

Matchmaker, Matchmaker
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Genesis 24

Genesis 24 stands on its own as a story. It is entirely possible to read it without talking about what comes before or after, but it is much better to have a sense of where these events fit into the big picture of Genesis.

For instance, it is very important to know that this story begins under a cloud of grief and concern. Sarah has just died. Abraham has just laid his lifelong companion in the ground. Abraham and Isaac are still recovering from the experience of standing outside their Mother's grave with their arms around each other and their eyes red. Mourners come by one by one and they all say the sorts of things people say: "I'm so sorry for your loss. She was a wonderful person. If there's anything I can do, anything at all..." It's all an exhausting blur to Father and son. And now Abraham is very old and he's not sure how much longer he will live. As he considers the end of his life and what will happen to him when he's gone, there is one thing that still concerns him. One project left undone. He must find a wife for Isaac. It's sort of his last earthly wish. So it is in this environment of grief and concern that our story begins.

"So Isaac was comforted after his Mother's death." This story begins in grief, but it ends like a fairy tale. The richness of the description at the end is wonderful. It's like the narrator isn't just content to tell you that Isaac and Rebekah got married; he wants you to sense some of the romantic tension and drama of the moment. They see each other in the distance. Rebekah dismounts from her camel and pulls up her veil. Isaac walks toward her in the shimmering desert heat. The two of them meet. You can almost see the credits roll. So the arc of the story is from trouble to joy and what I'm interested in tonight is: how did the change happen? What were the elements that brought about this hopeful ending? What turned the mourning into dancing?

As I studied this story this week, there are three things I noticed that I think we can say helped turn Isaac's mourning into dancing. The first is the power of a strong woman. I love Rebekah in this story. Rebekah is not a conventional woman; she breaks the mold. To understand how that's so, you have to see that in some ways this story goes just like a boy meets girl story was expected to go back in those days. In the ancient world, if someone started telling a story in which there was a boy and a girl and a well, you kind of knew what you were in for. Those elements signaled that this was going to be a romance. This was going to end with wedding bells and smooches. The great Bible scholar Robert Alter describes the typical features of ancient near eastern romance: There would be a man traveling to a foreign place, there would be an encounter at a well with a beautiful woman, there would be drawing of water, there would be a hurrying off

to tell the family about the dark stranger, and then there would be a marriage. That's the convention, and if you want another example of this story, think of Jacob meeting Rachel later on in Genesis.

All those conventional elements are obviously here in Genesis 24, but there is one interesting twist. Usually in the story, the man is the one who draws the water. The man is the one who draws the water and does it in some sort of manly and impressive way. So, if you remember Jacob again, when he sees Rachel coming he moves the stone from the cover of the well in a feat of manly strength. But in this story, who does the heavy lifting? It's Rebekah. She's the one who waters all ten of those thirsty camels. She's the one who goes down into the spring and hoists the heavy stone jar on her shoulder and marches it up to the watering trough and does it again and again and again. This is an unusual element in a story like this. You know how in some movies you have this conventional picture of a man and a woman who are romantically involved running from the bad guy, and the man is in the lead and the woman is being pulled along, and you know how inevitably the woman trips and twists her ankle. You know that convention? Wouldn't it be surprising if the man were the one trailing and he fell and twisted his ankle? That would get your attention right? Well, that's the sort of thing that happens here. The woman is the strong one.

The fact is, for its time, the Bible's portrays women as uncommonly strong and capable. Women do things, they move things, they matter. Rebekah hoisting the water jar on her shoulder and watering those camels joins a long list of strong, faithful biblical women: Sarah, Abigail, Deborah, Jael, The Hebrew Midwives, Rizpah, Elizabeth, Mary.

And as we consider Rebekah and the rest of this strong and faithful host, I think there is a lesson here where God sends His power. One of the unique and glorious things about our God is that He works through the weak and identifies with the poor. This is totally different from the other religions of Israel's day. The Biblical scholar Frances Anderson points out that in most of the religions of the day, if you wanted to find out who spoke for the gods, you would seek out the powerful. You would seek out the king or the emperor. He points to the story of Naaman as an example. Naaman has leprosy and he hears a cure can be had from a prophet in Israel. Who does he go to? He goes to the King. He assumes the King of Israel is the prophet. If someone is rich and powerful they must have the favor and blessing of God. But Naaman finds out that the Lord chooses His prophets from farmers and fishermen. Naaman finds out that our God chooses servant girls and 14-year-old girls as His mouthpiece. As one of those 14 year olds says in her famous prophecy: He has lifted up the humble and brought down the proud.

