

Prayer

Give us hearts, O God, that are not satisfied with anything less than the truth. In all we do, may our lives display the honesty and integrity that come from keeping close to You at all times, for we know You will always guide us according to what is right and true. All praise to You, God of all wisdom, righteousness and truth. AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: Driving and cars

Large quantities of commercial goods are carried by road, and there is much debate about the wisdom of using roads for long distance haulage when roads are over-used and other options exist or could be constructed (rail etc.) which are more environmentally friendly.

Pray about this matter and ask the Lord to show you how you can best pray about this within your own country. Pray that transport companies would have the vision to develop means of transport that will be effective and impact less on roads, road use and the environment.

Meditation

Your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path:

It warms our hearts to the truths of faith
And challenges us to do what is right;

It nurtures our souls and feeds our minds
And empowers our spirits with zeal for action;

It shows what is good and right and true
And exposes the schemes of the Evil One;

It stays in our memories, and feeds our thoughts,
And directs us daily in all that we do;

It is comfort and peace and joy and love
And proclaims Good News of sins forgiven;

It surprises and delights, it moves to tears,
And it draws us back to the truths of our Faith;

Your Word is a joy to our hearts, and our hope for ever.

Bible Study - Genesis 24:28-41

²⁸ Then the girl ran and told everything to her mother's household. ²⁹ Rebekah had a brother named Laban; and Laban ran out to the man at the spring. ³⁰ For as soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on the arms of his sister Rebekah, and heard her story about what the man had said to her, he went out to him. He was still there, standing by the camels at the spring.

³¹ Laban said, "You are indeed blessed of the LORD. Come in! Why stand outside when I have made the house ready, and also prepared somewhere for the camels?" ³² So the man went to the house, and the camels were unloaded. Straw and fodder were provided for the camels, and water for him and his men to wash their feet. ³³ Food was then set before him to eat; but he said, "I will not eat until I have spoken of why I have come." Laban said, "Then tell us."

³⁴ So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. ³⁵ The LORD has blessed my master so much he has become very wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶ My master's wife Sarah bore him a son when she was old; and he has inherited everything. ³⁷ My master made me swear an oath, and told me, 'You must not take a wife for my son from the Canaanite daughters of the land in which I live; ³⁸ but you must go to my father's house, to my relatives, and find a wife for my son.' ³⁹ I said to my master, 'What if the woman will not come with me?' ⁴⁰ But he said to me, 'The LORD, who has always guided me, will send his angel with you and make your mission succeed. You will

find a wife for my son from my relatives, from my father's house. ⁴¹ You will be free from the obligation of the oath when you come to my relatives. Even if they will not give her to you, you will be released from your obligation.'

Introduction

The story of the finding of Rebekah as a wife for Isaac slows Genesis right down. The writers clearly delighted in spending time with this story in a way we have not yet seen in the Bible. It is full of details about the servant, Rebekah herself and her relatives, and also the camels! (24:31-33) Then, at the conclusion of this passage, the servant repeats much of the story we already know for the benefit of Laban, Rebekah's brother, and the rest of the family. Whilst by now, we know a great deal about all that is unfolding, these details add to our knowledge of the people involved in the story and they add fascinating insights into the ancient customs of the world in which it is being played out.

When Rebekah had finished attending to the camels (24:20,21) and accepted the expensive gifts from Abraham's servant, she ran back to her mother's house (24:28). Her brother, Laban, saw the gifts his sister was wearing and realised something was happening; we find him later in scripture to be a very astute and cunning man (Gen 29,30). He rapidly went to meet the servant. The expected hospitalities were then offered and accepted between Laban and Abraham's servant (24:31-33), but the story takes us by surprise when the servant insists upon stating the purpose of his journey before eating. We might expect from other examples of ancient hospitality, that feasting and merriment would take place before a serious matter was discussed (see Abraham's provision for his angelic guests, Gen 18:1ff). Then, when the servant began his speech (24:34-41), he skilfully weaved his story to impress upon his hosts both the blessing of God on Abraham, and therefore Isaac. He was convinced that the Lord had led him directly there; though he did not yet mention Rebekah. That would come later.

