

# Genesis 24

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 20 June 2021

Preacher: Arthur Keefer

[ 0 : 00 ] Genesis 24. It is the longest chapter in Genesis, as you've probably guessed. It's one of its most riveting.

! It's right in the middle of the book and it marks the end of Abraham's life. Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.

This is really Abraham's conclusion. The question now is whether or not God will continue to bless Abraham, especially when he passes away. God has given him Isaac as a son to carry on the promise.

God spared Isaac on Mount Moriah. But we are nowhere close to the promise that God gave to Abraham. Your descendants will be like the grains of sand on the seashore, like the stars of the heavens.

That is, your descendants are going to be too many to count. I can count two so far. Isaac and Ishmael. And Ishmael, we've got a bit of, you know, questions about, about how he fits into the story.

[ 1 : 09 ] So if we're talking about the chosen one, we have one child, Isaac. And he's not married yet. So here in his old age, Abraham takes action to see God's promises fulfilled.

And we're going to see several things. We see extraordinary faith, like Abraham's. We see God's intimate working in human lives. The servant prays for particular things, and these things come about before his very eyes.

We also see a few questionable responses. Doubt. Obstacles. It seems to God's plan.

So people are going to hesitate. They're going to hold back. Some people, we'll see, have alternative interests that make us wonder, can this plan really succeed? Indeed. Ultimately, God will fulfill his promises and plans.

He will fulfill them along with humanity and in spite of humanity. God fulfills his promises by means of humanity and in spite of humanity.

[ 2 : 21 ] There are four main characters. Abraham, his servant. We have Rebecca. And we have Rebecca's brother, Laban. We're going to take the story one by one, really.

We're going to look at each of these characters. Each of them, I think, also has a motto in terms of their faith or their doubt or wherever they are in between. So here we have four portraits of faith, variations on faith at least.

And the first is Abraham. But before we get to him, let's pray. Let's pray. Oh, Lord, bring your promises to mind this morning.

Let us lay a hold of your promises with faith. We ask that you would speak to us through this story. That you would assure us that your plan is good. Along with us and in spite of us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. As I said, these are Abraham's last recorded words. He's introduced through promises in chapter 12.

[ 3 : 25 ] This is where we're introduced to Abraham. God says, I will bless you. I will give you many descendants. I'm going to give you land. And I'm going to bless the world through you. And all of the book of Genesis hangs on these promises.

It's a story of partial fulfillment, actually. They don't come fully about. But they are partially fulfilled. But Abraham is a man who also exits the story with a fixation on these very promises.

Look at verse 7. This is when Abraham is telling his servant. He's giving him grounds for why the servant should go find a wife for Isaac.

And he says, the Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, to your offspring I will give this land.

He will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. What he's saying is, on the grounds of God's promises, I'm sending you off to find a wife for my son.

[ 4 : 31 ] He appeals to God's promises. And in a way, it's fitting, given what Abraham has been through. Chapter 12, when he's first called, he's 75 years old.

He has Ishmael, sort of an illegitimate son at the age of 86. It's not until he's 100 years old that Isaac is born. 15 years later, he's got this teenage son, and God says, all right, your son has been born, now go take him up on that mountain and put him to death.

Isaac marries Rebecca here at about the age of 40, making Abraham 140 and close to his death. Through decades of working along with God, and doubting God, even, Abraham now has full confidence in the Lord, what the writer of Hebrews will call faith, exemplary faith, really.

He is the father of faith. In this episode, Abraham is indeed at the end of his life, and he knows that God does not need him in order to fulfill his promises.

He sends the servant on his way. He, in a way, lets go, and he entrusts the story to God. There are many instances of him taking it into his own hands.

[ 5 : 54 ] He and Sarah make a plan to try to fulfill God's promises in their own way, which God graciously incorporates into his plan, but ultimately carries on with his own.

An interesting thing happens here. One more thing for Abraham. When the servant poses a potential obstacle to the plan, Abraham says, here's how it's going to go. I have confidence in the Lord.

Go on your way. But the servant says, what if this woman I find doesn't come along? What if she doesn't want to leave her homeland? It doesn't want to return to the promised land.