The second thing that God uses to turn mourning into dancing here has to do with the thirsty camels. Some of you may know that I sometimes use this passage for wedding meditations. Never mind 1 Corinthians 13; give me camels. I really like the test that Abraham's servant uses to find the right girl to be Isaac's wife: I'll ask for a drink and if the girl offers me a

drink and then offers to water my camels too, I'll know that this is the girl for Isaac. This test isn't purely arbitrary. There is wisdom in this test. This servant is a smart guy. Here are words to live by: If you are looking for a spouse, find someone who will water your camels. Why? Because, the sort of person who will water your camels when all you asked for was a drink is exactly the kind of person who will make a great spouse. And they'll make a great spouse because they are the sort of person who is willing to go the extra mile, who's willing to give others more than they ask or imagine; in short: they are the sort of person who practices grace.

Look how Rebekah behaves in this passage. Obviously she passes the servant's test when she waters the camels and gives him more than he asks or imagines. But if you read carefully, she does much more than pass the test. Did you notice how Rebekah does everything quickly and efficiently? She 'quickly' lowers her jar to give Eliezer a drink. She 'quickly' empties her jar into the trough. She 'ran' to the spring to get more water. She 'runs' to the house and tells her father to prepare a place for the guest. You get the picture of a young woman who gives more than she's asked and does it willingly. You get the picture of a young woman who joyfully pours out grace. And that kind of willing, joyful sharing of grace, that ability to give other people more than they ask or imagine and to do it joyfully, not grudgingly...there is nothing better at turning mourning into dancing than that kind of grace. It's not just marriages of course, every human relationship depends on this sort of grace. So the challenge to this text to all of us is to go out there this week and find some thirsty people and take the time to water their camels.

Which brings us to the very last healing power in this story and it's the strongest power of all. Despite all the heavy lifting by Rebekah, despite the faith service of Eliezer to his master, despite all the human actions and conversations that make up the outside of this story, the central driving healing force in the story of Isaac and Rebekah is the steadfast love of God. You noticed that right? It's not something that's obvious on the surface of the story. God does not speak. He does not do any miracles. He does not cause fire to come down from heaven. The skies do not part and angels proclaim, "This girl is the woman of my choosing." If you were at the well that day, it would have looked like any other day, but under the surface God's steadfast love is busy, busy, busy fulfilling his promises, healing the brokenness, making all things new.

You see it in verse 12. The servant bows his head to pray and he asks: "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham." He asks for steadfast love. And no sooner is the prayer out of his mouth than Rebekah shows up. The way the text reads it's clear that this is not coincidence. God is exercising his steadfast love. In verse 21, the servant is still not completely sure if this is the right girl, but then when she offers him a place to stay that night and he finds out she's family, the true driving force behind this story becomes clear to him, and he breaks out into praise and prayer: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham! He has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. The Lord has led me on the way to the house of my

master's kin." The servant reaches one of those happiest moments in life where he realizes that the goodness of God is all around him and the steadfast love of the Lord is carrying him along.

The exclamation of the servant shows us the real dynamic of the story. We celebrated earlier the strength of Rebekah, this unexpected power coming from this girl—it's God's strength that allows this slender beauty to do all that heavy lifting. We celebrated Rebekah's grace, that she did more than the servant could ask or imagine? She was able to do that because we serve a God who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. The power that brings this story to a close and moves us toward that tender moment when Isaac and Rebekah glimpse each other across the desert and find comfort in each other's arms is the power of God's steadfast love.

I need to say one more thing. I wonder if all this seems a little too neat and easy to some of you. I wonder if this seems like too much of a Hollywood ending. I wonder if it feels like the message of this story and this sermon is: God's steadfast love made the problems go away and helped the nice young people live happily ever after, and his steadfast love can do the same for you.

If you have even a whisper of that sort of feeling, let me stop you right there, because this isn't the end of the story of Isaac and Rebekah. Things may look happily ever after in verse 67, but the road ahead for these two will not be easy. They will have a dysfunctional family. Their boys will not get along. The younger one, Jacob, will lie and cheat. The older one, Esau, will marry badly and make headstrong choices. Eventually the younger will steal the blessing from the older and he will run away from home. Rebekah will find herself at home with an angry bitter Esau, a blind and brokenhearted husband, while Jacob was far away and unable to come home. In fact, after Jacob left there is no record that Rebekah ever saw her son again. This wasn't some dream family life these people had. It was sad, and hard.

So however Genesis 24 ends, this isn't a story that promises happy endings for our families and our loved ones. What it does promise is that whatever happens, wherever we find ourselves, whatever external circumstances we are facing, the steadfast love of God is with us, and it's holding us, and it's moving us along, it's turning our mourning into dancing, and it's making sure that all His promises are kept. The love that carries us through life is symbolized by this cross. The cross reminds us that terrible things happen in this world and terrible things will happen to us, but the love of God will carry us through these things, the love of God is present in these things, and so while we may not always get a happy ending, we will always have joy. That's the story of Abraham and Sarah. That's the story of Isaac and Rebekah. And it's our story too.