While we are held in tension waiting to know whether Rebekah will indeed accept the approach of marriage, it is worth remembering that from the beginning of the story of God's people, marriage was regarded as very important. Abraham married his half-sister, who was as much connected as he was to the original call heard by their father Terah, to leave Ur and head for Canaan (11:31ff). Rebekah was part of this same family, her father being Abraham's nephew; and later on in Genesis we discover that Rebekah's son, Jacob, also went back to the same family to find a wife, eventually marrying two daughters of the same Laban who appears in this story!

We might find some of this disconcerting because the practices are ancient and barely legal for us today. It is important though, for during the later years of the life of God's people Israel, much of their trouble came because of the people's intermarriage with those of other beliefs and practices (see 1 Kings 11:1ff, Ezra 10 etc). This issues does not disappear from God's word in the New Testament, for Paul returns to it in his letters (2 Cor 6:14), reminding us of the importance God places upon marriages in which both partners are committed to the Lord. This may be a hard message for some to receive today, but scripture is very clear about it. God wants to bless marriages in which both parties follow in His ways. It is within such marriages that He is able to draw people together in His intended spiritual unity (1:27,28). Apart from the gift of Faith, it is arguable that there is no greater gift of love we can receive from God, or from another human being, than that of a marriage truly blessed of God.

Bible Study

Relatives!

The story of Rebekah in Genesis 24 has always been something of a mystery because of some of its details, which are not what we might expect. Firstly, Rebekah is said to run to the 'house of her mother' (24:28), begging the question whether her father Bethuel had more than one wife. We suspect that Rebekah may have already guessed that a marriage proposition was coming her way, for her reaction to what had happened was not just the result of enthusiasm! She already appears to have been well disposed towards the prospect, having accepted gifts from the servant of Abraham, but we are left wondering whether her relatives would see this all the same way!

Also, we might expect that Rebekah's father would be called to deal with such a matter, but the story suddenly introduces us to a man who will play an important part in the story of God's people both at this point, and in later years (Gen 28ff). Rebekah had a brother named Laban (meaning 'white'), a man who shows himself to be both perceptive and cunning. Whether or not

his father should have been called, he was the one who unilaterally took the initiative; and while Rebekah was telling her mother all about what had happened, the sight of the riches on his sister's arms (the ring and the bracelets 24:22,30) was enough to indicate to him what was going on and he went straight to the spring to meet the servant of Abraham (24:30). Laban offered proper and generous hospitality as would have been expected, not just for the servant and the camels, but also for the whole party with the servant (24:32).

Laban's actions in this part of the story seem innocent enough, but there are hints even here of a man bent on every form of monetary gain possible from the family situations in which he found himself. The path to such wealth is paved with manipulation and influence, and by the time Rebekah and her family were faced with the crucial decision about how to respond to the marriage proposition from Abraham's servant, Laban appeared as an equal to his father Bethuel (24:50); an uncommonly influential position for a son and brother.

The speech by Abraham's servant (part 1)

We already know that the servant chosen by Abraham for the onerous task of finding a wife for his son was the most senior of his household. Some reckon that he would have therefore been a man of some bearing himself, and almost certainly not a young man; someone experienced in the ways of the world at the time, and well used to bargaining and negotiating. He has already come across as a man of care and attention to detail (see 24:21), but he cut right through the niceties of the occasion by refusing to eat before stating his errand (24:33).

It may well be that Abraham's servant could see in Laban a young man who would seek to gain as much as he could from the situation, and he therefore decided to act quickly in order to prevent any unnecessary expense or prevarication. It was certainly a risk. The speech he made was extensive (24:34-49), and covered all the circumstances of his journey; he left nothing out. The first part of it (which is in today's passage) described the circumstances of his quest, laying a foundation for the coming proposition of marriage. What he did, however, only made sense if everyone knew by then that the purpose of his visit was to make a marriage proposition to Rebekah.

The first thing that the servant emphasised was the wealth of his master Abraham. He explained that this was the Lord's blessing (24:35) and used established ways of describing his wealth; gold and silver, flocks and herds etc. Although we may be impressed by the wealth that was described, it was important that the Lord was mentioned, for belief in the Lord as God was what tied the families together, even though Bethuel's family had not followed the specific call to go to Canaan and were not recipients of the Covenant promise given to Abraham.