Notice what Abraham says here in verse 8. If the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine. Only you must not take my son back there.

I need Isaac back in the land. This is a promise I'm prioritizing. But I still think this is a good plan. What I'm trying to say is, everything is at stake for Abraham, for his family.

[ 6 : 59 ] And he nonetheless makes space for what he doesn't know. It may not work out the way we think it's going to work out. But I wouldn't call that doubt. He makes space for what he doesn't know.

So Abraham believes God's promises. He takes action in line with God's promises. But he does so all in God's time. And I think that's Abraham's motto.

All in God's time. And that's his life story. God gives promises. God fulfills or partially fulfills the promises. He does so in his own time.

And we obey. Let's move on to the servant. We know two things about the servant so far. The first is that he's Abraham's senior servant.

Right? He had charge of all that Abraham had. And the second is that he's shrewd. Right? Perhaps this woman's not going to come back. This sounds like a great plan.

[ 7 : 59 ] I'm all for it. But, you know, what if? These things might not always be that easy. He considers all the possibilities. But he commits to his task by taking an oath.

He swears by the Lord's name. And he puts his hand under Abraham's thigh. Now, the idea here is that he's putting his hand in a vulnerable spot. This is the custom. Right? And I think this accentuates the trust and the severity of the oath for these two men.

And then he gets on his way. The servant is going to Nahor. And Nahor is 500 over, actually over 500 miles north of where Abraham is currently residing.

This would have taken over three weeks. And he has all these gifts. He has all these camels. A bit of an entourage. He arrives at the city of Nahor. He stops at the well.

And then he does what? He prays. Verse 12. Verse 12. He arrived at the place where women draw water.

[ 9 : 05 ] And he said, O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today. And show steadfast love to my master. Behold, I'm standing by the spring of water.

And the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman, to whom I shall say, please let down your jar that I may drink. And who shall say, drink, and I will water your camels.

Let that woman be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master. The servant shows up and he prays.

And he bases his prayer on God's steadfast love and faithfulness. One interpreter has put it this way. It's hard to imagine a more powerful basis for prayer. God has made and fulfilled promises to Abraham already.

And the servant draws on that sort of loyalty. And then he watches in eager expectation. He watches for the mission to be accomplished. My grandfather and I, my mom's dad, we would go camping and fishing and things like that regularly.

[10:23] And he would always take me to this little restaurant in a small town on our way out. And we would have breakfast. And at this place you could buy these little lotto tickets.

And there would be a screen where they'd post up the kind of numbers that are going to show up. So we'd kind of do it as a bit of fun when I was young. And what was really special, we shared, my grandpa and I shared the same birthday.

So February 27th. So we'd pick some combination of those numbers. 27, 0, 2, 1987 and so on. And then we'd sit down, wait for our breakfast.

And I'd look up at that television. And I would wait to see if any of those numbers were going to appear on the screen. Now, of course, we generally didn't get any money back.

Sometimes we made, we broke even every once in a while. But it's that watching. Watching in anticipation. The servant's faith is expressed in the vivid expectation that God will come through.

[11:30] He's standing at the well and he is watching. And he is waiting. And he is expecting, in his case, I think with more confidence than mine, that God is going to fulfill his plan.

He not only begins with prayer, he ends with prayer. After he interacts with Rebecca, he weighs up the clues. He's got his tick list there, the things he's prayed for. And then she invites him back to her family's home.

He does what? Bowed his head and worshipped the Lord. Later in the story, we're told that God has led the servant on the reliable way.

But at this point, the way is looking pretty good. And the servant's prayerful single-mindedness shows us a man thinking mission accomplished. Mission accomplished.

He has a single-minded pursuit of God's plans. He prays for them. He acts in line with them. And he praises God because of them.

[12:32] Mission accomplished. That, I think, is a servant's motto. So like Abraham, so here, God fulfills his promises along with humanity.

Do you see that? A confident and initiative-taking father. A prayerful, attentive servant. But the obstacle is nonetheless there.

And there's still a question lingering in his mind. What if this woman refuses to return with me? That takes us to Rebecca. We meet Rebecca when she interrupts the servant's prayer.

