

## Prayers

### **To God**

In Your love Lord Jesus, You remind us of our sins, forgive us when we fall, revive us when we are down, empower us for life, protect us from the Evil One and assure us of our destiny. We can surely ask no more of You, except to give us the grace to turn to You, whatever the cost, to confess our humanity and thus receive Your love. Thanks be to God; AMEN

### **For Self**

*Pray today for God to bless you as you travel, wherever that may be. Ask for God's help and protection so that You will arrive safely and continue to give your life to His praise and glory.*

### **For others**

*Pray today for the roads and transport of your country. Roads have formed an essential part of the life and culture of each nation for a long time, and although we treat them as an automatic 'right', we should remember that a safe road is a blessing from God.*

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## Meditation

Decide for truth, and free your mind.

Be ready for the wind of revelation  
to invigorate your flagging soul  
with godly wisdom and perception.

Decide for joy, and be ready to dance.

Let the Spirit free those tired limbs  
to leap and praise your Saviour  
with true freedom and with gladness.

Decide for trust, and open up your heart.

Feel God's covenant love begin again  
to warm your soul towards your neighbours  
with honesty and love outpouring.

Decide for vision, and look to the future.

See the glorious plan of God unfold  
to liberate the sinners of the world  
with undeserved and never ending love.

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## Bible Passage

## Genesis 24:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Abraham was old, advanced in age, and the LORD had blessed him in every way. <sup>2</sup> Abraham said to his most senior servant, who had charge of everything he had,

*'Place your hand under my thigh <sup>3</sup> for I insist you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get my son a wife from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, <sup>4</sup> but go and find a wife for my son Isaac from my country and my relatives.'*

<sup>5</sup> The servant said to him,

*'It may be that the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land; should I then take your son back to the land from which you came?'*

<sup>6</sup> Abraham said to him,

*'Make sure you never take my son back there! <sup>7</sup> The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house, from my native land, and who spoke to me and promised on oath to me,*

***"I will give this land to your offspring,"***

*he will send his angel before you and from there, you will take a wife for my son. <sup>8</sup> But if the woman is unwilling to follow you, then you will be free from this oath; but do not take my son back there!'*

<sup>9</sup> So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and made the oath to him about this.

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## Review

We pick up the story of Abraham at the point where the old man nears the end of his life. Scripture records Abraham's acceptance by faith of a covenant relationship with God (Gen 12,15,17) and the growing friendship between the two. He learns that faith requires personal obedience, especially at critical moments, and whilst we know few details of his everyday life, Scripture describes some of his amazing conversations with God (e.g. Gen 18:1-10, 21:1f.).

### ***An old man looks to the future.***

In today's passage we find ourselves at a significant crossroads in Scripture. God has fulfilled his special promise to Abraham to bear a son, but if his greater promises are to come true, then more must happen. This is because God has promised Abraham that his son will bear a 'nation' of people, to be used in His great plan for humanity (12:2,3 etc.). Yet at this moment in Abraham's life, his son Isaac has no children, and is not even married!

Today, any parent would wait for love to take its course, but this was not done in ancient times. Arranged marriages were the norm, with nomadic peoples using this to maintain their wider family influence. Because of this, Abraham saw it as his duty to obtain a wife for Isaac, but he was old and unable to accomplish this task, so the job was given to a servant (24:2,5).

### ***Family lines in Genesis and the Canaanites***

Abraham called his most senior servant (we have no name), who had to make a solemn oath (24:1,9) to do what was required (24:1-4); but the questions we ask are these. Why was it so important that Isaac's wife should come from Abraham's family line, and why was Isaac kept out of the quest?

To find some answers we must look back to earlier chapters of Genesis in which all the ancient tribal groups are set out (chapters 5 and 10), and also the conclusion of the story of Noah (9:18-29), which describes the lineage of Noah's sons. After Noah was saved from a flood in which the previous evil generations of Adam and Eve were wiped out, Noah's sons unfortunately replicated the tribal divisions between good and evil. Noah's son Shem became the good line, giving rise to Abraham and his descendants the Jews. In contrast Canaan, the grandson of Noah and son of Ham, became identified with much that was evil in the world (9:26,27).

### ***The 'good' line of Shem, and free choice***

Is this the mere tittle tattle of the ancient world? Yet Scripture presents it rather as the facts of the matter. Some are good and some are evil, and all people choose one or the other, just as they choose to accept God or reject Him. Abraham now faced a crucial choice in finding a wife for his son, a wife who would bear the children of the covenant promise. Because of this he would allow no attachment to the local Canaanite population of evil repute and insisted that Isaac's wife be found from his family line of Shem, and the only contact he had with them was through the relatives of his father Terah and grandfather Nahor (24:6,7), who lived in Haran. In the coming chapters we will find it helpful to keep an eye on Genesis 11:24-32 to check on the family relationships involved as the story unfolds!

Remarkably, however, while Abraham used a servant to pursue this task, he was able to trust God sufficiently to say that if the servant were to find a woman but she proved unwilling to risk all to be the wife of Isaac, someone who was for her an unknown man, then the servant would be, *'free from your oath'* (24:8). Abraham is supremely generous; in obedience there is freedom!

