage of Ishmael is briefly mentioned to show that through Abraham, all nations would be blessed, even though the line of Ishmael would not be heir to Abraham's assets or the promised land, nor would they prove to be godly and righteous people. It merely demonstrates that God is faithful to his promise even when we are not faithful to Him.

We will start with chapter 25 (part b) next week.

II. The Main Message of Chapter 23

Most people will read chapter 23 and focus on the death of Sarah. After all, this is the most emotional part of the chapter, but it is merely a means of transitioning into the main point of the narrative – Abraham purchases a significant piece of property. Sarah's death is recorded to bring a tidy end to the story of her life, but the details of her burial show us exactly how God worked in conjunction with an ordinary human act to bring about His divine plan.

If we back away from the details of this chapter and take a broader look at the entire narrative of Abraham, we see a different picture emerge out of chapter 24. We see in the life of Abraham the sovereign hand of God in gradually moving Abraham into position to secure the promise for his heirs. At the beginning, Abraham was offered riches and rulership because of being a conquering hero. He declined both, lest it ever be said he was made rich by men rather than blessed by God. Next, we have Abraham being given wells by Abimelech. Then Abimelech grants Abraham room to roam and live within the land wherever he desired. At that point, Abraham begins to settle down and call this land home.

Now, Sarah has died and Abraham wants title deed to a piece of property that would be preserved as the burying place for his wife. Abraham offers to buy the cave of Machpelah from a man named Ephron. It was located at the end of Ephron's property and could be conveniently sliced off without breaking up his property. Ephron offers to give Abraham the property, but Abraham insists on paying for it. A legitimate business transaction would give Abraham a much stronger claim to the land than a mere gift. For 400 shekels of silver, a handsome price, the cave and the entire field containing the cave, and all the wooded area surrounding the cave were officially deeded over to Abraham in the presence of the Hittites as witnesses to the transaction. The land was unquestionably Abraham's. The narrative is carefully tracing the way in which the land is incrementally coming into Abraham's possession.

We probably see God's will being worked out in incremental stages more often than in one sudden step. And, we often don't recognize the incremental stages as part of the

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plan. We keep waiting for the big miracle to happen all at once, but God is working it all out in our favor one step at a time.

III. The Main Messages of chapter 24

Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. ²He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh. ³I 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, ⁴but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.”

We could appropriately refer to this chapter as the Rebekah narrative, and there are some interesting little side notes that jump out at us. But after dealing with those, we still need to determine what the central message is.

*** LIFE APPLICATION FALLACY WARNING – “HOW TO FIND A WIFE”

Within modern Christianity, we have many sincere but careless and unskilled “teachers” pumping out too much theological garbage. Some of it comes from poorly trained ministers, some from poorly trained Sunday School teachers, some from unmonitored small group Bible Study leaders whose lack of expertise in teaching the Bible helps perpetuate many fallacies that do nothing but muddy the theological waters.

We get a glimpse of marriage in the Ancient Near East. This entire process is completely foreign to our culture. Abraham wants Isaac to marry a woman from within the family and sends his servant back to his hometown to find Isaac a wife. Keep in mind, Isaac is 37 years old, yet Abraham makes marriage arrangements for his adult son. Abraham’s servant goes to Abraham’s birth town, picks out a wife, and brings her back to Isaac. When they draw close, Rebekah sees a man working in the field and says, “Who is that?” “That is your husband.” Rebekah obediently covers her face with her veil to indicate her official state of engagement. Isaac meets his mail order bride, and takes her into his mother’s tent, indicating she is now the new matriarch, taking Sarah’s place.

This is all so brutish by our standards. Rebekah had very little to say, except for whether she wanted to leave her family immediately or wait ten days, but not as to whether or not she would go.

*** LIFE APPLICATION FALLACY WARNING – “PATRIARCHY FOR TODAY”

You might be surprised, but some people think that patriarchy is an appropriate and legitimate Biblical model for the modern day family. I know of a recent situation in which a minister tried to enforce a patriarchal system on his family. His son grew into young adulthood and got married. The young bride noticed how much power and authority her father-in-law exercised over his son/her husband. She was not comfortable with how deeply the father delved into his married son’s personal life and personal choices. She questioned her husband why he let his father control his life. The father found out he daughter-in-law was questioning his authority and he came unglued. He informed her he was the patriarch of the family and as such he held totally authority over the family. The marriage did not last.

*** LIFE APPLICATION FALLACY WARNING – “HOW TO HEAR FROM GOD”

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¹⁴May it be that when I say to a young woman, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.”