He's sitting there praying at the end of verse 14. And then in 15, before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebecca, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder.

She appears. And what's remarkable with her is the speed. Notice in verse 18. She said, drink, my lord. And she quickly let down her water jar upon her hand and gave him a drink.

[13:41] When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, I will draw water for your camels also until they have finished drinking. So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water.

And she drew for all his camels. It said that camels required gallons and gallons of water on a trip like this. To have ten of them there, I wouldn't think she'd carry too many, not several gallons of water.

We're talking maybe dozens of trips back and forth. Dozens of trips back and forth. She hurries. It's been said that this is a stiff test, since it would require far more than common civility to volunteer to water ten thirsty camels.

But the young woman's performance surpasses even the most optimistic expectations. A mother has recently written a book with the title, I'm Just Happy to Be Here.

And she talks about the kind of ambiguities of motherhood, some of the difficulties of motherhood. A lot of paradoxes, she says. But she says, how do I deal with being tasked with the most important job on earth while I'm flawed and I regularly get things wrong?

[15:06] She comes to the conclusion that even though mothers don't always get it right, she says we're doing the best with what we have. That's the attitude that she should have, at least.

And I think there's a sense of Rebecca being presented with a situation and doing her best with it. In complete seriousness, she's happy to be here. She's happy to be here. Whereas Abraham makes confident assertions of faith and the servant single-mindedly requests that God fulfill his promises, Rebecca remains upbeat and cooperative with God's plans. It comes through very clearly later on when Rebecca has to, when she has to break the tie, right? So her brother and her mom are going to say, no, let's let her stay for a while. And then the servant says, well, let's ask her. And Rebecca says, I will go. I'll go now. Let's leave. And who knows what else is going through her head at this time.

[16:09] When she's back at the family home, the servant's presenting this story about God's plan. This guy's traveled hundreds of miles to be here. He has all kinds of nice gifts.

I seem to have fulfilled some divine plan. And now I'm invited to go marry my cousin down south. What seems clear to me is that the servant has hammered home the divine plan aspect. That's what he is fixated on. And Rebecca's made aware of this. The doubts that he had, the confidence that he and Abraham have. He's been sent on the tails of God's promises, prays that the Lord will be loyal, watches and waits, and concludes by saying, God led me on the reliable path. And when the choice is finally put to Rebecca, she cooperates. She goes back to Canaan. She's happy to be here. To be a part of God's plan. Our fourth and final character is Laban. Laban. He's not quite as glowing as the others. Rebecca seems cooperative, right? The plan's going well, at least. But the suspense heightens.

[17:26] When we see the question of how will Rebecca's family respond. All has been successful so far. But is everyone really on board? And this is when we meet Rebecca's brother, Laban.

Let's look at verse 29. Rebecca had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out towards the man to the spring. As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelet on the sister's arms and heard the words of Rebecca, his sister, thus the man spoke to me.

He went to the man. And behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring. Laban. Laban seems eager to meet. Like Rebecca was eager to serve.

But he betrays another motivation. Jewels and camels. Rebecca has been gifted by the servant a ring and two very large bracelets.

So Laban's sister comes home kind of glammed up. Right? With this guy who has a load of camels, which is equivalent to nice cars. And we get the sense that this is Laban's idea of a good time.

[18:40] A famous Hungarian-American actress said, I never hated a man enough to give him his diamonds back. The servant then really puts the squeeze on Laban.

In verse 48, after the servant presents Laban with this kind of divine plan story, he then does this. I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord and blessed the Lord. So he's talking about when he realized the promises were fulfilled. He says, I worship the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son.

Now then, if you, Laban, are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me, and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left.

The servant puts this company to a challenge. He basically says, will you be kind and loyal like my God has been kind and loyal?

[19:49] He basically says, are you going to act with the character of God? The final obstacle comes here at the end. They want to hang on to Rebecca for a while.

Verse 55, her brother and her mother said, let the young woman remain with us a while, at least 10 days. After that, she can go. So despite any apparent theological consent, where Laban says, ah, this is indeed from the Lord, I think when he says that, as readers, we're supposed to think that's a little bit questionable.