The servant then set out his task by stating his mission plainly; he had come to find a wife for his master's son (24:36-38). In theory, because Abraham was a brother to Nahor, Rebekah's grandfather, his son could be quite an old man! The servant therefore had to make it clear that the son was of a marriageable age, by declaring that Isaac was the son of Sarah's old age (24:36). Moreover, Isaac was the only inheritor of the wealth of Abraham; a highly attractive proposition for Laban and his father Bethuel. A marriage would normally entail a considerable exchange of wealth from which they could expect to benefit.

The oath – a helpful bargaining tool

In a skilful manner, and before he had reached the conclusion of his speech, the servant then gave the 'sting in the tail' of the whole proposition. The woman he sought would have to leave everything and go with the servant back to the Negev, south of Canaan! Instead of coming out with this directly, however, he mentioned it by way of talking about the obligation he was under to his master, and spoke of the oath he had sworn and how he would be released from it if the woman refused to come with him (24:39-41); it was both subtle and truthful!

By mentioning this, he effectively took the pressure away from himself and piled it upon Laban and Bethuel. They now faced a choice; they could accept the proposition and the family ties that came with it, along with the privileges of securing a 'good' marriage for Rebekah, but they would have to let Rebekah go completely and accept that they would probably have no on-going benefits from the marriage alliance. This was something they would have hoped for, and would be expected to increase their anticipated wealth.

The oath therefore served the purpose not simply of allowing freedom of choice to Rebekah, and also giving the servant freedom of conscience if she refused to come; it also highlighted both the independence of Isaac and the complete break that Rebekah would have to make with her past if she was to be part of God's plans for the future through Isaac.

Application of Scripture

Within this passage of scripture, the servant is spiritually sensitive to the circumstances in which he found himself. He had to be careful to protect the mission on which he was sent from being overtaken by events, and run by Laban's (possible) scheming adventurism. How easy it would have been for the servant to accept hospitality in the usual manner and get around to the 'real business' of his visit when the men of the household felt like it. No, the servant was a shrewd man and he sought to deal with matters directly and immediately.

Too often in the life of the church, we are cautious in our approach, not wishing to offend people (for example) even though we may feel spiritually convinced that something is wrong; or we are concerned that people will have different views over some matter that the Lord has laid on our hearts. If we state what we believe clearly, then what is of God and what is not will quickly be brought into the open, and be resolved. This is a wise way of dealing with church business.

Certainly, the emphasis of the speech by the servant is on the blessings of God and on the specific guidance of the Lord in what he does. The mission he had been given was no less than to ensure the continuance of the people of God, and though it may not have felt to him as if it was as serious a matter as this, we now know it was no less! It is imperative that the Lord's people keep a firm hold on the Gospel, their sense of mission, and the providence of God; for without this, the church perishes. Today, we have no excuse for not knowing our calling, for it is spelled out in many New Testament scriptures, not least the Great Commission of our Lord (Matt 28:18-20). It certainly needs to be applied to the world today, and we should always be prepared to be as straight about it as the servant of Abraham was about his task.

Space for notes

Lifestyle Challenge

Please use the programme of lifestyle challenges which can be found by following the link 'lifestyle challenge'. The downloadable 'worksheet' will help you follow through any challenge which you feel is right for you to take up.

Suggestions about discipleship and Christian lifestyle

Today, I suggest you consider what you believe the mission of the church to be, and perhaps, what your place is within this mission. It is too easy to be overawed by a request such as this when there is no need to be. Each of us must be clear to ourselves about what we know of the Gospel and what the Lord has called us to do, and the clues are always there within our own Christian experience and calling. It is right that if we feel uncertain about this, we should wait on the Lord; yet He surely wants us to know the answers to this challenge and to live by them. It is not his will that we should forever be waiting, when there is much to do!

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, You died to set people free from sin, You rose to give them New Life, You ascended to give Glory to the Father, and You sent Your Holy Spirit to pour your glory on us. May we never forget what You have done for us. AMEN

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Turn to Genesis 29 and 30, and read there to gain an impression of the character of Laban. Compare this with the passage today, and discuss.
2. What are the best ways to express hospitality today? What is acceptable for friends, for church friends and for family? Should there be any difference?
3. What kind of 'wealth' is implied by the blessing of the Lord today? Does this mean wealth as the world would understand?