Oracles – obtaining yes or no answers from some deity through a humanly contrived test. The answer is taken by the seeker to be a distinct message from the deity, but in reality is considered rather ambiguous by others because of the 50/50 chance of going either way. It is like flipping a coin to discern God’s will.

We have three notable occurrences of oracular divination in scripture. Abraham’s servant (here); 1 Samuel 5 where the Philistines seek advice from their heathen priests how to best get rid of the Ark, which has caused them great distress (return the ark with five golden tumors and five golden rats and if you are healed, then God must have been appeased); and, the most famous, Gideon and the fleece. None of these are conducted by spiritually mature men of God. Even Gideon was raised in a home with a Baal altar and an Asherah pole.

Although they all seemingly had success, this does not in any way infer we are supposed to adopt those methods of hearing from God. Keep in mind these were spiritually primitive people who were using whatever methods or means they were accustomed to in their culture to hear from God. God may have met them in their sincerity, but their actions were never intended to be taken as prescriptive or normative. In fact, even the ancient people of God evolved out of those practices and by the time of David, he sought to hear from God through prophets. That would be a much more reasonable pattern to emulate than the more primitive oracular exercises, although the oracles of God are now written scripture and clearly documented for us. Even so-called modern day prophets must comply with the authority of scripture, or they are not considered legitimate.

It is interesting, to say the least, how oracular practices were used throughout the centuries. The ancients used to throw the accused into a river and if they survived, they must be innocent. If they drowned, they were guilty. In 17th and 18th Century England, those accused of being witches were dunked in the river. If you sank, you were innocent. If you floated, you were guilty for supposedly renouncing baptism and doing the devil’s work.

We unwittingly draw similar oracular conclusions as modern day Christians when dealing with sick people. Sometimes we assume those who are not healed are somehow not right with God. This is especially so within the fringe positive confession movement in which their overly-simplistic theology leads them to believe everyone should and would be healed if they could just find that sweet spot with God – if their faith was genuine.

We dabble in oracular speculation when we assume disasters and tragedies that befall us are signs that God is judging us. Some popular television evangelists were quick to proclaim that 9/11 was judgment from God on America. Likewise, if we automatically associate material gain with God’s blessings, but poverty with His disfavor, we make it all too simplistic, to black and white.

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Or what about those who refuse to provide medical attention for their children, believing if God wants to heal them, He will heal them. If the children die, it must have been God's will.

A. The main message

All the aforementioned sub-points tend to overshadow and detract from the most important point of the Rebekah narrative. This is still about tracing the promise to Abraham to its fulfillment and observing all the barriers and difficulties that had to be navigated through in order to see the promise fulfilled. It was not enough for Abraham to have an heir, it had to be his son. It was not enough to be his son, it had to be a son born through Sarah. It was not enough to have a son through Sarah, it had to be a son who would survive to adulthood. It was not enough for Isaac to grow into an adult, he had to marry. It was not enough just to marry. He could not marry a Canaanite. He needed to marry within Abraham's clan to keep Canaanites from claiming part ownership in the land. On the pathway to the promise, we see many forks in the road, but it was necessary for the characters to stay on the main road and not take any byways. And all along the way, meeting these conditions often meant struggling up against barriers and difficulties, and being forced to make difficult decisions which were often inconvenient. In other words, when God gave Abraham a promise, Abraham had to be involved in the process by God's design. The promise was not some automatic mechanism that Abraham had the luxury of laying back and watching it happen. Abraham toiled hard toward the promise.

God's promises more often than not require a great deal of investment on our part. We might call it sweat equity.

B. The will of God

Many if not most people make discerning and following the will of God one of the most mysterious and difficult aspects of serving God. It doesn't need to be like that.

Rule #1 – Minimize all subjective methods of discerning God's will. Reading the Bible would not typically be thought of as a subjective method. But it is the way we interpret the Bible that is subjective. We seek God in prayer, but hearing an answer from God in prayer can be very subjective. Look for objective feedback, like seeking outside counsel from various trustworthy people.

Rule #2 – Don't sweat the details. God's will is not as narrow and limited in scope as we often believe. God is quite often not as concerned with which job you pick, or which college you choose, or which house or car you buy, as He is if you are earnestly making the best choice you know how to make while honoring him in your daily walk. He may never lead you to one brand of beans over another, but he expects you to use wisdom in all you do.

Rule #3 – Honor God in your life and keep going. Make the right moral choice when needed, but keep going and make the wisest choice you can with God's help. God will open and close doors to get you where He wants you. You don't have to know ahead of time where He is taking you before you can make a choice. As long as you live to honor Him, He will help get you there.