Laban and his mother still stall. And interestingly, they ask Rebecca, as I've said, and she breaks the tie and she goes. So we've encountered two obstacles to God's plans so far.

One is dispelled immediately, whether Rebecca fits the criteria, and the other one builds. Laban's a bit questionable at first. He seems quite into camels, quite into the jewelry.

And he may not really want his sister to leave. And we're not really positive until the end that she wants to leave. Laban's motto is this. If you say so, dot, dot, dot.

[21:04] Rebecca wants to leave? If you say so. This is a divine plan? If you say so. Is this faith? Not really.

What does the servant think of all this? Do not delay me, for the Lord has prospered my way. Mission accomplished. That's what he's thinking.

God's promises fulfilled. That's what he's thinking. The final scene here is very short. It's very sweet.

And it's what this chapter is known for. But what is this chapter really about? What is it really about? It's about God's plan.

It's about the loyalty of the Lord. It's about God working along with humans. Their ideas, their plans, their efforts. And it's about God working in spite of humans.

[ 22 : 06 ] Alternative interests. Clear obstacles. Doubt. Distances. Distances. Unknowns. What are we to do with all this narrative?

I think the first thing is to recognize that we're in a different situation. We're in a different situation. God's covenant is not now focused on the growth of one biological family. The tension of so many stories in Genesis is built upon that very thing.

Will Abraham, will this person have a child in order that the promises might be fulfilled? In order that God's blessing might come to the nations? No one here in this building, in this room, is a representative head of God's people like Abraham was.

But we do have promises from God. And we can work biblically to achieve them. Remember, it's God making promises and then fulfilling them alongside humanity, along with humanity, and in spite of humanity.

We've seen a lot of along with in this chapter. But we're all familiar with obstacles to God's plans and God's promises. God working in spite of us and in spite of our circumstances.

[ 23 : 25 ] The letter of the Philippians says, God promises to finish the good work that he has begun in us. But we doubt this.

We don't always or often see sanctification. Apathy is a huge obstacle here also. We don't always care about sanctification. About being holy as the Lord is holy.

Tonight, I'll talk about the promises of God surrounding evangelism. He's promised to direct the spread of his gospel and to grow his church. But look at today's circumstances.

Christianity is out of fashion. Secular society is unstoppable. And so on. All the taglines that we hear. And sometimes start to believe. So first, we pray.

We begin and we end our endeavors with prayer. There's something to be said, interestingly, that we know what to look for. I think that's the interesting thing with the servant.

[ 24 : 30 ] He prays for these things. And I'm not sure we should always set up these kind of strict criteria for what we sort of expect God to do. But when we pray about things in life, we are given eyes to look for God's work.

We are given eyes to see, really. And we must be persistent. Luke 18, the parable of the persistent widow. Right?

This woman, one of the most marginalized people in first century society, goes to a crooked judge and asks for justice. And she requests for justice again.

And again. And again. Until eventually he relents and says, okay. I've had enough. I'll give you justice. How much more than will your heavenly father, it's said, give justice to those who ask for it? Pray without ceasing. In all your ways, acknowledge God. And he will direct your paths. The servant has a promise from God and several possible reasons why that promise might not be fulfilled.

[ 25 : 38 ] And so he prays. We work along with God's promises when we pray for them. Secondly and lastly.

We have faith as we look to Christ. All of the promises we know are fulfilled in. Christ. And they are attached to Christ.

They're realized in our union with Christ. By the power of the spirit and for the honor of God's name. So you'll know this well.

Hebrews 11. It picks up on Abraham. On Moses. On these founders of the faith. And he says, They didn't receive fully what they were promised.

They were looking ahead to a better land. A better place. And he says, Since we're surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

[ 26 : 39 ] And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Looking to Jesus. The founder and perfecter of our faith. Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Promises come about all in God's time. Thanks to Christ, we can think mission accomplished.  
Mission accomplished.

In the midst of God's plans, it's okay to say, Happy to be here. Happy to be here. If you feel a little bit more like, if you say so, or encounter that attitude, God will still accomplish great things.  
Let us pray.