### ***The servant***

We do not make oaths in the same way as people of old. Today, some may feel it smacks of faithlessness to swear something by God; why not just get on with trusting God for the things of life! Nevertheless, by trying to understand what an oath in God's name meant to ancient people, we enter a world of sincerity and purpose, to which we sit rather loosely today.

Abraham chose his most trusted and senior servant for the task of finding a wife for his son. At Abraham's death, this man would be responsible for passing on Abraham's inheritance; he would be available to Isaac for counsel and advice, to help in the smooth transition of power. We are not talking about a small family unit here, rather, a large extended family, a self sufficient nomadic group capable of working the land together and producing sufficient for the sustenance and livelihood of all.

We will hear much more of this servant as the story of the quest for Isaac's wife unfolds. He begins with much trepidation (24:5), and is worried about failure. But Abraham's absolute faith in God releases him from the worst of the burden (24:8), and insists that God has already planned for success; *'He will send His angel before you ...'* (24:7).

### ***The oath***

This servant was required by oath to find a wife for Isaac, and the manner of the oath seems rather coarse to us; '*place your hand under my thigh, for I insist you swear ...*' (24:2,3). However, in those days, marriage arrangements were a deeply revered matter, and everything about them was treated with utmost respect; love, marriage, and sex including sexual organs.

Whilst we recoil at Abraham asking the servant to make a promise by placing his hand close to his genitals (yes, this indeed is what the Hebrew text says), our reaction is merely an awkward response to such things within a supposedly liberated society. For ancient people, the description of this oath was deeply moving, indicating sincere and loyal commitment.

### ***Trusting in God for the future, and not going back***

One last feature of this passage is worth our attention. Abraham does not go back to Haran (11:32), to do for himself the work of finding a wife for his son. He has a history of doing amazing things while very old, so we perhaps expect too much from him!

Abraham sent his servant on this mission because it was important for him spiritually not to go back to Haran. Many years earlier the Lord God told him to leave his father's house and not return (24:6); but why feel so strongly about this years later? The matter is linked to the reason why Isaac himself is not allowed to go on this journey. Abraham and Isaac are both people of covenant faith, and they must not 'go back' on the journey they have taken with God or be tempted by the past. They have both travelled a tough pathway to access a covenant relationship with God, and it has been both spiritual hard and physically demanding. As so often in the Bible, the physical and the spiritual are intertwined.

So faith must not look back, and Abraham's son was to be a man for the future not the past. Abraham knew his journey was more than symbolic. The direction in which he travelled was often an indicator of his relationship with God (remember when he had caused havoc by travelling beyond God's call to Egypt, almost compromising his wife! - 12:12-20). Abraham had learned his lessons and did not want his son going back to his past family; rather he should be confident in God's plans for the future.

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## **Application**

### ***Trusting in God's ways***

Abraham shows throughout this episode that he is completely confident that God will achieve His will, even though the mission on which he sends his servant seems somewhat far-fetched. He even accepts that if the girl will not follow the servant and return to her married to Isaac, then God's will is not thwarted! We might feel that no options are left, or that if this is to happen then the woman will have her free will taken away! But nothing of the sort is implied or suggested, only faith that God's purposes will be achieved.

### ***The infectious faith of Abraham - imparted to the servant.***

We would all like to be able to exhibit the features of mature faith, but the life of Abraham shows that these come at the cost of much experience of life. In this passage of scripture, Abraham is able to initiate action to achieve God's purposes and inspire faith in others to do God's will. His faith that God will achieve His purposes is absolute, and he is able to inspire the same confidence in other people. He is also set upon the future, and will not go back, knowing that the Lord is working to unfold his plan of salvation. The servant receives this gift of faith from Abraham; it is 'imparted' to him.

We do not always perceive that some of the most important aspects of faith and Christian discipleship are imparted. What does this mean? When people perceive in others the things of God to which they aspire, they can by prayer and intent open the door for the Holy Spirit to impart those gifts and graces in themselves. For example, a young preacher hears a great preacher and is inspired to preach with passion and energy; a church ministry team attends a conference and is inspired by those they meet to copy the work they see being used by the Spirit elsewhere. In each, God's gifts are imparted from one to another.

### ***Celebrating the faith of the aged***

What a contrast this paints with much of the faith that we see today! We should be inspired by Abraham's faith in his old age. He is an example of one who has grown in faith with his age; he has not withered in faith as his body withers! We are often inspired today by the risks taken by young people for the Kingdom of God, but imagine how much more we would be inspired if we were to celebrate the faith of all, especially the aged?

Our world today quickly dismisses experience as something which prevents the exploration of the future rather than enables it, and yet here, the old man Abraham demonstrates these qualities of faith at their best. The servant asked by Abraham to complete his task was also an older man, and this is quite clear in the Hebrew text. There is no doubt that age is celebrated in Scripture far more than we appreciate!

### ***Questions for groups***

- 1. What contribution are aged people making to the Christian church and the life of faith today? What contribution could they make?*
- 2. What value is there in parents being involved in arrangements for marriage, or is this part of the story a relic of the past?*
- 3. How can we work with the Lord to bring about his plans for the future, and what place does faith have in this?*

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## **Final Prayer**

**Lord God, You are the source of our hope and our joy. Help us see Your hand at work within all that happens to us, and give us confidence that You are in control of everything. Save us from losing hope in Your purposes, and guide us into all truth, we pray. AMEN**